

# Recovering and Valuing Other Ethical Pillars Buen Vivir\*

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## *Biocivilization for the Sustainability of Life and the Planet*

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Which philosophical, ethical and political  
foundations?

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World Governance



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\* The literal English translation is “good living,” but it is important to observe that buen vivir is itself an imperfect Spanish approximation of the indigenous Ecuadorean Kichwa term, *sumak kawsay*. Meanwhile, in Bolivia, a similar concept stemming from the Aymara Indian cosmovision and language—*suma qamaña*—is customarily translated into Spanish as *vivir bien*, or “living well.”

We are entering the current critical historical juncture with the encouraging finding of peoples' resistance and proposals. The ancient cultures of the various peoples of Asia, Oceania, Africa, and Latin America have constantly challenged, in practice and in theory, the conceptions of the allegedly linear and upward historical course of development of humankind characteristic of Eurocentric, and then North American modernity, which had condemned them, as outdated remains of the archaic and survival of the backward, to inexorable improvement or extinction.

In this paradox of what is supposedly archaic and backward in theory, but emerges empirically with stubborn novelty and validity, there is at stake part of the current need of humankind for designing new forms of knowledge and understanding that can question the pillars of hegemonic civilization, now in crisis, and make it possible to deconstruct and surmount them. This crisis, multiple and comprehensive, is generating objective material conditions that make it possible to see as current and pressing the alternative knowledge of other cultures that had emerged in parallel, separate, and distinct forms, and that had become highly developed. Although there existed in them relations of domination and conflict, they were of a very different nature from those of Western Europe and the United States, and they held a secondary place under social regulation principles that combined social and environmental justice in support of harmony and balance in the world and the cosmos.

Overcoming various complex epistemological difficulties, awareness of these realities is growing, and this awareness can no longer be easily underestimated. Humankind is aware, for example, of the crucial objective fact that the major reservoirs of biodiversity on the planet have been conserved by several of these peoples called "barbarians" and "uncivilized," despite and against the "civilized" scientific progress of the modern West, which almost certainly would have exterminated those reserves of life if it could have got hold of them. Furthermore, while the original peoples were able through their resistance to conserve this treasure of vital hope for all humankind, at the same time the modern civilized West created the atomic, chemical, and bacteriological horrors that could exterminate all human life, or at least damage it irreversibly.

Generating the conditions to facilitate this movement of epistemological and ethical decolonization to retrieve in a useful way the cultural heritages of the peoples of the world is a theoretical task of prime political significance that is already underway, but still insufficient, and to which efforts should be devoted, aware of the fact that these new or renewed ethical approaches should necessarily be incorporated into the process of transition and improvement of civilization that started between the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

# Kachkanirraqmi: “We are here, we are still”

The specific case of the Andean culture in Latin America is not just about the current existence of more than 1,600 Andean communities just in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia living in productive and cultural autonomy; it is not even about the relevant presence, despite their systematic genocide, of South American indigenous peoples, who are currently 60% of the population in Bolivia, 35% in Ecuador, with at least 400 different and distinct peoples in all the countries of the continent today. This is a much more widespread, deep, and growing process involving all societies.

Against two centuries of “rationalization,” “modernization,” “urbanization,” and other similar processes, fully sanctioned by the academy, sociology, and economics, Buen Vivir or Living Well, Sumac Kawsay in Kichwa, and Suma Qamaña in Aymara, a profound ethical principle of the ancient Andean culture, was brought to the United Nations debate by at least three South American presidents at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and in an unprecedented event in history, the new Political Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia (2008) raised it, along with other ancient Andean principles, to constitutional status (Article 8.I).

This has not been a contingent, but rather recurrent, cyclical, and permanent throughout the history of Andean countries. This persistence of the ancient Andean culture presents a paradox: the supposedly “outdated,” “archaic,” “primitive,” “backward,” and “retrograde” are actually generating the new, the renewal, and even the revolutionary. However, in opposition to this actually existing practice of societies and peoples, the global chains of mass media, controlled by hegemonic, violent, and dominant world powers, convey analyses of these situations marked by deep coloniality and racism, where they are classified as “political backwardness,” “populism,” “indigenous fundamentalism,” etc. Beyond the intentions of domination behind the media, this lack of understanding shows how the different members of humankind are still insufficiently able to understand one another from a conceptual point of view and be related in diversity.

However, it is precisely the radically different nature, often in opposition to hegemonic culture, of the Andean culture in general and of Buen Vivir in particular that enables and explains their ability to contribute literally “from elsewhere,” from other logics and paradigms, to overcome the current crisis of the hegemonic civilization paradigm.

## Overcoming Extreme and Facile Views

Rebuilding the Andean culture and specifying Buen Vivir is a difficult and complex task, with no final conclusions in all its details, but a task that needs to be done, at least for some of its fundamental elements, which are vital to understand the difficulties and implications of the present times. This requires overcoming the difficulties of the prejudice that theoretically views the Andean culture as a “repetition of the same,” a particular case of the supposedly universal laws of all humankind. Or the opposite case, which tries to portray it as a kind of perfect “paradise” with no relations of domination and conflict. It thus avoids the hard work of rebuilding and rigorously recognizing a reality that is neither one nor the other, but different, with relations of domination and conflict, but which are unprecedented and original and cannot be reduced to those that are supposedly universal.

Reacting to its violent denial and historical disqualification, there are some who idealize the past, the Andean culture in this case, which is foreign and contrary to authentic, rigorous, and useful reconstruction efforts, and sometimes serves as a basis for a totalitarian indigenist vision that promotes racism and even seeks an exclusive and sectarian position of privilege in a new hierarchical structure of relationships to other peoples and social actors.

Already in the course of the twentieth century, a misleading debate had taken place on the existence of an alleged “Inca socialism.” This debate was more artificial than real, and was upheld by politicians rather than social-science research, politicians all from the perspective of coloniality. This was a debate, we might say, among the colonized, among those who wanted to see a repetition of the European monarchy, and those who wanted to see a socialism that, as a “model,” was also a European product, all of them blind to what was unprecedented and what was original, to what there really was. Ironically, the very concept of “Inca socialism” was conceived by a right-wing conservative reactionary, the French lawyer Louis Baudin, who from a few historical elements coinciding with European socialist discourse identified the social order administered by the Incas with “socialism,” as many did likewise with the European “empire and monarchy.” This identification of a complex and unique reality with a European historical model on the basis of just a few external and formal matching elements is the typical mechanism of epistemic coloniality. Paradoxically, Boudin, when he wrote and published in French his famous book *A Socialist Empire: The Incas of Peru* in 1928, sought to identify modern European socialism with the supposed “enslaving socialism” of the Incas and thus discredit both “socialisms” as inherently oppressive and criminal. However, the popularity of the title of the book, as superficially written as it was misunderstood, triggered a more ideological than serious and systematic debate between the “demonizing” or “idealizing” interpretations, both colonial, of the Tahuantinsuyo.

Efforts must be redoubled to facilitate this historical task of decolonizing knowledge, unlearning coloniality, giving our original peoples their place as an “other,” different generator of legitimate and useful knowledge, in essential horizontal dialog with modern Western knowledge. We need to find other ways of understanding of “others,” enable their description and analysis as what they were and in fact are, beyond the traps of universalism and denial on the one hand, and those of idealism and justification on the other. This requirement of epistemological decolonization goes beyond the Manichean polarity of the demonization or fetishism of ancient and different cultures, in this case the Andean culture, in order to build a more real and useful, though more complex and difficult form of knowledge in the broad and uneven terrain that lies between these extreme and facile views.

## Origins of Originality

If Buen Vivir is an ethical approach in its essential meaning, it is important to note at the outset that it is not fully finished or undisputed, far from it. On the contrary, it is in a process of plural, complex, and controversial construction. Hence, to be understood in a useful way, it requires knowing the deep and essential contexts of the ancient Andean culture, of which Buen Vivir is fruit and expression.

“Andean” comes from “Andes,” the name given to the mountain range that is millions of years old and runs down the South American continent from Venezuela and Colombia in the north to Antarctica in the south. The origin of “Andes” is in the ancient Aymara Qhatir Qullo Qullo, “mountain that is illuminated” (by sunrise and sunset), which the Spaniards reduced to “Qhatir,” later castilianized to “Antis,” and finally to “Andes.” It is an endless mountain range, the longest in the world, 7,500 kilometers long, with an average of 4,000 meters above sea level, higher than 6,000 meters in many places. It acts as the symbolic spine of the continent, ubiquitous, diverse, and common, from north to south, from ocean to ocean, connecting all the countries one way or another, melting in current Peru and Bolivia with Amazonia under a strong Andean-Amazonian identity. It is a privileged natural astrological observatory and the setting of permanent and cyclical earthquake movements with inevitable mythical, spiritual, and religious consequences for the peoples who have lived there for thousands of years. The first surprising social and state orders arose around the Andes, covering large areas of several of the current South American countries.

There is no serious evidence of the arrival of human beings in America after the so-called “Bering Strait” closed, that had joined North America and Europe by its freezing eleven thousand years ago. Neither is there any strong evidence to conclude that the American

peoples had contact with peoples of other continents before the arrival of Europeans in the fifteenth century, other than in any case fleeting exceptions, such as the Viking exploration of North America in the tenth century and evidence of Chinese exploration in Latin America six decades before the arrival of Europeans. As a result of the isolation of America and its populations of any meaningful contact with populations from other continents of the globe, from about eleven thousand years ago, human beings developed unique and irreplicable interaction with the specific astrological, geographical, climatic, and zoological elements of the region, a different, sociocultural evolution, parallel and independent of those developed in other parts of the planet. This consequently led to equally unique and irreplicable social orders and cultural structures. This is the basis of the originality, of the unprecedented nature of so-called American prehistory, to the point that its study does not use the traditional periodization of prehistory or the methodology used in other parts of the world, but other specific periods that are suited for the archaeological reality of the continent.

In the exact same way, the early civilizations of America developed in isolation, in parallel but independently of the rest of the planet for thousands of years. This is the concrete, material, structural, historical reason why American realities, and specifically the Andean culture, cannot be really understood when they are studied and interpreted with ideas and methods born in other realities for which they were meant.

The periodization specifically suited and most agreed upon for the purpose of its study and understanding comprises three major pan-Andean horizons, i.e. state social orders covering territories of several of today's South American countries: Early (Chavin), Intermediate (Tiawanaku) and Late (Tahuantinsuyo). However, they are not correlative and consecutive; they are interrupted by interspersed periods of prevailing fragmentation in many social orders of regional and local nature, limited to small portions of territory. They are called the two major local "intermissions." Consistent with the basic principles of flexibility and adaptation that inspire all Andean cultures and communities, these horizons and intermissions were due to periods of increased ice in the Andean mountains, which displaced large populations and required as a mechanism for adaptation the complex and contradictory formation of social orders that, while being state-run, hierarchical, and including relations of domination and conflict, retained the fundamental principles of large-scale reciprocity and community social redistribution, and a harmonious balance with the environment.

Underlying these alternately pan-Andean and local historical cycles, there is a permanent cultural continuity that was sustained and accumulated over thousands of years, under various political forms, by hundreds of different Andean peoples. This underlying continuity and accumulation made it possible to develop a high level of astrology applied to agriculture, mathematics, geometry, architecture, hydraulics, communication symbolism, and cultural knowledge. The specific form of the Tahuantinsuyo, the last pan-Andean cycle

under the administration of the Incas, is only a small and final part of this millennial continuity and accumulation, and this was the one that the European invaders came upon.

## Essential Principles

A large movement of counter-colonial research and recovery of these cultures and history, both from the Andean peoples themselves and from academia and politics, since at least the early twentieth century, is providing thorough and useful views of these realities and knowledge. We get from them a very essential description of their more substantial content, which makes it possible to contextualize and understand much of the current civilization approach of Buen Vivir. This includes insistence regarding the complex extra effort that will be required to view and understand through another paradigm many of its concepts, which are strange or inconceivable through the hegemonic paradigm.

The Andean world is a living world, a being world. A world where everything is always present, everything is natural and immanent. There is no separation between the abstract and the real, which means that symbols and names are as real and material as any other being. The past and the future exist only in the present, for the present and by the present, they are current. It is cyclical time, non-circular, non-repetitive, but renovated, always with cosmic and telluric variations. In the Tahuantinsuyo period, according to early Spanish chroniclers, people ignored their age in the Western terms of number of years. In contrast, they were classified by age cycles in relation to their productive capacity, from babies, *uaua / llullac uarmi uaua*, to the elderly, *rocto macho / punoc paya*. In *Runa Simi*, the “general,” but neither official or exclusive common language of the Tahuantinsuyo, derived from Kichwa, all life-cycle categories were distinguished in the feminine and masculine, a symbolic distinction in language that is currently the banner of the struggle for gender equality in the Western world, especially in the Spanish language.

Its fundamental core of order was the agricultural-astrological dynamics, that is, the people maintained a deep observation of astrological cycles as directly related to the agricultural cycles and maintained harmony with them. This was a systematic way of knowing and doing, accumulated over thousands of years, which was intended to maintain and increase the flow of life, balances, reciprocity and the conversation among all beings. This is apparent in numerous and magnificent ritual and technological complexes devoted precisely to essential agricultural-astrological knowledge in hundreds of places in South America, which are evidence of the precise and profound astrological-agricultural knowledge that merged in sacralized harmony with the flow and reproduction of life.

Based on this thorough knowledge, they conceived a living, revitalizing, and steadily flowing world, with cycles that, while permanent, are not necessarily equal, where there is room for the unexpected, the unusual, and the contradictory, taken with ease and familiarity, “digested,” incorporated into the logic and dynamics of things. This happened, for example, with the Catholic religion, the central figures of which, Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints, were “digested” in the living Andean world as persons in the community of huacas (spiritual beings), and as such they became part of ceremonies, parties, conversations, and reciprocities, together with the ancient huacas, the apus (mountain spirits), the potato, etc.

Unlike modern Western thinking, this world, this nature and this environment are not an “object” with which the human subject is related, but a world that is itself a subject. In more straightforward terms, it is a living being, a person, where everything that constitutes it is itself subject, living being and person, including soil, water, rocks, mountains, mists, rains, stars, ancestors, huacas (spiritual beings), and of course human beings, animals, and plants. This is shown by the so-called “Tello Obelisk,” a huanca (symbolic stone) found in northern Peru, corresponding to the pan-Andean Chavin culture of 4,000 years ago. In it, all beings, humans, animals, plants, mountains, waters, stars, etc., have eyes, ears and mouth; they are living beings that reciprocate and talk. This brings about a consequence that radically separates Andean thought from modern Western thought: culture, understood by definition as any symbolic or material production of the human being, is here a dimension of everything in the world. A stone has culture, as does a river, a llama, and human beings.

Unlike in the modern West, there is no standardization: no land, no plant, no stone, no river, no rain, no wind is the same as any other, each llama or alpaca, each plant is a person distinct from any other, in profound and comprehensive relation and conversation. There is nothing outside of the evident, and anything “supernatural” is inconceivable: the huacas (present spirits) are part of the real and living world, just like everything else. Andean societies were an indivisible and integrated whole of the social, political, economic, and spiritual dimensions. Living beings in the Andean world may be divided into three types of communities: the human communities, a complex diversity of hundreds of ethnic groups, community, local and state orders; the communities of the Sallqa or nature (Pachamama), and the community of the huacas or spiritual presences—ancestors, apus or spirits of the mountain, stars, etc.

The local, regional ethnic, immediate place where the three communities were related on a daily basis was the Ayllu, fundamental source of life and harmony, which remained essential, below and beyond the pan-Andean state orders, their violence and dominations, and which so far had managed to resist and “digest” the Spanish encomiendas and reductions, the haciendas, cooperatives, and transnational companies of the republics, showing an unbeatable vitality, with more than 1,600 Andean communities in South America.

The essential relationship that keeps the world together is the incompleteness, equivalence, and reciprocity of all beings. In sharp contrast with modern Western thinking, although there are relations of domination and conflict between human beings—certainly limited by inviolable principles of “social rights”—human beings as a whole community have no status of superiority over the other beings in the Andean world. They are as incomplete and as equivalent as everyone else, so it is essential for them to relate on equal terms with everyone else. Everyone else needs the human being equally. In the Andean world there is no place, it is not possible to conceive relations of domination and exclusion, or of superiority of any being over others, whether human beings or “gods,” as in the Western Judeo-Christian biblical Genesis. The three communities need, reciprocate, and talk with each other. The human community, for example, observes, respects harmony, asks the mountain if it is possible to dig an irrigation canal or a terrace on its side for crops. The community of huacas does not only benefit the human community by providing agricultural cycles, it also needs it; hence, human beings, for example, help the sun with the ritual of giving it chicha when it “is weaker” at the end of winter, and there are even “gardens planted with corn for the star.” Reciprocally, they give thanks to Pachamama every time they drink some liquid, throwing a little to the ground (chaya). These are rituals that modern Western eyes misinterpret as “worship” of the sun and the earth, but they are forms of reciprocity and conversation between the human community and the community of huacas.

## Materiality of Life

Refuting in a practical and historical manner the bias that caricatures the concern for the environment as a position to not intervene or use technology to obtain products from nature, Andean cultures and communities have made massive, intensive, extensive, and highly technological use of the environment, in full harmony and balance with it, achieving greater food production than that which is obtained in the same areas today, through hundreds of thousands of miles of agricultural andenes and terraces, water systems, dams, underground canals, and artificial ponds, built on steep mountain slopes and high plains.

They kept their huge production in thousands of collcas (storage units), where for conservation they took advantage of climate factors, winds, sand, and altitude, to keep food, clothing, wicker, etc. fresh and insect-free. They added the intensive use of navigation and fishing, with testimonies stating that they had “one hundred thousand rafts in the sea” (early chronicler Pedro Pizarro, in María Rostworowski, 1988). The breeding of Andean camelid livestock reached enormous proportions and raised the general living standard, with the wool, leather and meat of llamas, also used for transportation, and their dry manure as fuel, and the fine wool of alpacas and vicuñas, which were hunted, shorn, and

released to their natural habitat in order to not reduce their numbers. There were intensive barter exchanges based on established equivalences, since the currency or the market in the sense that we know them today did not exist, although there was the expertise of many trades, such as fishermen, livestock farmers, goldsmiths, potters, weavers, servants of the huaca cult, astrologers, administrators, accountants, and many others, including the so-called “merchants,” a kind of distributors, agents of trade in products. Their monumental and extended architecture, based on the expertise of thousands of years and the massive work in mitas (shifts), was landscape-oriented, and they located the structures in harmony and identified with the environment, such as Machu Pichu and hundreds of other stunning locations throughout South America.

They combined various forms of ownership, with predominance of the ayllu, the regional ethnic community property, which owned lands, water, and grassland, often distributed in different ecological zones, distant up to one day’s journey vertically in the Andes, so that every ayllu could thus have the greatest variety of agricultural and livestock products. Following the Andean highlands, from the coast to the mountains and forests, the microclimates and the geographical agricultural or pastoral conditions varied strikingly, and the Andean peoples were able to get the most of all of them, with flexibility for adaptation. There was limited transhumance, establishment of colonies and enclaves, and the combination among them of “fixed” and “seasonal” or “shift-based” villages. While “Redistribution” was a mechanism of vertical sharing, “Reciprocity” was horizontal; both adopted numerous, varied, and complex forms along the Andes as the essential form of social relationships, even over and in interaction with relations of conflict and domination.

In each ayllu, any common man had a tupu of land, and with each new child his plot was increased. The tupu, a measure of surface area, was of relative extension, it varied with the time and effort required to travel it. For example, if the tupu had to be climbed, it was larger than if it was flat. It also varied with soil quality: for example, it was larger, if the land needed more rest, etc. It was a unit of measurement centered on equivalence and harmony, always enough for food and a good life. They could thus generate surpluses that, in a complex system of reciprocity and redistribution, spared those cultures from experiencing poverty, and it was the inalienable duty of the ruling sectors to guarantee minimum social rights for all. The Spaniards were amazed in their first contacts by the general state of good health, nutrition, and clothing of the population. Even the individuals who for whatever reason were not and would not be materially productive any longer, the elderly, persons with some disability, the sick, etc., could perform activities tailored to their circumstances: to convey experience, look after livestock, wind wool, etc., being in every case the responsibility of the community, so they were taken care of, such that they had no needs. Testimonies of the early Spanish chroniclers show the level of welfare achieved. In Chucuito, present-day Peru, for example, a common man could have a thousand heads of camels (Report of the visit of Garci Diez de San Miguel in 1567 to the province of

Chuchito); today it is one of the country's poorest areas.

## Qhapac Ñan

An extraordinary symbolic and social force, as well as permanence and currency, are displayed by the Qhapac Ñan, the network of tunnels, roads, bridges, ladders, terraces, tambos (kind of inns or lodges) and collcas (storage units) of the Tahuantinsuyo. It represented 20,000 years of accumulated works of the various Andean peoples. Each regional ethnic community was responsible for its construction and maintenance, during the periods of prevalence of this form of government; the state was equally responsible, through the design and implementation of major works in working mitas (shifts), when the pan-Andean federations prevailed.

“Qhapac Ñan” is usually translated as “Inca Road” because it was administered by the Incas when the European conquerors arrived. However, it means more exactly “Road of the Qhapac” or “Road of the Qhapackuna,” builders and walkers of this road. “K`apakk” means “exact, accurate, fair.” While “Kkh`apakk” means “sacred.” It is then the “Road of the Righteous” or the “Path of Wisdom.” Under the last Inca administration, it was about 6,000 kilometers long from Colombia to the Maule region in Chile, and 30,000 square kilometers of surface area were connected, including various ecological zones, in coasts, mountains and forests, up to 5,000 meters high.

In the Qhapac Ñan, though there was a common general language, the Runa Simi, derived from the Kichwa as a synthesis of several languages, all the different languages and cultures of hundreds of different peoples were preserved. Because in the Tahuantinsuyo, unlike the parallel European dynamics, the predominant trend was that the cultures of subordinated peoples, even after being defeated in violent conflicts, were kept and entered intact as part of the pan-Andean state order.

An expression of the sense of proportions and harmony of the Andean society, in the Tahuantinsuyo, the Qhapac Ñan included at certain intervals, which could be of variable size (Tupu) according to the difficulty of moving through it, a Thampu or Tambo. These were places that had “everything for life,” arranged at a certain distance that varied according to the effort needed to travel it, so that all travelers could rest, drink, eat, and practice spiritual reciprocity with the huacas. The Spaniards frequently built their churches on these places in order to break the previous spirituality violently and impose the new Catholic religion.

As it generally happens with ancient cultures, the material and cultural wealth of the Qhapac Ñan is still unraveling, overcoming centuries of neglect and colonialist contempt. Many of the spiritual meanings of its design, for example, are being seriously explored by specialized researchers. Such is the case of the “mathematical geodesic alignment” of its roads, buildings, star observatories, and cities, in angles and diagonal straight lines, in exact proportion of distances and reference to the axial tilt of the planet, with deep scientific and spiritual implications. An example of this process is the new Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia of 2008, where “the State adopts and promotes as ethical-moral principles of the plural society: . . . qhapaj ñan (noble road or life)” (art. 8.1).

Currently, the states of Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Argentina, and Chile, which are joined by the Qhapac Ñan, are promoting its declaration as cultural heritage of humankind by 2011. This is the purpose of the “Qhapaq Ñan Project,” which had recorded until 2004, 65 watersheds and 735 archaeological sites, and had identified 16,000 communities. It thus represents the material and symbolic evidence that the integration of South America is objectively necessary and entirely possible, as complementary to the wealth of difference and diversity, and in full harmony with the environment.

## Buen Vivir

In short, the Andean world can be summed up as one where there were relations of domination and conflict, but where these were still rigorously subjected to superior deeply rooted principles of harmony and balance (Allin Kawsay). In them, human beings see themselves as nothing more than a part, equivalent to other parts of the cosmic universal whole and in a relation of reciprocity with it, a fundamental breaking-off from anthropocentrism, presently hegemonic and in crisis. Its structures and relations of power, domination, and conflict were immanently limited by an indisputable and inviolable common ethical minimum, which in fact rendered poverty and assault on nature literally unthinkable; these were imported by the Europeans and caused so much astonishment and incomprehension among the original inhabitants, such as the unknown firearms and the invaders’ deadly plagues.

This self-limitation, deeply refined as an essential truth, as both social and cosmic ethics, is opposed to the understanding of development as endless accumulation of material economic productivity, which is still prevalent today and has led the planet and the species to confront risks and threats of catastrophic magnitude, as well as the rising material and symbolic inequalities that fuel endless conflicts and strains at local, national, regional, and global levels. And it is the core of the Buen Vivir approach that has emerged in the last

decade as a significant contribution to the new pillars of civilization from Latin America, as a result of the combination of ancient Andean knowledge and renewed critical, intellectual, and academic thinking, which is certainly filled with nuances and even internal controversies of multiple natures.

Although its most well-known expressions refer to the “Sumak kawsay” of the Kichwa of Ecuador and Peru today, and the “Suma Qamaña” of the Aymara of the present Bolivia, similar expressions are found in the “Ñandereko” of the Guarani, the “Shiir waras” of the Ashuar, the “Küme mongen” of the Mapuche, and in virtually all indigenous peoples, not only in Latin America, but in all ancient cultures of the world, which does not free the approach from internal controversies about the real extent and forms of relating among the indigenous peoples. This highlights its plural and open, even mestizo nature, when it connects with the new emancipation thinking, which is actually introduced by the concept of Buen Vivir, in the sense that it fails to define itself with absolute detail, nor does this appear to be its vocation, but does show a clear and strong set of values, ways of thinking and feeling human beings, nature, and the cosmos. Taking the ancient Andean culture as its historical source, it appears with renewed intellectual force and political sense as relevant input for new civilization pillars.

Its distinguishable core can be essentially synthesized in a holistic and cosmic view, of respect and horizontal coexistence with nature, of search for social justice and full multicultural respect. In particular, it emphasizes a radical understanding of well-being and development that requires self-limitation and restraint as opposed to unlimited production and irresponsible and unsustainable waste. From deep community contents it gives very limited importance to individual consumption and ownership, but grants a crucial place to the inclusion of all and the harmony of feelings. This view sees and feels human beings and the world that integrates them organically with the entire universe, in contrast to the hegemonic anthropocentrism of Western capitalist modernity. This has led some intellectuals to characterize it as “biocentric,” “bioequalitarian” or “bioenvironmental.”

Appropriated by various social sectors and incorporated in many ways to new governance proposals, from new legislation to new ways of conceptualizing the economy and relations with the environment, it opens strong discussions about possible specific historical realizations, which can lead to alternative forms of society, superseding and replacing the hegemonic system. This is the challenge posed to Buen Vivir in the realization of its principles for political projects, government plans, public policies, and new non-conventional and viable forms of economic organization at all scales, with the difficulties and risks that this involves. This is happening powerfully in countries like the Republic of Ecuador and the Plurinational State of Bolivia.

This is a process in flow and in dialog, necessarily multiple and plural, which converges in turn to a broader flow and dialog, at the scale of a community of human destiny, together with numerous other contributions of so many rich ancient cultures, as well as the emancipation thinking emerging in the West that, taking the best elements of modernity, is nourished by the most advanced current knowledge and thinking and creates unprecedented ethical proposals that, considering our present urgencies, are also contributing to the formation of new pillars of civilization for the community of human destiny.