



“You are here because the land called you”:

Searching for *vivir bien*/living well

Volume 2 | Issue 3

Article 9, December 2017

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Abstract

This paper provides an account of an education seminar titled “When Indigenous People Lead,” inspired by the decolonisation work being conducted by the first Indigenous president of a colonial nation-state in the Western Hemisphere, President Evo Morales of Bolivia. The purpose of the seminar was to bring Indigenous peoples and allies to Bolivia to examine the strategies used by the Morales government to dismantle the stranglehold that settler colonialism and capitalism have had on their country. Our goal was a single seminar to examine the implications of the Morales government for Indigenous peoples, who envision similar change in their homelands. This study examines our journey of searching for *vivir bien* - living well - through a theoretical lens of decolonisation and ecosocialism directed toward alternatives to socially and ecologically destructive systems. We chose ecosocialism as the framework to examine

and deconstruct Morales’s work because ecosocialism strongly supports Indigenous ways of knowing, but it also argues that the alienation from nature is directly related to alienation from each other, and this in turn causes environmental degradation with capitalism at the core of this planetary issue.

Keywords: Indigenous, Bolivia, Turtle Island, *vivir bien*, living well.

Introduction

On a beautiful summer day in 2009, we were sitting at the Pow Wow Grounds coffee shop on Franklin Avenue in the Native neighbourhood of Minneapolis, Minnesota, discussing the groundbreaking work conducted by Bolivia’s first Indigenous president, Evo Morales. It was empowering to see President Morales’s vigilance in challenging the social and environmental hegemony created by the *Doctrine of Discovery* (1493) and 500 years of settler colonialism (see The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, n.d.). The vision Morales had for his country was influenced by his Indigenous worldview and by witnessing the devastating impact of capitalism and an extraction economy on both the ecosystem and the people of Bolivia, especially the Indigenous poor (da Silva, 2009). It seemed evident to us that Morales was building an ecosocialist society with an economy based on

the needs of the social and natural environment rather than the laws of the market (Cunha Filho & Goncalves, 2010). We wanted to understand the strategies he was employing to accomplish this goal. At the climate change conferences in Cochabamba 2010, and Copenhagen 2009, Morales stated, “We have a stark choice between capitalism and survival...The countries of the world have failed in their obligations...Either capitalism lives or Mother Earth” (Mander, 2010).

Morales has consistently challenged the neoliberal policies and practices of the West that continue to harm Indigenous homelands and peoples. As the convener of the Cochabamba Climate Change Conference, his words laid the foundation for one of the most important declarations of our time. It states:

We, the peoples and nations of Earth...are all part of Mother Earth, an indivisible, living community...interrelated and interdependent...gratefully acknowledging that Mother Earth is the source of life, nourishment and learning and provides everything we need to live well; recognizing...the capitalist system and all forms of depredation, exploitation, abuse and contamination have caused great destruction [to] Mother Earth, putting life as we know it...at risk... [We are] conscious of the urgency of taking decisive, collective action to transform structures and systems that cause climate change and other threats to Mother Earth... (“Proposal Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth”, 2010, para. 1-6).

It was the leadership that Evo Morales modelled at the 2010 Climate Change Conference, and his work as the only Indigenous president of a colonial nation-state in the Western Hemisphere, that inspired us to travel to Bolivia and explore the impact of this Indigenous leader’s decolonising actions on his country and the world.

The Center for Global Education (CGE) at Augsburg College was approached to help organize organise travel to Bolivia, since CGE’s programs are inspired by Paulo Freire’s philosophy of popular education (1985). We worked together to create a travel seminar titled “When Indigenous People Lead,” based on an Indigenous philosophy of leadership, decolonisation, and ecosocialism.

Under the guidance of Fidel Xinico (Kakchiquel Maya) and Sonia Davila Pobleta (Bolivian), who worked for CGE, we gathered fourteen participants representing six different tribal nations and various communities from around Turtle Island (the Indigenous name for the Americas) and travelled to Bolivia to meet with Indigenous rural, urban, and government leaders to learn about their journey under the Morales presidency.

From Turtle Island to Bolivia

In 2010, our first stop in Bolivia was on the altiplano of the Andes, the highest and widest mountain plateau on earth with the exception of Tibet. This is where we offered tobacco and prayers of thanksgiving and sought permission to enter the Indigenous Aymara communities. For those of us who were Indigenous, this is the traditional protocol used to honour the land and ancestors of a particular region outside of our homelands. Upon entering the community of Qurpa, we were invited to plant a tree in the soil of Pachamama or Mother Earth to commemorate the moment. The chewing of coca followed, as is the custom of the Aymara people when participating in important dialogue or ceremony. According to Allen (1988), coca is valuable to the Andean people, who have traditionally cultivated and consumed it for thousands of years both spiritually and medicinally to maintain physical health at high altitudes. It also provides nutrients important to dental health and diet, but most important is its use as a ritual tool or bridge for social interaction, exchange, and honouring the “spiritual bonds between the people and their land” (pp. 32; 80-82).

For the Indigenous participants, this was not simply an interesting learning experience, it was an opportunity to develop effective decolonising alliances. It was also about making relatives. For many Native nations on Turtle Island such as the Dakota (also related to the Lakota or Nakota) of the *Oceti Sakowin*, the making of relatives is both a traditional practice and a ceremony (Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings and Standards Work Group, 2012). The people of the Oceti Sakowin call this the *huykayapi* ceremony, which is used to strengthen the bonds between

unrelated persons and to ensure that no one is ever without family. It was also important to create larger extended families, peaceful relations, and political alliances. For those participants who were not Indigenous, it was a process of witnessing and waiting to be acknowledged after all the customary protocols had taken place. For some, this was uncomfortable because as White people from the United States, they have often held a place of privilege and seldom have to wait to be recognised behind people of colour. After the formalities they, too, were welcomed and began to see the importance of the beautiful custom they were witnessing. But for the Indigenous participants, it was a reconnecting with ancient relatives that we may have known centuries before.

Thirteen Principles of Vivir Bien or Living Well

The ultimate privilege of this travel seminar would have been to meet President Evo Morales, which was certainly presumptuous. After all, we were simply a group of educators from North America and not of great importance. Meeting Evo Morales would be like meeting President Obama, which would be next to impossible. Instead, Fernando Huanacuni (2010), second in command to President Morales and the Director of Ceremonies for the Ministry of Foreign Relations, graciously and generously met with our delegation at the presidential palace. It was in his opening statement, “You are here, because the land called you,” that we began to realise the honour and responsibility of coming to Bolivia. He framed his presentation around the *Principales Para Vivir Bien* or *Suma Qamaña*, the Thirteen Principles for Living Well, from his book *Buen Viver or Vivir Bien: Filosofía, Políticas, Estrategias y Experiencias Regionales* (Huanacuni, 2010), now used as the foundation for the new Bolivian constitution. Here is a summary of the thirteen principles given in Aymara, Spanish, and English languages:

1. *Suma Manq'aña – Saber Comer* – How to Eat: This implies more than merely filling your stomach. The focus is on healthy foods and fasting every new moon and every new year on the winter solstice. Pachamama gives life and all the food required. The Andean Cosmovisión sees everything as alive and needing food; therefore,

making food offerings to Pachamama, the rivers, and mountains is important.

2. *Suma Umaña – Saber Beber* – How to Drink: Before taking a drink, one should offer some of that drink to Pachamama and the high mountain spirits in the four directions.

3. *Suma Thokoña – Saber Danzar* – How to Dance: The dance described are those steps that enter into relationship with the cosmic earthly connections.

4. *Suma Ikiña – Saber Dormer* – How to Sleep: Again, the sleep the Aymara seek is quality sleep that pulls in the energies of the morning and the night.

5. *Suma Irnakaña – Saber Trabajar* – How to Work: For the Indigenous original person, work is not suffering but happiness when it is realised with intense passion.

6. *Suma Lupiña – Saber Meditar* – How to Meditate: To meditate is to enter into the process of introspection in silence with calm, tranquility, balance, and harmony.

7. *Suma Amuyaña – Saber Pensar* – How to Think: An Aymara saying is “Without losing reason, we walk the path to the heart.” To know how to think is to reflect, not only with the rational but also the emotional.

8. *Suma Munaña Munayasiña – Saber Amar y Ser Amado* – How to Love and Be Loved: This is the complementary process of *chachawarmi* or *warmichacha*, that harmonic sky-earth relationship with respect to all that exists.

9. *Suma Ist'aña – Saber Escuchar* – How to Listen: To know how to listen not just with ears but with the whole body. To perceive, feel, and listen to all that lives, then hear all that speaks.

10. *Suma Aruskjapaña – Saber Hablar* – How to Speak: To speak well means one must think before speaking, for what is said is written in the hearts of those listening. We should speak to construct, to feed; since we can't predict the effect of our words, we must speak well.

11. *Suma Samkasiña – Saber Sonar* – How to Dream: The principle here is that everything begins with a dream. Dreaming is the initialization of reality.

12. *Suma Sarnakaña – Saber Caminar* – How to Walk: There is no fatigue for one who knows how to walk. One must be conscious that one never walks alone. We walk with the wind, with

Pachamama, with Father Sun, Mother Moon, the ancestors, and many other beings.

13. *Suma Churaña suma Katukaña – Saber Dar y Saber Recibir* – How to Give and Receive: This refers to the *ayni* or reciprocity of giving and receiving that is necessary for all of life on Pachamama, which is a conjunction of many beings and many forces. According to the Aymara, one must know how to give with a blessing, being thankful for all we receive and paying it forward. (Huanacuni, 2010, pp. 46-48)

According to Villalba (2013):

“living well” would be the expression suitable to the indigenous peoples’ ontology, whereas “living better” would correspond to capitalism. Thus, for indigenous peoples, to “live well” is to live in solidarity, equality, harmony, complementarity and reciprocity. It is contrary to the consumerism, competition, opulence and profiteering that are the hallmarks of capitalism. (p. 1431)

Unity with Diversity

The Andean plurinational peoples known as the Inka and pre-Inka, which encompassed precolonial territory in what is now Bolivia; lived by an ethical code of unity in diversity where everyone and every community contributed to *Tawantinsuyu* or the plurinational state of the Inka. This principle was based upon a practice called *ayni*, or one hand helping the other—today for you, tomorrow for me—and all needs are met (Penney & Oschendorf, 2015). With the rise of Vivir Bien or Living Well, the ancient concept of *ayni* has gained new importance, as explained by Huanacuni to our delegation. He explained that the work being done in Bolivia is “a rebirthing of a country...a rebirthing of life” (personal communication, June 2010). He shared how Bolivia in the past was being led to destruction and offered their process of change “not just for Bolivia, but for the world.” He claimed, “I am not just talking about a country, but a culture of life. This is Pachamama. We are Pachamama!”

The concept of Vivir Bien or Living Well is also included in the Plurinational State of Bolivia’s new constitution (2009). The preamble states:

We, the Bolivian people, of plural composition, inspired by the struggles of the past, the anti-colonial indigenous uprising, and . . . the popular struggles of liberation, labor marches, water wars,

struggles for land and territory, construct a new State in memory of our martyrs. A State based on respect and equality for all, on principles of sovereignty, dignity, interdependence, solidarity, harmony, and equity in the distribution and redistribution of the social wealth, on respect where the search for a good life predominates; based on economic, social, judicial, political and cultural pluralism of the inhabitants of this land; and collective coexistence with access to water, work, education, health and housing for all. (p. 6)

After the adoption of the new Bolivian constitution in 2009, President Evo Morales led the conference on climate held near Cochabamba, Bolivia in April of 2010. At this conference, the agreement with Pachamama or Mother Earth was created as the first known official agreement made with the Earth in modern times. The People’s Agreement of Chochabamba (2010), is highly critical of capitalism and imperialism, and argues for a country founded on eco-socialist principles in support of *vivir bien* or living well.

It is imperative that we forge a new system that restores harmony with nature and among human beings. And in order for having balance with nature, there must first be equity among human beings. Bolivia proposes to the peoples of the world, that the recovery, revalorization, and strengthening of the knowledge, wisdom, and ancestral practices of Indigenous Peoples, are affirmed in the thought and practices of “Living Well,” and by recognizing Mother Earth as a living being with which we have an indivisible, interdependent, complementary and spiritual relationship. (“People’s Agreement of Chochabamba”, 2010)

Education as a Means to Achieve Decolonisation

According to President Morales, a national model of transformation must also include decolonisation of the educational system (Kearns 2008). The new Bolivian Education Law under Morales has sought to “operationalize the concepts of interculturality and decolonisation via curriculum that arises from and meets the needs of the local community” (Howard, 2009, p. 592). Our delegation met with high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Education in

Bolivia, who spoke of the educational changes that have occurred under President Morales's leadership. Silvia Chumira, the Director for Alternative Non-Formal Education, explained that prior to 1935, settler colonialism kept Indigenous people inferior by prohibiting their participation in the country's educational system. Now, she said, there is the need to overhaul the curriculum and teach from a framework of social justice and equity. "In the past the rich gave things to the poor, to buy the consciousness of the poor" (personal communication, June 2010). Bolivia is now creating an integrated, plurinational curriculum framed in critical literacy. The curriculum will work to strengthen Indigenous cultures, languages, and relationships to the land. The ultimate goal, according to Chumira, is to teach young people to live healthier and more sustainably within the framework of the *Vivir Bien* or Living Well model.

Historic Agreement

Under the Morales government, Bolivia established a Vice Ministry of Decolonization, the only one in the entire world, according to Vice Minister Esperanza Huanca, a Quechua woman who had an intense gaze and powerful message. She told our delegation, "There is no decolonization without depatriarchalization," as she described the challenges Bolivia still faces to sever the bonds of oppression brought by settler colonialism (personal communication, June 2010). "Indigenous women [have] ...continually resisted dominant notions of womanhood that defined them as nonwomen, refusing to be circumscribed by hegemonic discourses and practices" (Stephenson, 1999, p. 11). Bolivian women, especially Indigenous women, have long fought for equal rights and have been fearless leaders since Bartolina Sisa led the Indigenous revolution of 1753 with her husband, Tupac Katari II. In 2000, it was the women who led the fight against Bechtel trying to privatize Bolivia's water (Dangl, 2007).

Finally, with the adoption of the new constitution of Bolivia, recognition has been achieved, with half of the new government leaders and employees now being women, viewed by Indigenous Bolivians as important to maintain

spiritual duality and gender balance, which they call *chachawarmi*. "Things are out of balance with only men leading...leading the world to destruction. Earth and Sky need each other to complement" according to Huanca (personal communication, June 2010).

It was at the Ministry of Culture, which housed the Vice Ministry of Decolonization that the Bolivian government and the Turtle Island delegation decided to draft an agreement to work in collaboration for three years on interests and issues held in common. The intent of the agreement was to establish and strengthen relations of cooperation and interchange directed toward decolonisation in order to achieve *Vivir Bien* or Living Well through projects of interest such as education, culture, climate change, community health, and well-being of Pachamama/Mother Earth. The implication of *Vivir Bien* or Living Well in this agreement was to work toward cooperation as equals and as relatives in the spirit of reciprocity.

The letter of intention was signed simultaneously via Skype with the Vice Ministry of Decolonization in Bolivia and the Phillips Indian Educators (PIE) committee in Minneapolis, Minnesota on September 10, 2010. In the agreement, the PIE committee agreed to work with the government of Bolivia and the delegation from the seminar "When Indigenous People Lead" to organise activities that will move us all toward the goal of decolonisation and self-determination. According to Joe Rice, chairperson for PIE,

This relationship represents an extraordinary opportunity, not only for the Native adults, but more importantly for the young Indigenous people of our community, who need these kinds of opportunities and teachings to counter the extraordinary challenges of growing up in occupied America. I am excited whenever there is any chance to help the western hemisphere recover some of its sanity. (Whipple, 2010, p. 3)

Bolivian Exchange to Turtle Island

After our first exchange, the Turtle Island delegation began working immediately to bring the Bolivians to Turtle Island to teach others in

our country about the important work Bolivia is doing in regard to Indigenous peoples, decolonization, and eco-socialism. In 2011, we brought a group of filmmakers from the Cinematography Education and Production Center (CEFREC) in Bolivia to Turtle Island to share their inclusive way of creating documentary films that tell the story of their people and their country's progress. The film festival was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, bringing together Indigenous filmmakers from CEFREC and the United States. Founded in 1989, CEFREC's mission is to empower Indigenous people to engage in the work of creating a truly participatory and democratic society through their filmmaking. Indigenous people have observed dominant society's use of mass media to flood communities with commercial and cultural messages that were oppressive, inaccurate and incompatible with their lives and values. CEFREC's goal is to counteract the messages and use media as a powerful tool for self-determination (Kalafatic, 2001).

As in Bolivia, we began the meeting on Turtle Island with ceremony at the sacred birth site of the Dakota people of Mni Sota Makoce, which is the Wakan Tipi cave. While offering tobacco at Wakan Tipi cave, similar to coca leaves at the welcoming ceremony in Bolivia, six bald eagles hovered above the delegation for 45 minutes. When the Bolivians' eyes turned upward, they began to pray, giving gratitude in their own languages, seeing this as a fulfilment of the Andean prophecy of eagle meeting condor. According to the Bolivians, the prophecy speaks of a time when eagle and condor will fly in the same sky and create a new level of consciousness for humanity. The Eagle Meets Condor Film Festival spoke to the power of the Indigenous story, the struggle and the Indigenous peoples who organise to change their world (Phillips Indian Educators, n.d.).

Continental Indigenous Conference in Bolivia

In 2013, we concluded our three-year agreement by bringing an Indigenous delegation from Turtle Island to the third *Seminario Taller Retos Y Desafios En La Construcción De Estados* (Third Seminar on Successes and Challenges in the Construction of

Plurinational States). The relationships between the US and Bolivian governments have always been strained, so this was the first invitation given to a delegation from the United States to attend this seminar. We spent a week at the seminar discussing challenges to autonomy and how to create an economy based on the needs of the people without creating more harm to Pachamama. The discussions took place using Indigenous methods of intense listening and consensus building such as talking circles, giving attention to each voice as problems were posed, and making suggestions with a plan of seeking solutions. Those who were invited were not necessarily political leaders, but rather leaders of Indigenous communities, social movements, spiritual leaders, and elders who were respected among the Indigenous populations represented.

At the end of the seminar our Bolivian relatives organized a meeting for us with Dr Nila Heredia. Dr Nila was a former guerrilla fighter with Che Guevara at his last stand in Bolivia. She survived imprisonment and torture and is now the Vice Minister of Traditional Medicine for the country of Bolivia. Dr Nila graciously took us to a hospital in an Aymara community on the altiplano that had been named in her honour. As a result of her leadership, the hospital was a model of true collaboration between traditional Indigenous healing methods and Western medicine. Dr Nila (Personal Communication, June 2013) told us "The hardest part was to get Western medicine to acknowledge it. Health is not just the absence of illness". The hospital now has three traditional practitioners and many midwives recognized by the main university in Bolivia. We thanked our hosts with a gift and in return, they held a feast in our honour. Together we danced at over 13,000 feet to the Aymara traditional drums and Andean flutes and smoked pipes in ceremony brought by Ojibwes from the north of Turtle Island.

Conclusion

As our motherlands called us to participate in dialogue with Indigenous leaders, we did so with the hope of witnessing the dismantling of centuries of settler colonialism and finding new inspiration to make changes upon returning to our homelands. Although Turtle Island

Indigenous nations lie within the wealthiest and most powerful colonial nation-state in the world, we remain at the bottom of most of the social indicators such as education, health, infant mortality, incarceration rates and unemployment. We believe that there is a direct link between the well-being of Indigenous peoples and the well-being of the planet, but the reality is we are often the miners' canaries when it comes to planetary neglect and abuse. As a recent follow-up, La Paz, Bolivia's last remaining glaciers, have melted because of climate change, creating a state of emergency and water rationing because El Niño's seasonal have been undependable. On average, Bolivians use only 48 gallons of water per day to our American 100 gallons. The military must now dispatch water tankers daily to neighbourhood lines. The Chacaltaya glacier, last of the big ice from 18,000 years ago, melted away in 2009, six years before it was predicted to do so. Kaufman (2017) states that "The same forces causing La Paz's drought are taking their toll on the rest of the planet, including in the American Southwest, Central Europe and China. With a warming planet, there just is not enough snowfall or rain to replenish." (p. 44). The altiplano temperature has increased by 2 degrees Celsius, and in the past 15 years, annual rain and snowfall has declined by 20 percent, with another 10 percent decrease predicted by 2030. Bolivia produces only 0.35 percent of the world's greenhouse gases compared to the United States 14.4 percent, but Bolivia experiences the impact of far greater heating because of their tropical latitude and altitude (Kaufman, 2017).

Although President Morales has struggled against colonial pressures to return to the old order, his administration has made important gains in spite of immense challenges. In addition to the work at the climate change conference in 2010, these achievements include the passing of a new constitution; implementation of a variety of state-funded social programs; reducing extreme poverty from 38.2 percent to 21.6 percent; the adoption of several macroeconomic policies that increased investment in public spending by over 750 percent; creating and promoting strong food-security policies that resulted in a decline of hunger by 7.4 percent during 2009 to 2014; the creation of 5,000 small-scale infrastructure projects such as medical clinics, gymnasiums, and

schools; and an increase of the real minimum wage of 104 percent from 2005 to 2013, giving Bolivia the highest increase in real minimum wage over any other Latin American country and tripling Bolivia's GDP growth 48 percent from 2005 to 2013 (Singham, 2014).

As critical Indigenous educators from Turtle Island, we are well aware of the history and impact of colonisation as well as the challenges to make real and meaningful change in our country. But what we learned in Bolivia is a story worth telling. Kahn (2010) argues, "knowledge should serve the people" (p. 26). We therefore have an urgent responsibility to our students and communities to "make them aware of a larger hidden curriculum of unsustainable life" (Kahn 2010, p. 22). The story of Bolivia, once the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, serves as a powerful example of how to find ways to serve people, protect the environment, and manage the impacts of climate change.

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