



The subversion of the good life (enlightened rebelliousness for the 21st century: a critical perspective on the work of Bolívar Echeverría)

La subversión del buen vivir (rebeldía esclarecida para el siglo XXI: una perspectiva crítica de la obra de Bolívar Echeverría)

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ABSTRACT The debate surrounding the civilizational model of Western modernity, with its economy of concentration and exclusion based in oil energy and unsustainable resource extraction, has revived, in the political and academic arenas of the health field, discussion of the “good life” ideal inscribed in the new constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador. In light of this social, health, and environmental crisis spurred by the imposition of an economy of death, and the consequential proliferation of unhealthy ways of life, Bolívar Echeverría’s theses on the material base of life and culture are discussed as a tool to evaluate historically the performance of the governments of the actually existing lefts, to develop a model of historical transition and to radically renew critical consciousness with a perspective devoid of dogmatism and mythic stridencies, imbued with a profound capacity for self-criticism.

KEY WORDS History, 20th Century; Biography; Capitalism; Health; Epidemiology; Culture; Knowledge; Latin America.

RESUMEN El debate sobre el modelo civilizatorio de la modernidad de Occidente, con su economía concentradora y excluyente, y su matriz económico energética petrolera y extractivista no sustentable, ha reavivado en los escenarios políticos y académicos de la salud la discusión de la propuesta del buen vivir inscrita en las nuevas constituciones de Bolivia y Ecuador. Ante la crisis social, sanitaria y ambiental producida por la imposición de una economía de la muerte, y la consiguiente multiplicación de modos de vivir malsanos, se discuten aquí las tesis de Bolívar Echeverría sobre la base material de la vida y la cultura, como una herramienta para evaluar históricamente los desempeños de los gobiernos de las izquierdas realmente existentes, y trabajar un modelo de transición histórica y el indispensable remozamiento de la conciencia crítica desde una visión radicalmente renovadora, pero que mire la realidad sin dogmatismo, sin estridencias míticas y con un sentido de profunda autocrítica.

PALABRAS CLAVE Historia del Siglo XX; Biografía; Capitalismo; Salud; Epidemiología; Cultura; Conocimiento; América Latina.

A CONTEXT OF PARADOXES

The case of present-day Ecuador expresses some of the paradoxes of twenty-first century capitalism in Latin America. The South American governments that emerged out of popular opposition to the neoliberal model and that define themselves as democratic put into evidence a clear contradiction between, on the one hand, the progressive resolve of their leaders and, on the other hand, the persistence or increasing consolidation of an attitude on the part of the State amenable to a capitalist model, centered on the monopolistic advance of large-scale production systems and extractivism.

In such an ambiguous scenario, a discourse of revolutionary tone has nevertheless on several occasions been rhetorical fuel for the revitalization of the hegemony, in an operation oriented toward a developmentalist and technocratic recovery of the system after the crisis at the beginning of this century.

An appraisal of the States – and not only of their governments – in this Latin American era of the actually existing left, indicates that, beyond a bit of social and discursive cosmetics, the pendulum has primarily swung towards a reconstruction of the political direction and moral and intellectual organization of the “ruling” class, while the excessive inequality of the production structure remains practically untouched. Of considerable relevance in this scenario are both the notion of hegemony and Gramsci’s definition of the State as “the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance but also manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (1 p.158).

The auspicious content of discourses such as that of the government of the Plurinational State of Bolivia and its creative view of the stages of a revolution strongly rooted in a plurinational and decolonizing counterculture, despite its interesting proposal (2), does not seem to dispose of the historical conditions to solve the “creative tensions” between the State and the social movements of the so-called fifth stage of the revolution. In the current state of affairs it will be difficult to redirect the productive forces, both objectively and subjectively, in order to meet two strategic conditions essential

for an in-depth transformation: first, the gradual dissolution of the central State toward a social-public, and not statist nor centralist, control of power; and secondly, the construction of a new civilizational model that can displace the model based in oil energy and resource extraction – making use of the inertia of the indigenous counterculture – when hydrocarbons and mining are precisely what have to this point financed and supported the material expansion of the social State itself.

Furthermore, if this historical operation is difficult in Bolivia or in a country like present-day Ecuador, with an ancestral dynamic of indigenous resistance to the way of life and unsustainable consumerism of capitalist modernity, it is of course even more so in other societies of the region, where the projects of the actually existing left are failing to truly transform the material and cultural bases of society. They have limited their action to smoothing the rough edges of savage neoliberalism in order to make way for a developmentalist transformation of neoliberalism. They thus end up replacing the preexisting strategy of scandalous wealth concentration, extreme devaluation of salaries and direct privatization of public services with a minimum renegotiation of salaries, an inorganic dissipation of subsidies through weakly redistributive programs and the modernization of public institutions – a modernization that ends up facilitating, be it paradoxically or intentionally, a masked privatization of services and thus the complicity of public management in the accumulation of capital.

In this situation of ambiguity, propaganda, and shift to the right, a second paradox is generated. The political parties and social organizations constituting the historical left, which had an important role in the defeat of the neoliberal regime and in the rise of these new governments, have not only been forced to disassociate themselves from the neodevelopmentalist apparatus but have also been pushed into an inevitable opposition, thus weakening the connection between the critical thought of the most progressive intellectuals and the collective consciousness of the social bases of these governments.

In the case of Ecuador, the illusion forged of a future based in justice and equality as well as the granting of subsidies strongly tinged with a populist logic have promoted an idea of change that

paradoxically consolidates the new hegemony, generating the support of a wide range of sectors, especially of the subproletariat, the poorest middle class sectors and even certain fractions of the proletariat. The consecutive election victories of the new governing party reflect this tendency. In this context, the government's discourse abstractly demonizing participatory lumps the left with the right's political failure. Thus, the historical left wing – with its parties, labor unions, indigenous organizations, and environmental movements, among others, made into scapegoats for the lack of real changes – has seen the spaces for an emancipatory political construction circumstantially limited.

These conditions make palpable the need to replenish our arsenal of theories and tools of strategic leftist analysis in order to understand the new materiality and structure that characterizes twenty-first century capitalism, as well as to understand the development of culture, ideology and politics in the new context. Meanwhile, there is also an urgent need to comprehend the new hegemony and to uncover the transformational potentialities within the civilizational model of advanced capitalism.

We need to radically renew critical consciousness with a perspective devoid of dogmatism and mythical stridencies, imbued with a profound capacity for self-criticism. Adolfo Sánchez Vásquez – another great of emancipatory thought – suggests that, if we seek to transform the world, it is not enough to fight against capitalism and imperialism; we must also struggle to make socialism real (3). It is in the face of such a huge challenge that the work of Bolívar Echeverría acquires special significance.

MY READING OF ECHEVERRÍA: THE SUBVERSION OF THE GOOD LIFE

I encountered Bolívar both personally and intellectually in Mexico in the mid-1970s. It was a time during which many of us within Latin America incited, through our critical essays, a quest to profoundly renovate the aging public health paradigm that had become a functional instrument of power and an efficient resource of hegemony.

In those days, Mexico was a place of convergence for the intellectual exiles expelled by authoritarian regimes as well as a gravitational center for critical thought in health. The Master's Program in Social Medicine of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana de Xochimilco (UAM-X) was a vital hub, as the University was at the forefront of university reform and had brought together a team of scientists to establish the bases of a new graduate program. Those of us in the first cohort of students had to face a movement of opposition to the project within the university and work together to get out of the dead end we found ourselves in. I knew the names of two distinguished compatriots, Bolívar Echeverría and Agustín Cueva, who lived in Mexico and worked as professors at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and I visited them to suggest they become professors in the Master's program. It surprised them to be asked to participate in a graduate program in health, but they accepted the offer once they understood the need to begin with a profound examination of the political economy and critical sociology of health. Their participation was not only successful but also helped nurture a different way of seeing the social aspects of life determination.

Bolívar's Political Economy course left a deep mark on me and radically broadened the horizons of my work, focusing on a systematic analysis of what I have called, since then, the social determination of health (4). Not only because I had never before been offered such a clear explanation of the classic thinkers of political economy and the philosophy of praxis, but also because his interpretation was radically innovative and free of economic historical determinism, focusing on the influence of social materiality on the spirit and its determination on collective and individual ways of life. In short, a real subversion of the logic of functional empiricism which narrows its perspective to indicators such as "quality of life," "income," and "poverty," approaching them as mere decontextualized abstractions deprived of their historical essence. This gratifying course was the starting point for our theoretical critiques and methodological reconsiderations in subsequent years. It continued to provide crucial support when several of us joined forces in Ecuador to establish counterhegemonic thought regarding collective health in Latin America.

Our aim was not to perfect the same ethical, empirical and even naive notions and explanations of healthy living, but to move toward a dialectical logic grounded in the great society-nature metabolism and the relationships of accumulation, which are essential for understanding the social reproduction of capital. Bolívar recreates a coherent explanation which penetrates the complexity of this process and takes into account the phenomena of markets and consumerism, of culture and political movement, in relation to a structured materiality and not as a result of a simple movement of disconnected ideas and practices.

Bolívar's thought was vital to the work that united us from the late 1970s onward, in the building of a movement – finally founded in Ouro Preto in the mid-1980s – that those of us who formed part called Latin American Social Medicine. Thus was born a new cycle of subversion of the notions of hegemonic sanitarianism.

EMANCIPATORY COMPLEX THOUGHT TO CONFRONT TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CAPITALISM

Readings that span from the Bolívar Echeverría of the essays on the possibility of change in issues 5 and 6 of the journal *Pucuna*, published by a group of intellectuals known as the *tzántzicos* (5,6), to writings such as *Discurso Crítico de Marx* (7), *Valor de uso y utopía* (8) and *Definición de la cultura: Curso de Filosofía y Economía 1981-1982* (9), to works including *Vuelta del siglo* (10) and *Modernidad y blanquitud* (11), put into evidence not only the guiding themes of a rigorous and erudite philosophical and scientific work but also a command of deeply penetrating dialectical thought in the criticism of capitalist modernity. Furthermore, by substantiating a materialist theory of culture and explaining from this perspective the possibility and historical existence of other modernities – for example, romantic, classical and baroque modernities – Bolívar confronts the conservative notion of postmodernism and indirectly questions those leftist intellectuals who succumbed to the idealist seductions of neoconservative paradigms such as poststructuralism.

The aim of this brief essay is not to provide the full scope and depth of Bolívar's work on political economy, philosophy and cultural theory, but rather to highlight and weave together his contributions in those three fields. These contributions have been of vital importance to those of us who have fought for the rights to life and health, in the construction of a radical break with the functionalist ecological paradigm of public health that conceals the system of relationships existing within the processes of the capitalist structure, health and the environment.

Though the revolutionary movements occurring within the historical confines of capitalism began more than 200 years ago, a revolution capable of a wide, coherent and long-lasting subversion of the civilizational model underlying this mode of social reproduction has yet to be achieved. Nor have such revolutions been capable of subverting the unhealthy ways of life inherent in the preeminence of capital accumulation over the reproduction of individuals and of life. Indeed, none of the successive social revolutions have managed to achieve a profound change that would make an authentic healthy way of life possible.

The revolutions progressed toward a better distribution of wealth, changed the structure of property, conquered better working and housing conditions, improved the social wage, moved forward in allowing universal access to public services, and democratized cultural and political institutions. We can say that the most advanced revolutions, framed on socialist principles, have undoubtedly achieved significant conquests, but in no case have they transformed the civilizational model of capitalism and its ways of life. Such revolutions have failed to overcome the individualistic mercantile culture and the overwhelming preeminence of exchange value over use value; to displace the centrality and exponential growth of consumption and of productive and individual waste; to bridge the urban-rural divide; and to build what I have called the *vital capacity* (a) (12,13) of cities and rural areas, since those socio-natural spaces are far from providing conditions for a supremely sustainable, solidary and healthy production. They have been incapable of sustaining the reproduction and improvement of life and of the economic, cultural and political conditions necessary

to make ways of “good life” [*buena vida*] viable for both current and future generations. By assuming the logic of an accumulation-oriented technology rather than a life-oriented one, they have not led the great metabolism of society-nature towards the generation of a sufficient food biomass or towards sustaining dignifying and safe work, nor have they established the conditions for a culture connected to use value, for the reproduction of identities, and much less for the public-social control of power and organizations, so as to multiply solidary organizational forms and collective bases. Moreover, as a corollary of this historical failure, such revolutions could not break with the opportunistic and avaricious logic of the economy in order to protect nature and recreate healthy socioecosystems.

The most categorical and painful proof of the disorientation, incapacity or insufficiency of such revolutions has been their reversibility. It is enough to look at what remains of the great Soviet experiment after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of Russian capitalism, or at Chinese socialism during the period of State capitalism, to realize that such revolutions, despite their gains and the heroism of those promoting them, failed to revolutionize materiality and consciousness in a sustainable way.

It is often argued that these revolutions faced a world in the hold of an inverse logic and a voracious global market which demands, both objectively and subjectively, that one enter or perish. This scenario is undeniably complex and adverse, but if we incorporate into the analysis the importance of the Russian and Chinese populations in the world, and that of the other territories that experienced the socialism of the twentieth century, over a third of the human population would be accounted for in the confrontation with the Eurocentric capitalist civilizational model. Nevertheless, in the States that proclaimed themselves socialist and in the social democratic States of Europe, the forces of power were not able and are still unable to comprehend socialism in its deepest sense, nor did/do they resolve to truly revolutionize materiality and consciousness. It seems as if the inheritance of so much blood shed for the construction of socialism, of so much talent applied, can now be reduced to the absurd possibility of creating “capitalism with a human face” or managing the relationships with the empires pragmatically.

The web in which we are entangled is a world where domination moves around two fundamental axes. The first is a material axis, in which the tentacles of the empires operate not only through the inequalities of the market but through the overwhelming exportation of a material organization of life, a model for organizing the practice of living that, in addition to reinforcing dependence, is seductive and is complemented by novel mechanisms of objective subjugation, as Marx would say, of *subsumption* (14 p.54). But there is also an axis of spiritual or cultural subjugation, as I explained earlier in this text, that is described by Gramsci’s category of *hegemony* (1 p.158); this hegemony has been renewed with the rapidity and seduction characteristic of advanced capitalism.

The capitalist materiality of the twenty-first century has been transformed, and is now determining ways of life and health in a special way. In order to unravel these processes and develop a material notion of the “good life” that is truly emancipatory, the reading of the political economy proposed by Echeverría is important. Such reading first helps us to understand the social reproduction of capital in its true complexity, freeing us from an economicist and mechanical materialism. And secondly, it allows us to do so from a place of profound, non-functional consciousness, which “opposes the general inadequacy of an entire human way of life, and not just secondary ways of life derived from social behavior (including, among others, administrative, legal and cultural behaviors)” (6 p.28).

The construction of the material “good life” is centered on the concept of overcoming productivism and the valorization of value as the axis of an economy that revolves around accumulation. Nonetheless, doing so implies, according to Bolívar, to once again consider use value as a natural form of social reproduction. Moreover, he affirms that reconsidering the use value which Marx opposes to modern thought “explodes the horizon of intelligibility in which [modern thought] moves” (8 p.153). This is vital in order to clear categories such as “good life,” “healthy way of life” or even “quality of life” of the functionalist bias that condemns them to be instruments of inconsequential reformist thought.

The spiritual or cultural axis of subjugation needs to be confronted with a renewed

revolutionary consciousness. Bolívar held that, if the construction of an alternative materiality has been delayed, this has occurred in association with the collective consciousness, even that consciousness which is allegedly revolutionary; such consciousness has been reduced to “mythical or ideological garb” without understanding that what is essential are “the motivations of material existence in reference to which the revolutionary consciousness must form its structure and define its contents” (6 p.27).

Considering the ideological inconsistency of these times and the persistence of an uncritical culture, the underlying problem is not a lack of a mythical consciousness or absence of predisposition toward heroic feats in the left. Rather, the problem is the reproduction of the moral and intellectual order imposed by the “ruling” class. In other words, the reproduction of its hegemony, based less on the propaganda divulged by the media than on the seduction of the capitalist materiality which subsumes the consciousness of, for example, Russian, Cuban or Ecuadorian youth.

Bolívar’s novel reflections on the notion of subsumption – which was applied by Marx to explain the internal and external subjugations operating in the labor process under capitalism – analyze the determination and subjugation of the real or natural processes of transformation of nature and the “restoration of the social body” to the formal abstract process of the production of surplus value and accumulation. We have incorporated this question into our critical work on health since its origins in the late 1970s. This decisive condition embodies the reproduction of capital and what Bolívar explains as a “form-giving effect” of the process, in two different levels or states: firstly, the *formal subsumption* of the capitalist mode that changes the conditions of property of production/consumption and affects, externally, the relationships between the system of consumption needs and the system of production capacities; and secondly, the *real subsumption*, or “substantial” subsumption, in which the social internalization of this mode disrupts, from within, the dialectics between needs and capacities (15 p.10).

Some authors, such as Veraza (16) and Barreda (17) – the latter, like me, studied under Bolívar – hold that:

...as capital develops the technical structure of the labor process it has subjugated, it acquires more power to subjugate other spheres of social life [...] Thus, for instance, cultural subjugations enable people to accept certain forms of rationality which are in agreement with capital [...] This cultural subjugation does not itself extract surplus value, but reinforces the possibility of extracting surplus value from the working class during the labor process. The same occurs with political, state or institutional subjugation; with the subjugation of the customs of civil society or of the daily life in people’s homes; and, in general, with all circulatory and distributive subjugation or with the subjugation that occurs in consumption. (16 p.10) [Own translation]

These authors support Echeverría’s argument that a real subjugation, and not just a formal subjugation to consumption, is produced. This question would thus enable us to shed new light on the effects neoliberal economic policy has had (16 p.11).

Such powerful ideas invite us to reflect deeply, but at the same time demand we answer questions aimed at preventing a deterministic reading of this issue. Is it that the spread of the condition of *real* subsumption beyond the labor sphere implies a generalized absolute subjugation that allows no space for liberty or relative autonomy in consumption and in the cultural spheres? Is it that we are implying a real subjugation of everything and therefore a deterministic reading of Marx? What special care should we take to keep alive the Marxist interpretative principle of the determining importance of structural materiality on the superstructure and culture, whose basic domain is circulation or the market, without falling into determinism? Should we consider the general society-nature metabolism, subordinated to the social reproduction of capital (accumulation), as the highest dimension of subsumption, within which we would find the subsumption of collective ways of life? In short, how do we prevent subsumption from being transformed into a deterministic category and keep alive the principle of relative autonomy that expresses the dialectic power of the subjected?

In other works I have discussed this dilemma and highlighted Samaja's significant contribution to this debate (18). Nevertheless, it is clear that a key dimension of the movement of subsumption and relative autonomy operates in the relationship between materiality and spirituality, among the economic, cultural and political spheres in capitalist modernity. It is in this question that the works of Bolívar acquire such great significance.

In his lucid commentary on Echeverría's *Definición de la cultura* (19), Gandler asserts that this contribution to a materialist theory of culture contains

...theoretical reflections at the highest level, which are undoubtedly of better quality and are more coherent, relevant and original than the vast majority of productions in philosophy and social theory of the ostensibly post-Wall Europe. (20) [Own translation]

A materialist theory of culture is an essential requirement for the contextualized historical construction of a way of life. If it is a matter of radically questioning the unhealthy ways of life that characterize such capitalist modernity, knowledge historically rooted in culture is a *sine qua non* tool, not only for penetrating the subjective constructions of pathogenic social relationships that affect groups in the particular dimension of social reproduction, but also for understanding the role of culture as mediator of the subject-object transactions that make up the forms of symbolic power of the capitalist civilizational model, which denies possibilities of life; all of this is inherent in the determination of health.

For this reason, Bolívar's 15 theses on modernity and capitalism (15) and his haste to uncover "a possible modernity that differs from that which has been imposed up to the present day" are, from the standpoint of critical epidemiology, key in any attempt to purge the notion of "good life" of its empirical-functionalist deviations. They are also fundamental when seeking to recover, in the analysis of social determination, the dimensions of the impact of the productive forces on the life of this planet, and on health as one of its expressions (15 p.4).

Keeping with Bolívar's emancipatory logic, we can affirm that, for our work in the construction of collective health, it has been vital to understand

the fallacy of the golden rule of capitalist modernity, which is to condition survival to the exploitation of the Other (of the human Other, of nature). Similarly, it has been fundamental to truly comprehend that other civilizational models exist which are feasible and are connected to life rather than death – to eros, as Bolívar explains (15 p.8). This is the way to move past the fight to correct or destroy unequal social relationships, which had been the central fight in previous decades, in order to put ourselves at the disposition of the reinvention of modernity, divesting it of the tyranny of capitalist logic, and discover the virtues and capacity for health of other civilizational models that embody other paradigms for ways of life.

According to Echeverría, there are five ideological-cultural trends that characterize and permit the reproduction of capitalist modernity: modernist anthropocentrism; consumerist progressivism; urbanicism; economicism; and individualism. Furthermore, included in the framework of such tendencies are the following four *ethos* or spontaneous behaviors that situate capitalism as a necessary condition for practical existence and harmony in daily life: the *realist ethos* which touts capitalism as natural, efficient and unsurpassable; a *romantic ethos* that identifies natural social reproduction with the valorization of value while claiming to be an affirmation of use value; a *classical ethos* which considers the subsumption of social life to the history of value to be inevitable; and lastly, the *baroque ethos*, which implies the "affirmation of life, even in death" and "surreptitiously insufflat[es] an indirect breath into the resistance that work and enjoyment of the 'use-values' offer to the predominance of the process of valorization" (15 p.13-25).

Such necessary reflections help us to elucidate the meaning of the political fight in the face of a foolish, unsustainable and wasteful economic system that lacks vital capacity and subsumes life to capital and destroys it. Out of this questioning emerges the visionary clarity of the thought of Bolívar, who from the beginnings of his discourse defined revolutionary consciousness as

...collective emotional states which, motivated by the reigning contradictions of a certain mode of production, establish in the

social consciousness a sort of semi-explicit "manifesto" that expresses, more or less clearly, the desired solutions to the existing contradictions and the political and economic methods that will lead there. (6 p.26) [Own translation]

Perhaps nobody has ever explained the difference between *revolution*, *reform* and *reformism* better than he, as Bolívar never lost sight of the determining connection that exists between materiality and culture. He could decipher the conditions of the dialectical movement operating between a capitalist social substance that strives to reproduce itself and the forms that this substance makes possible. When the forms created

do not compete with the previous structure, a reformism is generated that does nothing but replenish the structure; but when alternative forms are generated that openly compete with the capitalist substance, an actual reform is provoked that subverts this substance and progresses toward its revolutionary transformation (21).

Therefore, it is clear that the contributions of this remarkable Latin American thinker, for their sharpness and originality, are key to the critical thought of this new century and part of the enlightened rebelliousness that portends a new era for the theoretical and strategic thought of the left, as necessary as the energy of the social struggle on the streets.

ENDNOTES

a. I have proposed a new category for studying sustainability: vital or sustainable capacity. It expresses the productivity of a society and, in addition to the generation of fertility and biomass to sustain the nutrition of communities, takes into account the capacity to sustain the other dimen-

sions of social reproduction (dignifying, solidary and safe work and ways of life; self-governing forms of recreation that are appropriate to culture and identity; solidary forms of organization and protective collective bases) and processes of society-nature metabolism that protect Mother Nature and guarantee the cycles of her reproduction, biodiversity and biosafety.

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