



## ***Buen Vivir* as Policy: Challenging Neoliberalism or Consolidating State Power in Ecuador**

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### **Abstract**

*Core countries, including the United States, and global financial institutions have exerted an unmatched power to define and implement neoliberal policies, globally. These policies conceive of development as strictly economic in nature and call for a reduction in the size of the state and increasing privatization to guarantee growth. In this paper I examine Ecuador's adoption of 'Buen Vivir' to understand how the state can challenge the neoliberal agenda and how its power is redefined in the process. Buen Vivir is an indigenous Andean philosophy that emphasizes community well-being, reciprocity, solidarity, and harmony with Pachamama (Mother Earth). I analyze public government documents to investigate how policies based upon buen vivir have served to solidify an antisystemic position in a direct challenge to traditional neoliberal notions of economic prosperity, growth, and material accumulation. Through a review of how the state has sought to reposition itself as well as some of the contradictions in the implementation of Buen Vivir, I contend that the state exercises both dominating and transformative power. The case of Ecuador provides insight into the distinguishing role the state can play in resisting neoliberal development and in effect decentering global capitalism.*

**Keywords:** Buen Vivir, antisystemic, neoliberal, transformative power, Ecuador



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In the 1980s and 1990s Latin America was used as a laboratory for neoliberal reforms (Sader 2008). International financial institutions dangled loans with deleterious conditionalities in a promise that the reforms would result in economic growth. Yet, not long after implementation, the painful realities of neoliberalism launched historic levels of resistance from leftist social movements fighting for political changes. The social movements represented peoples who experienced increasing inequality and poverty during periods of right-leaning governments, and often relied on support from transnational networks (Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Kuecker 2008; Postero and Zamosc 2004). By the early 2000s, movements of indigenous, *campesinos*, landless, and the unemployed propelled political leaders into office who questioned the role of the United States and the capitalist world economy (Grandin 2006). Most notably, the ‘pink tide’ of Presidents Chávez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, and Correa in Ecuador used their newfound popularity to call for an end to US corporate and military interests in the region (Robinson 2008; Chase-Dunn 2011; Chase-Dunn and Morosin 2013). From public protests to supporting left-wing political leadership, these movements elevated transformative ideas that galvanized counterhegemonic struggles.

The demands of social movements and criticism of U.S. hegemony by South American movements and political leaders opened a political space to question the assumption that all countries should follow one path to become ‘developed.’ Alternative positions about development, capitalism, and global power are being explored, raising important questions about the role of the state (Schulz 2015). What state policies and practices are indicators that a challenge to the capitalist paradigm is emergent? What challenges does the state face when adopting new definitions and goals for development that test the hegemonic global capitalist system?

I adopt a world-systems perspective to analyze the case of one state in the global context, where the state is one of many actors vying for control and influence. Ecuador, a peripheral state, sought to challenge global capitalism by redefining development, incorporating the indigenous philosophy called *buen vivir* in state policy beginning in 2008. *Buen vivir* emphasizes community well-being, reciprocity, solidarity, and harmony with *Pachamama* (Mother Earth). This political change in Ecuador is significant for three key reasons. First, social development is not incorporated in the state’s plans as conditional to the achievement of economic growth, but rather as a primary goal of social policy, development plans, and in the Constitution. Secondly, having resisted colonization for centuries, indigenous peoples and their philosophies are valuable connections to a variety of pre-capitalist and non-capitalist cultures. Indeed, their very existence reminds us that there are alternatives to capitalist globalization (Hall and Fenelon 2009). Finally, it is Ecuador’s peripheral status in the world economy that makes this re-positioning of the state and challenge to Western notions of progress—defined by capital accumulation and privatization—all the more noteworthy (Boatca 2006). The contemporary crisis in the world-system is fertile ground for

radical shifts; antisystemic movements are challenging core powers and linking national struggles to global system failures (Chase-Dunn 2013; Panitch 2013). The power of antisystemic movements to shape structures and policies of states holds the potential to alter the balance for social and economic justice (Reifer 2013).

I analyze public government documents, including the Constitution and three national development plans, to examine how the adoption of *buen vivir* solidified the state's direct challenge to traditional neoliberal notions of economic prosperity, growth, and material accumulation and contributed to broader antisystemic mobilizations. This research contributes to the discussion of alternatives to neoliberal capitalism by grappling with how states may reformulate power by serving as a counterhegemonic entity in the world-system (Subramaniam 2015). My analysis reveals that while policy changes in Ecuador were counterhegemonic and incompatible with western notions of development, they did not change the reality of capitalist production. I then review the internal and external obstacles the state faced while implementing antisystemic policies to provide a nuanced understanding of the state's multiple forms of power. In many ways this Ecuadorian experiment was flawed; nevertheless, it offers an alternative model of development from the Global South that may inspire other counterhegemonic projects.<sup>1</sup>

### **The State and the Global Capitalist System**

World-systems analysis positions the state within the global context where it is one of many actors—including global bodies, financial institutions, social movements, NGOs, and multinational corporations—vying for control and influence. Peripheral countries are considered to have less power to act as independent entities; core countries alternately wield an enormous power to define and deploy policies that shape the political-economic realities of non-core countries (Subramaniam 2015). Moreover, the world-systems approach highlights the global-historical trajectory of capitalism. Scholars contend that the current crisis of global capitalism combined with the hegemonic decline of the United States has created space for alternatives (Wallerstein 2004; Chase-Dunn 2013; Reifer 2013). These alternative perspectives may wield enough power to influence the state, altering its level of involvement in the capitalist enterprise. Indeed, the state is continuously shaped “neither wholly from above nor wholly from below, but in a crucible of social struggle and changing social relations and interests” (Smith 2009: 3). In this section I discuss criticisms of neoliberalism, counterhegemonic and antisystemic efforts in the current global political economic context and the role of the state therein.

Since World War II, core nations and hegemonic institutions have had an extraordinary power

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over the economies of peripheral nations. Their ability to influence the adoption of neoliberal policies effectively worked to create a capitalist world-economy (Wallerstein 1974; Chase-Dunn 2001). The World Bank and IMF offered loans to a host of Global South countries, in return for the state's adoption of austerity packages and opening to trade and finance. These policies were designed to decrease the role of the state by reducing public spending across all sectors and increasing the role of private capital. State sovereignty over capital flows and democratic participation were reduced as the global market was prioritized (Harvey 2005; Barra and Dello Buno 2009). In neoliberalism the state is important, but its "only legitimate role...is to establish the conditions necessary for a market to operate" (DuRand and Martinot 2012: 28). For example, in 1995 the then Director-General of the WTO Renato Ruggiero astutely noted: "We are no longer writing the rules of interaction among separate national economies. We are writing the constitution of a single global economy" (DuRand and Martinot 2012: 22). Neoliberal policies are premised upon the assumption that the economy can function autonomously, distinct from government (Polanyi 2001; see also Block and Somers 2014).

Critics of neoliberalism define it as neo-colonialism (Grandin 2006; Harvey 2005) and dependency (de la Barra and Dello Buono 2009) while others contend that economic dimensions like growth and income per capita outweigh human development needs within neoliberal agendas (Sen 1999). Additionally, neoliberal policies limit nature exclusively to its exchange-value, while the rights of communities and cultural heritage is ignored (Escobar 2012; Walsh 2010; Shiva 2005). The policies contribute "not only to the degradation of the physical environment but also to the social environment, as various groups are systematically excluded from the tools of progress and their benefits" (Chaney and Schmink 1980:176). These criticisms acknowledge the neoliberal assumption that every society considers the individual as the basic actor, neglecting cultural variations in terms of values, traditions, and emphases on collectives, community, and relationships with the environment that shape all aspects of life (Sen 1999; Escobar 2012; Da Costa 2010; Hall and Fenelon 2009).

Regionally, Latin America embraced neoliberal reforms at a far greater rate than any other region with "ambiguous" results (Escobar 2010). Resistance to these reforms in the region called for a re-examination of the neoliberal paradigm (Wallerstein 2004; Escobar 2012; Robinson 2008; Le Quang 2013). Globally this resistance, both antisystemic and counterhegemonic, has found a home in a variety of social movements, alliances, social forums, worker cooperatives and unions, only some of which call themselves movements against neoliberal capitalism (Smith and Wiest 2012; Hall and Fenelon 2009; Ballve and Prashad 2006; Smith 2014). Counter-hegemonic movements resist the "dominant state actor in the world-system...and are a subset of the larger collection of antisystemic movements" (Smith and Wiest 2012:184). These actors work to challenge their governments and coordinate with other grassroots and national-level organizations

to effect change transnationally (Tarrow 2005; Smith 2014). Antisystemic movements oppose neoliberal policies and assert that democracy and equality can only be achieved in a ‘transformed world’ (Wallerstein 1990). Both counterhegemonic and antisystemic movements can be powerful enough to influence the state’s position within the global capitalist paradigm. They can shape institutions, including the state and global inter-state bodies, and such institutional change alters the context in which the movements operate.

Counterhegemonic and antisystemic movements are strongly influenced by their local and historical contexts. Latin American social movements have responded differently to the withdrawal of the state and its provision of social services (Rénique 2006). For example, the urban labor movement led the anti-neoliberal cause in Argentina, the Zópatistas formed autonomous municipalities in Chiapas, and the indigenous movement ushered in the anti-neoliberal efforts in Ecuador (Silva 2009; Sawyer 2004). Through a variety of means, social movements resisting neoliberalism have sought to shape the priorities of the state within the global capitalist system (Petras and Veltmeyer 2005). This is precisely what occurred in Latin America; inspired by the antisystemic movements that brought left-of-center administrations to power, a regional wave or ‘pink tide’ appeared united in its demands to reorganize the global economy (Robinson 2008). In Ecuador, the pressure from social movements and the election of a left-leaning administration created an opening for the state to assume a counterhegemonic stance.

As U.S. hegemony wanes, new opportunities for anti-systemic challenges are opening (Robinson 2008; DuBoff 2003; Arrighi and Silver 1999; Smith 2014). Peripheral and semi-peripheral countries experiencing industrial growth are exercising more influence, with an increasing ability to destabilize the balance of centralized power in the Global North. Despite the rise of new challenges to state power (Sassen 1996) states remain the principal institutions in global politics; and as such, regional cooperation among counter-hegemonic forces provide space for states to implement alternatives to global capitalism (Smith and Wiest 2012).

The potential for some states to challenge the neoliberal paradigm is crucial to our understanding of strategies of resistance (Subramaniam 2015). In order to implement a counterhegemonic agenda, a state may experiment with differing notions of power. Internally, the state maintains a dominating power (by controlling institutions, for example). However, the traditional notions of power as solely dominating/coercive may be insufficient. I draw on differing notions of power and argue that the state may exercise multiple forms of power. For instance, Pearce found evidence of a non-dominating power that “nurtures cooperation and capacity to act but which also impacts and generates change” (2013: 641). This kind of power can be transformative, wherein we build “models for a new society based on power understood as energy and initiative” (2013: 651). Wainwright (2016:11) also writes about the transformative capacity of power and notes that this kind of power was “discovered by social movements as they move[d]

beyond protest to proposing practical, prefigurative solutions.” A state may access or create space for the emergence of transformative power by rejecting neoliberalism and creating something new. Indeed, Wainwright (2016:13) notes that dominating and transformative power may work together where power as domination supports a transformative power: “For example, a change in the balance of power in society...can lead to progressive control over the state or progressive shifts within governing parties, which can in turn lead to some form of governmental support for a transformative movement.” If the point of departure of radical transformative politics is indeed national (Gramsci 1971), how the state reformulates power in the process of moving beyond neoliberal capitalism is critical. I turn now to examine how Ecuador has pursued this via the state’s adoption of *buen vivir*.

### **Case Background: Ecuador**

Ecuador is the smallest Andean country geographically and in population; it is home to 15 million people and 14 distinct indigenous nations. The majority self-identify as mestizo (of Spanish and indigenous descent) followed by indigenous, white, and an Afro-Ecuadorian. The national Census reports that 7% self-identify as indigenous (INEC 2011), while the national indigenous organization CONAIE contends that indigenous peoples represent more than 25% of the population. Mainstream Ecuadorian culture is predominantly mestizo culture, which accounts for the fact that Spanish is the first language of 90% of Ecuadorians (INEC 2011).

The oil boom of the 1970s helped to propel Ecuador’s economic growth. Foreign companies began exploration in the Amazon region a decade prior, but changes in the global price of oil during the 1970s demonstrated the important resource that crude could play for the small agrarian nation (Sawyer 2004). Crude oil remains Ecuador’s most important export, accounting for nearly half of government revenues (Lewis 2016).

Ecuador capitalized on the returns from oil while transitioning from years of military rule in the 1970s. Democratic elections brought the left-leaning populist Jaime Roldós to power in 1979. Two years later he was killed in a plane crash, with suspected U.S. involvement; subsequent presidents represented more centrist or center-right political stances (Perkins 2004). In the mid-1980s, the global pressures to conform to the neoliberal development paradigm were high, and Ecuador followed suit. Resistance to the state’s neoliberal turn has been unceasing, and indigenous peoples’ resistance has been most intense (Widener 2011; Rice 2012).

Until the Correa administration, Ecuador suffered from near constant political turmoil. His election in 2006 and maintenance of power through elections in 2008 and 2012 represents the country’s longest period of political stability. Indeed, Ecuador had seven presidents from 1996-2006. Social movements, particularly the indigenous movement, played an important role in ousting presidents from office during this period. Though perhaps less unified today, the

indigenous movement remains an important political voice in Ecuador (Zamosc 2007; Becker 2011). Through the 1990s and 2000s, the Ecuadorian indigenous movement was widely considered the most active indigenous movement in all of Latin America (Yashar 2005; Zamosc 2007). Similar to indigenous movements in other countries, the movement's relationship with the state fluctuated between opposition and support (Yashar 2005; Postero and Zamosc 2004). While the government drew on indigenous philosophy to position its development plans, the indigenous movement faced more pressure from Correa than previous presidencies and again mobilized its opposition (Becker 2012; Martinez 2013).

### ***Buen Vivir: Philosophy and Policy in Ecuador***

In this section I review the *buen vivir* philosophy highlighting its fundamental orientation to community rather than the individual, the connection between humans and nature, and notions of development. Then, I address how the philosophy has informed Ecuadorian state policy.

#### **Philosophy of *Buen Vivir***

The Andean region of South America is home to a philosophy that is an alternative model to capitalist modes of development.<sup>2</sup> While there is no English terminology that captures the sentiment of *buen vivir* to its fullest, many translate it as 'good living' (Cunningham 2012). In this section I elaborate three of the defining characteristics of *buen vivir* and then analyze them within Ecuadorian policy.

First, *buen vivir* is a philosophy focused on the community. Western forms of development take the individual as the basic social unit, while 'good living' is defined within the community, as a community. This forces an acknowledgement of how the context of the community mediates or influences the experiences and wellbeing of everyone. A community-centered understanding of life is deeply rooted in indigenous Andean traditions where kinship systems, relationships with the natural world, and social obligations of reciprocity are significant and longstanding (Mendoza and Zerda 2011).

Second, *buen vivir* conceives of a profound relationship between humans and the natural world. Humans are not separate from the Earth, rather they are one element of the biosphere and as such have responsibilities to nurture *Pachamama*'s vitality (Figueroa-Helland and Raghu 2017). The connection between people and the environment is inseparable from the definition of community. For instance, "The grandparents of the ancestral peoples cultivated a culture of life inspired in the expression of the multiverse, where everything is connected, interrelated, and nothing is outside but rather 'everything is part of...'; the harmony and equilibrium of one and all

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<sup>2</sup> Many indigenous cultures have parallel philosophies to *buen vivir* across North America, South America, South Asia, and Africa. See for instance Acosta (2015).

is important for the community” (Haunacuni Mamami 2010:15). Indeed, these characteristics of communal living in harmony with nature are the foundation for indigenous ways of living and resistance for over five hundred years (Gudynas and Acosta 2011).

Finally, *buen vivir* is not related to economic prosperity, growth, consumption, or material accumulation (Le Quang 2013). In the West, development is defined as a linear process, where a society moves from under- or limited development to more complex systems that prioritize economic growth. In contrast, a linear notion of development traditionally has not existed in indigenous Andean communities (Acosta 2008; Radcliffe 2012; Walsh 2010). *Buen vivir* invokes other non-materialist values: “knowledge, social and cultural recognition, codes of ethical and spiritual behavior in the relationship with society and nature, human values, the vision of the future, among others” (Acosta 2008, see also Smith 2017). *Buen vivir* is built on reciprocity, solidarity, cooperation, and harmony with *Pachamama* and is fundamental to the cosmivision of Andean indigenous communities (Walsh 2010).

Within this paradigm, *buen vivir* is a principle of equity for daily living that transcends all else; the goal of living is not to have more than one’s neighbor but for everyone to have enough. Quality of life is not reduced to consumption and property, nor is it measured through competition and accumulation of material goods. It is a holistic approach that requires the reformulation of development and definitions of progress in terms of both individual and communal well-being (Le Quang 2013). It is evident that *buen vivir* is fundamentally at odds with neoliberalism. In essence, this is the transformative power of *buen vivir*; it offers alternative ways of living, knowing, and relating with the living world that challenge colonial and capitalist paradigms. There are limited examples of states enacting policy that challenges capitalist hegemony and even fewer that make policy based in indigenous philosophy, thus our need to study these examples is vitally important.<sup>3</sup>

### **From Philosophy to State Policy**

*Buen vivir* was introduced to the national political conversation with the election of Rafael Correa. Correa, a U.S.-educated economist, ran as an independent in the presidential elections of 2006 and assumed office in January 2007. By April, citizens voted with overwhelming support (80%) for a referendum to create a Constitutional Assembly to rewrite the Constitution. Correa formed the party *Alianza País* to support candidates for the Assembly, ultimately winning a majority of seats in the September 2007 election.

Correa’s campaign promised to re-orient state policy to address the demands of Ecuadorian citizens rather than submit to international pressure. Despite not personally emerging from social movement organizing, his platform was largely embraced by a population that was highly critical of the neoliberal policies previous administrations instituted, including the dollarization of the

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<sup>3</sup> Ecuador was the first state to incorporate *buen vivir* in its Constitution in 2008, followed by Bolivia in 2010.

economy in 2000 (Becker 2012; Prevost, Oliva, and Vanden 2012). CONAIE ultimately supported Correa's initial run for President and many of his subsequent programs, including rewriting the Constitution in 2008 (Becker 2011). Support from this antisystemic movement organization enabled Correa to incorporate transformative ideas into the Constitution; including the incorporation of *buen vivir* as an orienting principle for the country and according legal rights to Nature. As I discuss below, this shift by the state is most notably included in the following three government documents I analyzed: the Constitution (Republic of Ecuador 2008), *Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir* (PNBV) 2009-2013 (SENPLADES 2009), and PNBV 2013-2017 (SENPLADES 2013).

### **Buen Vivir in the Constitution**

The 2008 Constitution marked an important transition by officially acknowledging the indigenous roots of Ecuador. Defining the state as plurinational in the Constitution occurred after years of indigenous activism (Becker 2012). The Constitution also signaled the state's commitment to *buen vivir* as a new direction for state policies; in other words, activating the state's capacity for transformative power. In accordance with a move toward decolonization, the Constitution uses the Kichwa words '*sumak kawsay*' in policy, highlighting ideas written within their original cultural reference points.<sup>4</sup>

*Buen vivir* is not defined in the Constitution, yet it appears throughout including in the Preamble: "We hereby decide to build a new form of public coexistence, in diversity and harmony to achieve *buen vivir*, the *sumak kawsay*..." The fundamental rights of *buen vivir* are mentioned 25 times, with specific attention in Section 2: Rights (Rights to *Buen Vivir*), Section 6 the Regime of *Buen Vivir*, and Section 7 the Regime of Development. It is within Section 2 that the state clarifies its role in providing for *buen vivir*. For example, Section 1 Article 3.5 notes: "The state's duty includes planning national development, eliminating poverty, and promoting sustainable development and the equitable redistribution of resources and wealth to enable *buen vivir*." The Rights to *Buen Vivir* articulate the rights to food, a healthy environment, water, social communications, education, housing, and health. In a move away from focusing solely on the individual level, these rights are granted the same standing as those provided to individuals, communities, and nationalities. Moreover, the emphasis on the collective is noted in Section 2 Article 83.7 where citizens are informed that they are "to promote public welfare and give precedence to general interests over individual interests, in line with *buen vivir*."

The Regime of *Buen Vivir* includes rights related to inclusion, equity and rights focused on

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Section 2 Rights Chapter 9 Article 83.2 outlines the duties and obligations citizens have: "*Ama killa, ama llulla, ama shwa*. To not be lazy, lie, or steal."

conservation of biodiversity (see tables 1 and 2).

**Table 1.** *Buen Vivir* Regimen, Chapter 1 “Inclusion and Equality” in the 2008 Constitution

<b>Constitutional Section</b>	<b>Article and Explanation</b>
Education	Art.323: The national education system is designed to develop the learning abilities of individuals and the collective, and to create and use the knowledge of technology, wisdom, arts, and culture.
Healthcare	Art 358: The national healthcare system is designed to develop, protect, and revitalization of the potential for a healthy life for both the individual and collective based on the recognition of social and cultural diversity.
Social Security	Art 367: The social security system is public, universal, not privatized, and will attend to the needs of the population. Inscription in the system is universally obligatory.
Housing	Art. 375: The state guarantees the right to a dignified living situation.
Culture	Art. 377: The national system of culture is designed to strengthen national identity; protect and promote diverse cultural expression; support free artistic expression; and conserve the social memory and cultural patrimony.
Fitness and Leisure	Art. 381: The state will protect and promote physical fitness, sports, and recreation recognizing the contribution these activities make to the health, formation, and development of people.
Social Communication	Art 384: The social communication system ensures the freedom to exercise the rights of communication, information, and freedom of expression
Science, Technology, and Innovation	Art 385: The national system of science, technology, and innovation and ancestral knowledge promotes the creation, adaption, and diffusion of scientific and technological knowledge
Risk Management	Art 389: The state will protect people, communities, and the natural environment against natural or man-made disasters; promote improving socio-economic conditions in an effort to reduce vulnerable conditions
Population and Mobility	Art 391: The state will contribute to territorial development, protect the environment and security of the population
Human Security	Art 389: The state guarantees the human security through policies to ensure a peaceful living environment to prevent violence, discrimination, & criminal activity.
Transportation	Art 394: The state guarantees the freedom of citizens to use any type of transportation; the development of a mass public transportation system will be a

	priority and will be regulated by the state.
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**Source:** Constitution, Republic of Ecuador (2008) as cited in CODENPE (2011); translated and adapted by author

**Table 2.** *Buen Vivir* Regimen, Chapter 2 “Biodiversity and Natural Resources” in the 2008 Constitution

<b>Constitutional Section</b>	<b>Article and Explanation</b>
Nature and the Environment	Art 395: The Constitution guarantees a sustainable model of development, respecting cultural diversity, which will conserve biodiversity and allow for balance and the regeneration of the natural environment
Biodiversity	Art 400: The state exercises the sovereignty over the biodiversity. It is in the public’s interest the conservation of biodiversity, especially the agricultural and genetic heritage of the country.
Natural heritage and Ecosystems	Art 404: The natural heritage of Ecuador, from the environmental, scientific, cultural, or touristic perspective demands protection, conservation, recuperation, and promotion.
Natural Resources	Art 408: All natural resources are the inalienable property of the State. They can be exploited under strict guidelines that are established in the Constitution.
Ground	Art 409: It is of public interest and a national priority the conservation of the ground, especially the fertile layer. The state will establish norms to protect and the sustainable use to prevent the degradation of the land by contamination, desertification, or erosion.
Water	Art 411: The state guarantees the conservation, recuperation, and integrated management of water, water sources. The state will regulate all activity that could affect the quality and quantity of water and the balance of the ecosystems
Biosphere, Urban ecology, and alternative energy	Art 413: The state will promote energy efficiency, the development and use of clean energy such as renewable that are low risk to the ecological balance

**Source:** Constitution, Republic of Ecuador (2008) as cited in CODENPE (2011); translated and adapted by author

The Regime of Development in the Constitution states outright that development should serve *buen vivir*. For instance, Article 275 affirms *buen vivir* is the goal for the state’s development

model: “the development regime is the organized, sustainable and dynamic set of economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental systems that guarantee the attainment of *buen vivir*...” Article 275 also outlines the responsibilities and rights to ‘live well’: “*Buen vivir* requires that people, communities, towns, and nationalities effectively enjoy their rights and exercise responsibilities within a framework of interculturalism, respect for diversity, and harmonious co-existence with nature.”

### **Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir**

Empowered by the Constitution, Ecuador integrated *buen vivir* into three national development plans: National Development Plan 2007-2010, PNBV 2009-2013, and PNBV 2013-2017. These plans prioritize state spending and outline the internal development goals of the state. At the outset, the National Development Plan was framed as an initial step in the process of deep-seated change across the government, known as a “citizen’s revolution.” For example, the plan for 2007-2010 states:

The deeper meaning of the Plan is its conceptual break with the Washington Consensus ideology, with its stabilization policies, structural adjustment and reducing the state to a minimum. This Plan is a break with the neoliberalism applied in Creole version that caused a weak political and institutional system and deep socio-economic crisis. The Plan recovers a vision of development that favors the pursuit of *buen vivir*... This necessarily implies a change in the way the state recovers its management skills, planning, regulation, process of redistribution and deepens the process of devolution, decentralization and citizen participation (SENPLADES 2007:6).

The PNBV 2009-2013 was designed to usher the beginning of long-term structural change (CONDENPE 2011) and is guided by a set of 12 objectives (See Table 3).

The most recent PNBV (2013-2017) defines *buen vivir* as “the style of life that enables happiness and the permanency of cultural and environmental diversity; it is harmony, equality, and solidarity. It is not the quest for opulence of infinite economic growth” (SENPLADES 2013:14). The plan emphasizes Ecuador’s focus on the following themes: equity, cultural revolution, territory, urban revolution, agrarian revolution, knowledge revolution, and excellence. The focus is on the role structural change will play in improving the individual and collective experiences in society. Accordingly, this PNBV establishes that economic growth is not an end in itself; rather it is a tool for the creation and enhancement of the abilities and capabilities of the public. Like its

predecessor, the third installment of the national development plan is also guided by a set of 12 objectives (See Table 4), with measurable outcomes noted.

**Table 3. Objectives of the *Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir* 2009-2013 (CODENPE 2011)**

1. Foster a cohesive and socially-integrated environment through diversity
2. Improve the educational capacities and potential of the citizenship
3. Improve the citizenship's overall health and quality of life
4. Improve environmental rights and promote environmentally sustainable programs
5. Maintain sovereignty, promote peace and foster greater Latin American integration
6. Promote stable, dignified and just work laws and provide work options for citizens
7. Construct and strengthen intercultural and public spaces
8. Affirm and strengthen plurinationalism and interculturalism
9. Guarantee individual rights and ensure a proper system of justice
10. Increase the ability of the citizenship to participate politically
11. Establish a socio-economic system based on sustainable development
12. Construct a democratic state based on the idea of 'good living'

**Table 4. Objectives of the *Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir* 2013-2017 (SENPLADES 2013)**

1. To consolidate democratic governance and construct the people's power
2. To foster social and territorial equity, cohesion, inclusion and equality in diversity
3. To improve people's quality of life
4. To strengthen citizen capacities and potential
5. To build spaces for social interaction and strengthen national identity, diverse identities, pluri-nationality and interculturality
6. To consolidate the transformation of the judicial system and reinforce comprehensive security, with strict respect for human rights
7. To guarantee the rights of Nature and promote environmental sustainability globally
8. To consolidate the social and solidary economic system, sustainably
9. To guarantee dignified work in all forms
10. To promote transformation of the productive structure
11. To ensure the sovereignty and efficiency of the strategic sectors for industrial and technological transformation
12. To guarantee sovereignty and peace, enhancing strategic insertion

## worldwide and Latin American integration

All three development plans articulate antisystemic positions relative to the global capitalist world-system. The plans clearly set a path to challenge capitalist notions of development by prioritizing, through adoption of *buen vivir* as policy, the creation of a more equitable society for all. As the philosophy suggests, a symbiotic relationship between humans and the environment, the development plan articulates how living well must occur in harmony with cultural diversity and the environment. The PNBV 2013-2017 continues this agenda and positions the role of the state as central in the creation of *buen vivir*.

### Analysis

Ecuador's 2008 Constitution and the subsequent National Development Plans are all antisystemic and counterhegemonic; they seek to decenter a U.S.-dominant system and advocate a move away from the capitalist paradigm. This policy shift is a clear example of how a peripheral state, facing pressures from global power holders and internal social movements, has challenged the global capitalist order. While difficult, if not impossible, for a single peripheral state to fundamentally alter the global development paradigm, Ecuador's problematic translation of *buen vivir* philosophy to policy in the short term (discussed in the next section) may plant a seed, inspiring new ways of thinking about future counterhegemonic projects. I turn now to an analysis of the policy in this larger, world-system context.

### ***Buen Vivir* Policy – Obstacles and Contradictions**

There were several issues with the ways that *buen vivir* philosophy was implemented in Ecuador's state policy. Three of the most significant concerns were a continued reliance on natural resource extraction, the strengthened centralized state, and a growing external debt to China.

Progress and development are no longer solely defined by GDP and purchasing power; on paper *buen vivir* emphasizes the synergy between humans and nature. In practice one might expect the state to move away from its dependence on natural resources. The exploitation of nature for human need is an accepted part of most theories of modernity, but it is incompatible with *buen vivir* philosophy. There is evidence that Correa's commitment to social development superseded other goals of *buen vivir*. For instance, during Correa's first administration he requested money from global investors for his "Keep Oil in the Ground" initiative for the Yasuní rainforest. At the same time he promoted this initiative at the UN his administration wrote plans to open up the southern Amazon to new oil projects. Ecuador has reduced its dependence on oil, though it remains its most

important export. Unsurprisingly critics question how ‘neo-extractivism’ can be accepted in a country where Nature has rights (Dangle 2014; Zorilla 2014). The state invested heavily in the social sector while dependent on the exploitation of nature and natural resources to generate revenue—consistent with the existing capitalist system.

This reliance on extraction violates basic principles of *buen vivir* and is a point of contention for indigenous and environmental activists who put internal pressure on the government to change course. Correa said with regard to growth in mining: “I don’t like mining, and open-pit is even worse, but it’s impossible to think of modern life without mining and it would be irresponsible not to use those resources” (Garcia and Valencia 2013). The contradictions in the promotion of large-scale mining while acknowledging the finite nature of natural resources in PNBV 2013-2017 is troubling for many (Walsh 2010; Zorilla 2014). Theoretically, how does this fit within the context of global historical trends of capitalism? Wallerstein (1991) contends that the contradictions between values and practices are inherent in the capitalist world-system. The neoliberal system is entrenched globally and it is inconceivable that a peripheral state acting alone could entirely replace this system (Radcliffe 2012). The PNBVs acknowledge a process of long-term structural change, yet there are no timelines for *when* the practice will move closer to the policy goals. How long can the contradictions in values and practices exist before the commitment to counterhegemonic change is realized? Is maintaining western notions of development in practice while investing in the social sector a first step in the process of moving away from the modernist paradigm? Or is the commitment to *buen vivir* principles in this particular case only superficial?

The second obstacle for the *buen vivir* policy was the increasingly centralized state that exerts a dominating power in key ways. In the government documents I analyzed, the role of citizenry and communities is highlighted as necessary to achieve *buen vivir*. Previous administrations and other ‘pink tide’ governments sought to expropriate and transform the power of movements by incorporating movement leaders into the government (Robinson 2008). However, Correa used other strategies to stall indigenous, student, and environmentalists that challenged his power; during his presidency over 200 indigenous protestors were jailed. He referred to them as “*infantiles*” and “*terroristas*.” Seemingly progressive on some fronts, this government, like others before, used the coercive power of the state to maintain political order and disempower social movements (Petras and Veltmeyer 2005; Martinez 2013; Lewis 2016). Simultaneously, the government’s proud stance as critic of U.S. hegemony was bolstered through the co-optation of several central issues of the indigenous movement (e.g., resisting U.S. free trade deals, dollarization of the economy, closing the naval base at Manta, holding a constituent assembly). Becker (2011:104) contends this co-optation of key issues and repression of activists “undermines the strength of social movements.” Viewed through the lens of world-systems, the state maintained its counterhegemonic position vis-à-vis other states, but was less committed to the antisystemic

values of movements and civil society that helped elect Correa (Becker 2011). Indeed, the world-system in which Ecuador is entrenched prioritizes the state as the primary political institution. Thus Ecuador's political leader sought a strong counterhegemonic stance externally while maintaining centralized, dominating state power internally.

Ecuadorians have long had a strong commitment to protest, indeed with high levels of political corruption, public protest was one way to command attention and force change. Correa used intimidation, closed NGOs that resisted plans for resource extraction in indigenous communities and ended funding for the Development Council on the Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador, citing misuse of funds (Becker 2012).<sup>5</sup> Indigenous anti-mining activists have in one case been killed, and in another jailed for ten months (Collins 2015). This disdain for popular power was also directed at students who protested against Amazonian oil extraction. Correa said that protestors were hurtful: "They are hurting the country, the poor, that Amazonian region. We are not the multinationals, we are the poor. We cannot be beggars sitting in front of a bag of gold" (Caselli 2012). Correa used the support of the indigenous and students to gain power, but as the political system grew increasingly hierarchical and dependent upon the president and his decrees, many argued that Correa was attempting "to neutralize the ability of the indigenous movement to mobilize and to destroy it as a historic social actor" (Dávalos quoted in Becker 2012:126). Indeed some of these tactics are similar to those used by more authoritarian states as methods to delegitimize and repress dissent (Prevost, Campos, Vanden 2012). The strength of the indigenous movement in Ecuador helped bring Correa to power and legitimized the implementation of state policy based on an Andean indigenous philosophy. Simultaneously, the indigenous and climate justice movements were increasing their transnational networks and translocal connections while the state sought to abandon this base of support (Becker 2013; Widener 2011). The relationship between state leaders who promote counter hegemonic initiatives and anti-systemic social movements has larger implications that can shape a political regime's success.

Finally, the state had presumably turned away from financing by global financial institutions; Correa was a long-standing critic of the World Bank and IMF. Correa sought another source of financing and found China eager to extend its reach in Latin America. Consequently, Ecuador accepted loans for upwards of \$11 billion from China, with more on the horizon (Krauss and Bradsher 2015). Similar to the terms of the contracts China has with other regional counterparts, Ecuador agreed to pay primarily through oil and to a lesser extent through mining and the development of hydroelectric plants, entrenching the dependence on natural resource extraction. For world-systems theorists, the significance of this relationship with China is twofold: 1) by

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<sup>5</sup> *Acción Ecológica* was closed in 2009 and reopened months later; *Fundación Pachamama* was closed Dec 2013.

creating financial relationships with China, Ecuador contributes to the creation of a heterogeneous global market where non-Core countries are increasingly powerful (Dunaway and Clelland 2017) and 2) the investments from China are servicing the *buen vivir* development plan. However, while Chinese investments service Ecuador's counterhegemonic initiatives, the terms of the loans reinforce capitalist logics. The debt that the country has generated is staggering and will require the same long-term repayment and sacrifice by the most marginalized sectors as did the loans during the neoliberal period.<sup>6</sup> Critics are concerned that even in the name of development for *buen vivir*, the Ecuadorian people and their desires are being silenced to the needs of the state for foreign capital (cf. Lewis 2016).

The question remains of how the debt to China will impact politics in Ecuador internally and regionally. Chinese loans far outweigh what the World Bank offered to all of Latin America. Thus, we see the state exercising dominating power to squelch internal pressures that were critical of Chinese loans all while it pursued counterhegemonic projects to support social development. The extent to which a peripheral state can entirely move outside the basic modernist paradigm is doubtful; this case reveals the distance between *buen vivir* philosophy and geopolitical realities. Despite serious concerns about the implementation of *buen vivir* in the short term, in the next section I discuss how *buen vivir* has nonetheless contributed to a transformative space for political imagination and counterhegemonic strategies.

### ***Buen Vivir* Policy – Resistance in the Global Capitalist System**

*Buen vivir* is antithetical to Western notions of capitalist development and the Ecuadorian policy that invokes *buen vivir* clearly challenges the hegemony of core countries and global financial institutions. In what follows, I describe how this resistance has taken three primary forms: prioritizing the autonomy of the Ecuadorian state, strengthening regional ties in Latin America, and rejecting a neoliberal definition of development. Each of these forms speaks to the capacity of the state to exercise a non-dominating, transformative power.

The review of government documents reveals that the Ecuadorian state sought to strengthen its ability to determine its economic and political agendas by reducing the influence of the United States. In the section "Ecuador Around the World" in PNBV 2013-2017, the global financial crisis of 2008 is used to contextualize the connection of countries and regions through the global economy. It explains how the decisions made in the United States, Europe, or by global financial institutions have the capacity to collapse other economies. As a strategy of resistance against neoliberal capitalism, Ecuador focused on defending the state's role as primary in setting the public

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<sup>6</sup> Additionally, at the current reduced value of oil, Ecuador faces enormous internal pressure for how it will continue to pay external debts and support social investment.

agenda, legislation, and fiscal policy. This has protected national industry and curtailed the influence of banking and speculative capital industries. The state's more active role significantly reduced the influence of the United States and global financial institutions on the government (a departure from previous decades) and is representative of the anti-hegemonic turn in Ecuador. The following examples are emblematic of that changing relationship. During Correa's first administration, Ecuador did not renew the contract for the U.S. naval base at Manta.<sup>7</sup> Ecuador steadfastly declined free trade deals with the United States, while neighbors Colombia and Peru signed. Despite indirect threats from the United States, Ecuador houses Julian Assange, founder of Wikileaks (2012-present) at its London embassy.<sup>8</sup> In 2013, Edward Snowden sought refuge after revealing the depths of NSA surveillance on US citizens; Ecuador responded by engaging in discussions to extend asylum Snowden.<sup>9</sup> Ecuador supported Iran and Cuba in foreign policy and ended USAID programs in the country in 2014. Thus, Ecuador lost any favored status it may have had with the United States by taking these counterhegemonic steps to assert its autonomy. Simultaneously, these actions may have served to strengthen Ecuador's alliances with its left-leaning neighbors in the region.

Peripheral countries face external political and economic pressures that may inhibit their ability to follow criticism of the World Bank and IMF with concrete action. However, Ecuador made waves only days after its new president assumed power. In his inaugural address Correa proclaimed that a portion of Ecuador's external debt was illegitimate. He asserted that because the debt was procured during the time of military reign, it would go unpaid. With a poverty rate of nearly 40%, Correa said debt payment would not be prioritized over ensuring the basic needs of Ecuadorians. Since then, the poverty rate has decreased to 25% and levels of extreme poverty are now below 10% (CIA World Fact Book 2014). The default on over \$3bn in bonds lowered Ecuador's standing among global credit-holders. Moreover, the government took control of the central bank and separated the financial sector from the media (banks owned major media outlets). In order to prioritize maintaining more control of the country's earnings, Correa renegotiated the contracts held by multinational oil companies. Previously the state received an average of 13% of the gross sales value, after renegotiating it received as much as 87% (Ghosh 2012).

The second form of counterhegemonic resistance is a 'turn toward the South' emphasizing

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<sup>7</sup> President Correa agreed to renew the base on the condition that Ecuador be granted a base at Miami. President Obama declined Correa's offer.

<sup>8</sup> Ecuador surprised many by granting Assange Ecuadorian citizenship in December 2017.

<sup>9</sup> The Snowden case ultimately affected trade negotiations. The United States pressured Ecuador not to accept Snowden by threatening to not renew its trade preferences for Ecuadorian tuna and cut flowers (two of Ecuador's top exports). Ecuadorian Communications Minister Fernando Alvarez cited the move as blackmail prompting Ecuador to unilaterally renounce the preferences.

stronger regional connections (Smith and Wiest 2012). Arguably, Ecuador would not have been as emboldened in its counterhegemonic actions were it not for the support offered by pink tide counterparts Venezuela and Bolivia. By deepening relationships with South America and Cuba more generally, Ecuador reoriented its focus from the Global North to regional development by supporting initiatives such as ALBA, *Banco del Sur*, UNASUR (now headquartered in Ecuador), and the Organization of American States. Additionally, increasing regionalism is a geopolitical strategy that is enshrined in government documents: The Preamble to the Constitution states that ‘the sovereign people of Ecuador...hereby decide to build a democratic country, committed to Latin American integration—a dream of Simón Bolívar and Eloy Alfaro.’ Renewed efforts for regionalism are a thread in the long history of resistance and decolonization in the country.

The third form of resistance is the rejection of a neoliberal definition of development. Ecuador is a small peripheral state, yet the fact that it questioned and redefined key assumptions of progress is striking. For example, Ecuador now uses more indicators of development beyond per-capita income and GDP. While these traditional measures are employed, *Buen Vivir* policy provides the state an alternative orientation toward living life fully, the wellbeing of communities, the relationship with the natural world, and even happiness (SENPLADES 2009; SENPLADES 2013; Ramírez 2010). For instance, PNBV 2013-2017 states: “Socialism for Good Living questions the dominant pattern of hegemonic accumulation...We propose a transition toward a society in which life is the supreme asset.” Ecuador’s initiatives have been bolstered by the larger conversations and global efforts to challenge narrow notions of development.<sup>10</sup>

The strong state-centered development plan that refutes neoliberalism calls for investing heavily in social and physical infrastructure for the wellbeing of society. Developmental states often do this by creating more egalitarian policies related to “access to educational opportunities and health care” (Harvey 2005:72). As part of Correa’s “citizen’s revolution” social spending doubled from 5 to 10% of GDP between 2006 and 2011 (Ray and Kozameh 2012). Due to the state’s active investment in the public sector, including in health, education, and sanitation, more people were employed by the state, and levels of unemployment were below 5% in 2011 (CIA World Fact Book 2014). Reducing poverty levels was addressed through minimum wage and welfare increases. The investment in the educational sector tripled from \$235 million in 2006 to \$941 million in Correa’s first administration (Ray and Kozameh 2012). This investment resulted in the elimination of school fees, free textbooks and school materials, expansion of the free breakfast program, and free public university. The Constitution and subsequent legislation altered

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<sup>10</sup> Bhutan has advanced discussions of ‘gross national happiness’ at the UN and in 2008 the President of France commissioned economists to write about the role of social well being in development indices (see Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2010).

the way universities are funded, administered, and accredited. In 2011 Ecuador invested 5.2% of its GDP in higher education, a larger percentage than any other Latin American country and second only to Denmark globally (Ray and Kozameh 2012). Investment in education is a massive change from the previous neoliberal policies that prompted divestment in this sector. The investments are an example of the state exerting its capacity for transformative power, whereby the population is supported by the state to achieve ‘good living.’

Heavy investment in social welfare programs increases the responsibility and size of the state. Increased state spending contradicts neoliberal guidelines which advocate reduced state expenditure. In addition to the oil contract renegotiations, the state also increased its tax revenue by enforcing corporate tax laws. Corporate taxes account for 40% of revenue collection and strict penalties for non-payment are now enforced. Less support for privatization and more effort to increase corporate taxes is a reversal of broader economic policies advocated by international financial institutions. These components of increased social spending are certainly indicators of a move away from the capitalist development model.

This case reveals the complexity of implementing policy that rejects key neoliberal tenants. The heart of Ecuador’s *buen vivir* policy prioritized social investment, which helped Correa maintain popular support. Yet, this support contributed to Correa’s ability to centralize state power, act coercively, and silence critics. Analyzing the role of the state—in policy and in practice—as an agent of transformative power is imperative for antisystemic and counterhegemonic efforts to unseat global capitalism. Clearly increasing regionalism and maintaining internal support were footholds for *buen vivir* policy in Ecuador. Admittedly, while the successes in Ecuador were limited, this case has inspired the larger transnational movement and brought attention to the transformative idea of *buen vivir*. The political conundrum for peripheral states ostensibly is determining how to advance *buen vivir* philosophy when constrained by the capitalist world-economy. Ultimately, the Ecuadorian case forces us to consider how to better align alternative visions with practice (Smith 2017).

### Conclusion

This paper has examined how *buen vivir*, an Andean philosophy that is fundamentally anti-materialistic and based on community, rather than strictly individual, wellbeing, was integrated into state policy. I use the case of Ecuador to explore the role a state can play in challenging global capitalist hegemony. This case is theoretically significant because Ecuador is a peripheral state that has redefined development in ways contrary to what core nations and global financial institutions endorse, and it thus supports the argument that hegemonic resistance will emerge from the periphery (cf. Santos 2006; Markoff 2003). The Ecuadorian policies actively reject models of

capital accumulation and privatization for a development system that prioritizes a philosophy of ‘living well’ whereby state development enhances the quality of life for all. This alternate way of conceptualizing development built on indigenous roots is designed to inspire a “dialogue between ancestral knowledge and wisdom with the most advanced universal thinking, in a process of continued decolonization of ideas” (Acosta 2010:13, see also Gudynas 2011). The *buen vivir* development model represents a new way to organize life within the modern nation-state (Escobar 2012).

The capitalist system is in crisis. Understanding how counterhegemonic and antisystemic movements may influence the state to create and sustain alternative ways of living is critical. Some lessons from this case relate to the ways power was exercised and the controversies that ensued. For example, Ecuador took a political risk to turn away from the United States and assert its own ideological agenda. The radical break from the neoliberal paradigm and the focus on regional strength is clearly articulated: “We have recovered our Nation’s sovereignty. Now our gaze is to the South, our historical South. There are no more foreign military bases. In Ecuador the international bureaucracies no longer give the orders. We no longer sign humiliating letters of intention” (SENPLADES 2013:20). Ecuador’s ability to assume this position and implement a path for transformative power was bolstered by support from regional left-leaning states and existing fissures in the foundations of the capitalist world-system. It is quite likely that ‘revolutionary shoves’ from anti-systemic movements (Chase-Dunn 2013), such as popular global movements from indigenous, climate justice, and anti-austerity struggles, also played a key role in the state’s defiance of the global capitalist hegemony (Reifer 2013).

However, an important criticism of this case is that macro-level policy was built on a community-oriented, grassroots philosophy. Contradictions quickly emerged that remain challenging for the state’s use of dominating power in the name of a philosophy that espouses non-dominating and collaborative power within the community. To reach his goals, Correa pushed back on both external and internal pressures, including silencing anti-systemic movements within Ecuador. As Martin Hart-Landsberg notes, “an anti-neoliberal stance should not be confused with anticapitalist politics” (quoted in Becker 2011:104). When activists questioned the state’s position on natural resource extraction, they used the Constitutional rights granted to Nature as the foundation for their argument. Correa invoked his presidential power to prioritize investment in the social sector, a counterhegemonic step in a capitalist system that privileges a weaker welfare state. However, rather than acknowledge the validity in activists’ concerns, he railed against them—invoking an authoritarian tone, which did little to engender support. The relationship between state leaders and social movements was key to advancing notions of *buen vivir* policy in Ecuador. Yet, as those movements grew louder and more critical of the administration’s implementation of the policy, the state used its dominating power to silence them. Indeed,

peripheral states may work with movements to challenge core states and dominant ideology, but they may also be less accommodating to all of the goals and values of antisystemic movements (Smith and Wiest 2012). Finding the balance between a strong state willing to oppose capitalist hegemony *and* create a progressive political system that truly empowers communities—using the philosophy of *buen vivir* as a guide—is emblematic of the work that remains.

In an increasingly globalized world, the role of the state is complex. The case of *buen vivir* policy in Ecuador demonstrates an alternate path for the state (Escobar 2012), and it also provides a window into some of the challenges a peripheral state may face. At a time when many seek alternatives to the global capitalist system, Ecuador's transformation of *buen vivir* philosophy to policy is an important first step in the path for state resistance.

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