Is the decolonial approach in spatial planning studies an irreconcilable conflict or an opportunity for Western academics?

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Introduction

Within the debate on "pluralizing the field of urban studies" (Schwarz & Streule 2016), this paper inquires the difference between the western concept of territorial governance and the current urban development in the global South, referring to three Andean countries, that are extremely complex in social, political and economic terms. Planning practices are developed and bump against institutions, analysts and media that repeat a series of "have to" on development, democracy and the State from the western.

Andean societies set their urban configurations according to their own territorial logic, which are often in conflict both with purely neo-liberal perspectives, where the State-civil society relationship must guarantee the order and reduce the conflict to maximize the market's development, and with post-Marxist concepts, where the power concentration in State institutions is pursued. On the one hand, the real estate sector relies on official institutions in a logic of conventional development, on the other local communities have created a parallel system able to integrate the market, de-legitimizing monopolies and the verticality of power, raising several original community practices and counter-hegemonic approaches (Arbona et al 2016).

Thus, this paper discusses the overcoming of the two classic development approaches (neo-liberal and post-Marxist), which are expressions of traditional western urban development logics and discourses trying to adopt decolonial lens to observe practices of territorial governance in the Andean region. In this sense, the reference to the indigenous cosmovision (*sumak kawsay*) of the Andean context vastly expands the perspective on urban studies and provides interesting outputs.

Political logics of a civil society lies on a territorial dimension, which has the capacity to weave multiple relationships among territories, groups and associations, outlining a notion and a transversal and bottom-up governance structure, which attenuate the contrast between the 'modern' state and the 'indigenous organizations' (Finot 1990).

The indigenous 'comuna' of Lumbisí in the city of Quito

In October 2019 the last strong protest in Ecuador against neoliberal national policies left 7 dead people, 1340 injured and 1152 arrested people, (cfr. *Defensoría del Pueblo*) and started as a national transport strike against the elimination of the petrol subsidy, involving taxis and bus drivers. Other social groups joined and the strike turned into a general demonstration against neoliberal policies introduced in the country after signing a 10.200 million USD agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

After a 12-day strike, the indigenous movement led by CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) achieved a historic success with the withdrawal of the decree that eliminated the petrol subsidy, and demonstrations suddenly stopped. In their public claim against national government, CONAIE leaders repeatedly referred to the constitutional pillar of the *good living* (*sumak kawsay* in Quechua, or *buen vivir* in Spanish), which has been continuously mistreated by the national government and improperly used in public discourses.

Going a step backwards, *good living* was introduced in Ecuador by the 2008 Constitution and it is a radical shift of paradigm, implying a counter-hegemonic approach to development based on the indigenous conception of nature and life: "[for] the first time, in the history of humanity a Constitution recognizes the rights of nature and this becomes

one of the constitutive elements of Good Living" (Larrea Maldonado 2011: 60)[1]. As noted by Catherine Walsh, "In a country that has long exalted its *mestizo* character, favoured whitening and whiteness and looked to the North for its model of development, the incorporation of *buen vivir* as the guiding principle of the Constitution is historically significant" (2010: 18).

As a matter of principle, *good living* has been recognized and applauded by the majority of the Ecuadorian population and commonly used in public political discourse, but in reality, its implementation and application in everyday life have not yet been achieved. This is the latest reason why the indigenous protest of early October 2019 has an important meaning in the claim for a 'real intercultural, inter-epistemic, and plurinational transformation' (Walsh 2010: 20). The indigenous protest has been able to locate itself as the mouthpiece of many neglected sectors, i.e. the feminist movement, the poor informal workers, students and peasants. It showed the capacity to gather dissatisfaction towards the national government and 'conflicting rationalities' (Watson 2003) violently came to light through protests.

These protests help to clarify and understand dwelling problems and social conflicts characterizing indigenous communities in Ecuadorian metropolitan areas. In the Metropolitan District of Quito, 21 ancestral communities called *comunas* are recognized (Andrade 2016). Their conception of the territory belongs neither to the neo-liberal conception of market nor to the post-Marxist vision of the State. They are the so-called 'hidden territorial face of Quito'[2]. "The *comunas* are entirely absent from most maps […] Unmarked and unrecognized, the communal territory may be treated as public land, waste-land, or informal, unregulated land needing to be titled or regularized" (Rayner 2017: 115). Spatial representation through maps and plans is intimately connected to the lack of acknowledgement of their legitimacy as autonomous governments.

One of those *comuna* is Lumbisí, that is currently facing a really strong real estate pressure, due to its proximity to the Cumbayá sector, which is the higher income housing area of the city, developed in the last twenty years without any spatial planning rules. The *comuna* is an alternative land regime that provides security of tenancy denied by capitalistic land market. In Lumbisí all the land is held by the *comuna* and the inhabitants belonging to the indigenous community have usufruct rights: "[the] prohibitions on the alienation of land, even if they are incompletely enforced, serve as barriers to capitalist real estate investment" (Rayner 2017: 109). The Municipality of Quito usually assimilates communal property to public property, showing a short-sighted view on the advantages communal property rights can generate against land speculation and towards the tenure security.

In May 2015 the Municipality of Quito approved in the first instance the "Ordinance Ilaló-Lumbisí" whose aim was to protect the Ilaló hill. The indigenous community immediately opposed to the plan, not for having a non-protection stance, but questioning the lack of observance with indigenous territorial autonomy[3] and the lack of dialogue and participation throughout the planning process. They created a Federation of Communes and Indigenous Communities, with the support of the national CONAIE movement, and obtained the withdrawal of the "Ordinance Ilaló-Lumbisí" and a renovated participatory process started.

The example of the *comuna* Lumbisí shows how a community claim and a counter-hegemonic approach to territorial governance can be successful with a collective response. It sheds light on the 'real intercultural, inter-epistemic, and plurinational

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[1] Original version: 'Por primera vez, en la historia de la humanidad una Constitución reconoce los derechos de la naturaleza y ésta pasa a ser uno de los elementos constitutivos del Buen Vivir'.

[2] Original version: 'el lado territorial oculto de Quito' (Andrade 2016: 13)

[3] The Organic Code for Territory Organization, Autonomy and Decentralization COOTAD (República del Ecuador 2010) in its art. 10 equates metropolitan districts and territorial districts of indigenous peoples and nationalities both as special regimes of government, among others.

transformation' wished by the indigenous movement which, transposed to the national level, flowed into the general demonstrations of October 2019.

The self-ruled popular system in El Alto urban area, Bolivia

The El Alto urban area has been originated mainly by the informal settlement of the Aymara migrants from the highlands[4].

El Alto shows very often the inversion of hierarchy between official and popular institutionality, being also a city that has been constructed by community organizations which have a historical trajectory and a deeper anchoring than the official institutionality (Sandóval & Sostres 1989). In fact, it is more and more common to articulate network, contacts and alliances with other labour unions and organizations, generating multi-sectorial organizational patterns permitting to amplify its operational capacity without the intermediation of a predefined formal institution. Instead of basing on a charismatic leader, able to lead the compartments of a political and organizational structure, configuring an articulated system of groups or segments, able to control territories similar to the logic of the Andean government systems that avoid recursively the power concentration in centralized instances (Platt 1987) and is expanded by centrifuge forces, reproducing its structure (of articulated and antagonistic segments) in multiple territories and contexts (Arnold & Hastorf 2008; Goldstein 2000; Arbona et al 2016).

The sum of informal economic activities and infraction of rules have been identified with the "culture of precariousness", linked to the lack of capacity building, institutionality and know-how, that have to be overcome to reach the development modalities and trajectories of the large industry (Casanovas 1988; Wanderley 2003). However, not only this apparent and diffused sum of activities has composed an economic system of popular companies, that have imposed its own logic and organization modality (Arbona et al 2015). Since the State is a body monopolizing power, the discourse consisted in the use of exceeding the exploitation of hydrocarbons and the State companies to strengthen the weak community organizational structure (García Linera 2006), establishing a monolithic labour structure, and up to strengthening and integrating the indigenous rights into the State structure.

Although the incapacity of the institutional change process to take the responsibility of what was produced, the self-ruled popular system continues to reproduce their own rules, logics and modalities often resulting in more adequate for the country and more able to generate legitimacy than the official ones. On the one side, this system is self-ruled and not submitted to the official institutionality, together with its legitimacy to provide services and modalities of an operation acknowledged by population, in order to immobilize or redefine policies and modalities of official regulations disconnected from the reality of the country. On the other side, the official institutionality, that does not recognize this bottom-up system, continues to produce public policies with the aim to improve something that has to be denied or with the aim to integrate it to a predetermined development logic, based more on what the country should be instead of what the country is. The consequence is made of two different but parallel socio-political spheres. Since the perspective of the local communities, the official law continues to be managed by the institutions with a coercive mechanism to educate, discipline and modernize, as the citizen was a blank slate on which it is possible to subscribe limits, rules and contents. Although the Constitution recognizes the self-ruling capacity of popular sectors, the law and their rules, being identified by the popular sectors, a little adequate to apply to the local dynamics by its top-down principle. The "legal provisions" are perceived as the fruit of a

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[4] The term "informality" was also political and originally indicated a sort of loss of political ideology, a simplification and corporatization of the bottom-up policy impeding to design a project or a shared ideological vision towards the future. The bottom-up hegemony is not based on full and complete control, but it consists in smoothing the excess of the official rules when they interfere in the operative modalities of local actors and in readapting to the specific context and embody the official institutionality. A new idea of state legitimacy resulted, not in terms of spatial control, but leaving the space and the functions to local communities (Arbona et al 2016).

culture of the State that creates rules to "set obstacles", making difficult the daily activity of citizenship and, in this way, reaffirming its institutional hierarchical role above the country and people (Jessop 1991; Arbona et al 2016).

Shipibo Konibo community rights neglected in Lima, Peru

Since 1993, Peruvian indigenous organizations (both peasant and native) have had complete autonomy to make decisions regarding their ancestral lands which could be sold and rented. However, according to Peruvian legislation, the legal figure of the "native community" only corresponds to the rural communities as established by the "Law of Native Communities". As a result, the recognition of indigenous urban communities' land and housing rights remains an underestimated problem.

In both urban and rural areas, recognition is the pre-registration step for public records and it represents the form to access land and housing titling programs. According to the 2017 National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI) national registration, of the total 2073 census communities there are 808 who have declared to have land conflicts in their territories, which represents 29.9%, but no information appeared concerning housing conflicts (Costa Aponte 2018).

The case of the Shipibo-konibo urban community in Lima is particularly interesting: they are the indigenous people from the Peruvian Amazon with the best and most stable relationship within the modern urban environment (Espinosa de Rivero 2009). At the end of September 2019, more than half a thousand members of the Shipibo-konibo people reoccupied the Cantagallo (Rímac) area in the city of Lima, where they have previously lived for more than 20 years. This was an ultimate act of history begun in 2013 with the ratification of the infrastructure project in Vía Parque Rímac, promoted by the metropolitan administration (Servindi 2019).

Shipibo-konibo community migrated from Ucayali province to Lima in the 90s, establishing the first urban native community in Perú[5]. After that, they settled informally on the so-called Cantagallo Island. Currently, development concerning the allocation of land rights in urban areas depends on local organization's struggle in the early time of land occupation in order to consolidate its position. If Matos Mar (1958, 1985, 2016) has touched upon the topic, we can clarify that local organizations have always been a basic element in the history of popular urbanization in Perú. They can be considered a configurational feature of those settlements in the process of urban and economic development (Tovar 1996). However, through the identification of *comunidades interculturales urbanas,* Shipibo-konibo has marked its indigenous ways of understanding the territory, kinship and political leadership organizing the space, their homes and their daily life (Espinosa de Rivero 2019).

Similarly to numerous other popular urbanizations, they have acquired the document known as *constancia de posesión* by the municipality, receiving the supply of temporary basic services. In 2013, a $700 million highway project connecting the city centre to peripheral districts, the Vía Parque Rímac, affected the entire community, which had no formal legal claim to the land despite interceding years since their first arrival. The municipality promised ambitious total resettlement, constituted a working group with the objective of looking for alternatives to relocate the community, but this has not occurred yet, and the construction began. In December 2014, the *Defensoría del Pueblo* recognized with urgency the relocation of the community in the new location of Campoy, through a trusteeship solution. The local government committed to the displacement project called *Habilitación Urbana Comunidad Shipibo Konibo Cantagallo* as an answer. However, local municipalities have always had relatively few powers related to land use, with granting titles and issuing permits largely removed from their jurisdictions. Furthermore, changes

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[5] According to the criteria of ILO Convention No. 169 to identify the indigenous population.

occurred in the local government have affected the accountability towards the community and the process of replacement (Defensoría del Pueblo 2016).

Abandoned by local government, in November 2016 a massive fire affected the settlement of Cantagallo. As a consequence, 436 homes were destroyed, 1226 people lost most of their possessions and they were forced to move away. Three years later the fire occurred in the Shipibo-konibo community of Cantagallo, the *Defensoria del Pueblo* questioned the delays in the fulfilment of the commitments assumed by the authorities. Current negotiations are taking a different orientation: the community will no longer seek relocation but the change of zoning of Cantagallo. In this way, they hope to get a title deed along with basic services.

The issue of formal land ownership is still crucial because it provides legal security and it allows definitive infrastructure and service provision. The struggle for tenure has led to the rise of local, national and pan-Amazonian indigenous organizations, which have played an increasingly active role in advocating for policies that should respect their territorial rights (Quijano 2014). Unfortunately, in urban areas, such rights are far to be recognized. Cantagallo remains invisible to the public entities and public policies seeking the recognition and development of the urban indigenous population are inconsistent (Castillo 2019; Espinosa de Rivero 2019).

Lessons learned

The Andean urban regions are witnessing an increasing variety of lifestyles and conflictual urban practices which coexist under a constellation of situated normativity (Duhau e Giglia 2008). In the last decades, for instance, the number of indigenous people living in urban areas has sharply increased and, with them, new ways of experiencing the city. According to Espinosa de Rivero (2009), contemporary urbanization processes constitute one of the challenges of indigenous people. Latin American 'conflicting rationalities', and especially the indigenous shifting paradigm of *good living* recognized by both Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions, give rise to interesting new approaches to territorial governance.

Adopting Connell suggestion, we agree that "[the] mainstream knowledge formation […] works on the assumption that there is one and only one episteme" (Connell 2018: 7), which is the one embedded in northern urban studies. In this sense, the 'interculturality' understood by indigenous conception aims at obtaining a 'radical shift': the goal is not only to recognise different pieces of normativity but 'to implode from the difference in the colonial structures of power'[6] (Walsh 2006).

Further, according to Roy (2009), it is arguable to 'generate productive and provocative theoretical frameworks for all cities' by promoting 'distinctive experiences of the cities of the global South'. Indeed, interculturality understood as the recognition of the existence of different and plural epistemologies (Connell 2018), is the starting point for a decolonial approach.

In this sense, the redefinition of communal and commoning practices in Lumbisì, the attempt to valorize "native rights" in El Alto, and the spatial fragmentation processes related to rural translocal spatial processes in Lima can be considered as conceptual and methodological experimentations in the search for different approaches to understanding and designing cities and territories alternative to the so-called "Western Urban Theory".

To conclude, the key question is the one proposed by Satgé and Watson (2018, p.12): "If a central role of planning theory is to shape practice, does the southern turn offer new understandings of cities and communities in these parts of the world and new ways to act

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[6] Original version: ' La meta no es simplemente reconocer, tolerar ni tampoco incorporar lo diferente dentro de la matriz y estructuras establecidas. Más bien, es implosionar desde la diferencia en las estructuras coloniales del poder, del saber y del ser como reto, propuesta, proceso y proyecto' (Walsh 2006: 35).

as planners and agents of change?". This means re-shaping the discipline 'in the global North as much as the global South' (Connell 2018). In this sense, we argue that the decolonial approach in spatial planning studies is not only an opportunity for western academics, but it is a pressing necessity for spatial planning practice and theory. The 'contested urban studies' (Satgé & Watson 2018) presented here are just a starting point for the 'realm of urban studies' (Schwarz & Streule 2016) that we wish for.

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