

Modernity, development, interculturality and Sumak Kawsay or Living Well but not Better

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As we all know, at the beginning of March 2007, the subprime mortgage investment fund Bear Stearns collapsed and gave rise to one of the deeper financial and economic crises of recent decades. This happened in the world-wide economy and it seems pertinent to me to our discussions of the problems of globalisation, development and interculturality to mention this fact.

Indeed, the world-wide crisis originated in the richest countries comprising the G7, and has required the intervention of the State to avoid the collapse of global financial markets. In these two year and a half years since the outbreak of the crisis, the countries of the G7 have allocated nearly 5 trillion dollars to the financial markets and have recognized the necessity of establishing better mechanisms of regulation and financial control.

However, five trillion dollars is too great an amount to even be imagined. In 2007, the gross national product of the United States was 13.86 trillion dollars. We can imagine then that in these two years, the financial markets were allocated around 40% of the amount of the total wealth of the United States.

It is a paradox of the times that the amount needed to overcome world-wide poverty and to fulfill the Millenium Development Goals of the United Nations for the poorest countries is not even 100 billion dollars, an insignificant fraction in relation to that allocated to save the world-wide financial system. The amounts to reduce poverty in Africa are even more modest, not even 55 billion dollars. In the same vein, to equip the poorest population of Latin America with basic services a small fraction of the resources that were destined to the financial markets would have been needed. In fact, in the USA, the Bush administration vetoed legislation to give free health care to children, in a program that would cost around 6 billion dollars. The argument of the Bush administration was that there were no resources to finance this program of public health. Days later, the same Bush administration was exerting pressure on the US Congress to allocate trillions of dollars to salvage the banks.

These facts seem to me pertinent because they allow us to clarify the distance between the speeches and the realities of power, and at the same time demonstrate that much of this discourse is no more than a mechanism of ideological and epistemologic colonization, rather than a discourse that has some social and scientific validity. I want to talk especially about the discourse of globalisation.

During the two last decades we have been witnesses to the form by which the discourse on globalisation has been constructed in a way which has narrowed the horizon of human possibilities to the coordination of markets and economic agents. States, the system of the United Nations, international development cooperation, the multilateral institutions, all of them, began to think, speak and operate based on globalisation, the efficiency of markets, and poverty as a strictly economic phenomenon associated with consumption. However, we see that reality constructed from the discourse of globalisation finally failed and is leading humanity to an unprecedented crisis. Nevertheless, the discourses seem not to be affected by this reality. There is a world-wide crisis that has forced humanity to undertake an enormous exercise to save the banks, because the five trillion dollars are a bill that we will all have to pay in the end, but the speeches and the ideas keep pouring out as if nothing had happened.

If globalisation failed, if the markets failed, it would be normal, in any circumstance, that the speeches that legitimized and sustained globalisation and the markets, should begin to change and recognize the world-wide crisis. But we continue speaking of globalisation as if nothing had changed in recent years. As if the crisis was a circumstantial and limited phenomenon in few countries and as if the invoice of five trillion

has nothing to do with us. This attitude of theoretical / ideological colonialism has an ethical side: we continue as if it were absolutely normal that five trillion dollars are spent to save the banks and we did not bother to spend a cent to overcome poverty, discrimination, violence.

For this reason, to speak of globalisation, when the entire world is suffering the perverse consequences of the markets, seems to me more an act of cynicism and collusion with power. Thus, I consider it pertinent that we begin to maintain critical distance from these discourses which legitimize power. The world-wide crisis is demonstrating to us that a system which decides to protect markets over the human beings who belong to it is a sick system, a system that must be relegated to history.

The world-wide crisis allows me to put into perspective another subject that seems important and that has a long life in modern discourse: the discourse of development. I think that globalisation and the crisis are the manifestation of something deeper and that make reference to the very essence of the system. It is the notion that man is separated from nature and must use nature and other human beings as tools to achieve egotistical (individual) aims. This use of nature, with no ethical consideration, is seen as absolutely pragmatic, and is central to modern beings. This dimension of egoism and individuality, is also central to modern beings. In the Nineteenth century the utopia of this modern being was born in the form of progress.

The ideology of progress has been shown to be perverse. Wars and the concentration camps constituted a closing of the discourse on progress, but not of the idea of progress. This idea transformed into the modern notion of development. Nevertheless, development is as perverse as was the idea of progress in its time. I want to remark on two dimensions of the perversity of the discourse on development: the first makes reference to the relation of man with nature that in the discourse on development is purely instrumental and that now threatens to become a problem of survival of the human species. The second dimension makes reference to the subordination of ethics to economic growth: if to grow in economic terms it is necessary to wipe out the surface of the planet down to the last tree, the notion of development has no obstacles.

For that reason we needed to overcome notions of modernization, development and economic growth with a form of life that is convivial, respectful and harmonious. We indigenous people have that knowledge, we have that practice, we have that legacy that comes from our ancestors, and we want it to share with all. It is called *sumak kawsay* which translated into English is the good life or life in harmony.

Little by little, the concept of *sumak kawsay* has begun to emerge from the invisibility to which it was subjected for more than five centuries. *Sumak kawsay* is the alternative to progress, development, modernity. It is a notion that wants to recover that harmonious relation between human beings and their surroundings. Between humanity and its fellows.

Sumak kawsay is not a return to the past, nor to the age of stone or of caves, and it does not deny either technology nor modern knowledge, as the promoters of Capitalism have argued. *Sumak kawsay* is part of the debate on our destiny that societies and human beings must have in the future. For *sumak kawsay* the fundamental thing is human beings, not markets nor the industrialist's eagerness for economic growth. For this reason, *sumak kawsay* states that to leave the productivist/industrial vision we must enter a process of decrease in the production of things, to enter a process of measured human growth, not in terms of things, but in human terms. In that context indigenous nationalities and peoples need to reclaim our self-determination, to deepen and to extend the practices of living well into society.

The planet is sick. The jungles, the forests, the rivers, the mountains, are agonizing. The model that we have created, the model of development, growth of markets, competitive individualism, of globalisation of markets, is leading us to an environmental catastrophe of unpredictable consequences. I'd like to exaggerate, but the data tells us that levels of environmental pollution have begun to reach critical and irreversible levels. Beside the environmental catastrophe is the human catastrophe that the present system is producing: poverty, inequality, violence, confrontation. The system can give no more. It is exhausting its

historical possibilities and it is now that we must begin to think about alternatives. Living Well, as part of a Plurinational State, is the alternative to avoid the human and environmental catastrophe of Capitalism.

This allows me to finish with a thought on interculturality on a different plane: that of civilizing dialog. I believe that interculturality must be put in a framework to find bridges in the transition between civilizations. That is to say, interculturality must be the form by which we conserve the best of this system, to be journeying towards a new system that surpasses Capitalism and modernity in a definitive way. Seen this way, interculturality becomes one of the most convenient forms to overcome development and journey towards *sumak kawsay*.

Interculturality must open that civilizing dialog. It must help our understanding of the ethical values of modernity that can be rescued with those ethical values of indigenous people and nations. It must become a challenge to humanity to solve the problems that confront it.

Interculturality must be the base from which to begin that dialog of knowledge with a view to, literally, save humanity from Capitalism and modernity. This may sound utopian, but utopia is one of the most beautiful values of modernity. It is necessary to rescue those values and to begin that work of all of us, in which we go about, as the Ecuadorian indigenous leader Dolores Cacuango said, seeding Paramo straw in the world, because this straw, no matter how uprooted, returns to grow.