

Interview - Rafael Bittencourt

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Rafael Bittencourt is a PhD Candidate in International Relations at the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC Minas), Brazil, and Adjunct Professor at the Federal University of Goiás (UFG), Brazil. He is member of the Research Group on the International Relations of the South Atlantic and of the Centre of Studies of Colonialities. His main areas of interest are on development in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, critical approaches to development in the Global South and anti-colonial, post-colonial and decolonial perspectives. His current research project focuses on the intermingling's between modernity and coloniality, especially the "sumak kawsay" and "suma qamaña" experiences in Bolivia and Ecuador. He recently published the chapter *Beyond the Western model of development: the 'Ujamaa' development practices in Tanzania*.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

The first key influences were my undergraduate professors at PUC Minas, such as Taiane Las Casas (currently my PhD advisor), Rodrigo Correa and Paris Yeros, who sought to draw our attention to the international relations of the Global South, particularly in South America and Sub-Saharan Africa. While the first semesters of the course were dedicated to traditional IR themes and debates, the following semesters allowed me to study Latin America and Africa through authors from these regions. This made perfect sense to me, as at the beginning of the course I had great difficulty understanding how my reality as a Brazilian, as someone who did not grow up in a developed country and whose personal history was very distant from the history of international relations that I was studying.

During my Master's, the big change was the dive into post-colonial studies, which is when I understood that it was not enough for the author to be located in the Global South, but they also needed to have a commitment to break with the structures that keep us on the periphery of an hierarchical international system. Now during the doctorate, the biggest break has been in the sense of approaching those authors who most directly faced marginalization, in particular the indigenous and black women, who already produced criticisms that can be considered "decolonial" before the popularization of this word from an academic movement. In this sense, the challenge has been to identify how to connect these contributions to the theoretical thinking of IR and produce changes that move us from research "objects" to "theorists". I need to point out that finding an environment full of people walking in a similar direction within the ISA Global Development Section has also been important in connecting with researchers from elsewhere within the South.

What is the *buen vivir* (living well) and why should we look at it through a decolonial lens?

Buen vivir is the Spanish translation of a term common to several indigenous peoples in South America, also known by the terms *suma qamaña* (in the Aymara language) and *sumak kawsay* (in the Kichwa language). In English, it loosely translates to 'living well' or 'life in harmony'. It is very important to highlight that it is not about well-being, a concept that gained importance in developed countries during the second half of the 20th century. Rather, it is a contribution from indigenous cosmologies in our continent (which, rather than America, can be called *Abya Yala*) to

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think of a new world that no longer places ourselves in the past, as inferior, but that recognizes our knowledges as valid and contributing to urgent and central issues such as climate change. Cosmovision is an alternative term for worldview. The differences between a non-western cosmovision and a western cosmovision is broader than just another understanding of the world, but it's an ontological difference that allow us to think about IR in a pluriversal manner, a world compounded by other worlds (see also Blaney and Tickner, 2017; Rojas, 2016 and, here on E-IR, Trowsell et. al, 2019)

The term *buen vivir* became better known after Ecuador and Bolivia incorporated it into their national constitutions in the late 2000s, as an objective to be pursued by the State. In this context, *buen vivir* establishes a very interesting dialogue with the idea of development: some understand *buen vivir* as a way of developing the country, others understand *buen vivir* as an alternative to development – thus replacing the concept itself. There are also those who believe that there is no dialogue between concepts of such different ontologies, necessarily leading to a distortion of indigenous knowledge. Decolonial lenses, whether through authors coupled to the modernity / coloniality project (the intellectual movement developed in the early 2000s by scholars such as Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and through other authors such as Olivia Rutazibwa, Robbie Shilliam, Luciana Ballestrin, and Zeynep Gulsah Capan) who also seek to overcome the damaging legacies of colonialism, help to understand *buen vivir* as an attempt at movement, a praxis. Thus, *buen vivir* can be understood as decoloniality, a reaction against coloniality. It is not possible to provide a conceptual definition of *buen vivir* without considering that it is something that is known from the experience of people who understand the relationship between nature and human beings from a complex logic of relational ontology. That is, there is no isolated definition of the environment, but an understanding based on the relationships established between humans, animals, the jungle, ancestors and the cosmos. This tangle of relationships leads to an understanding of mutual care, which in turn allows the maintenance of life through natural resources, but which condemns unbalanced extraction, aimed only at the accumulation of wealth, which destroys the land and the existing harmony between indigenous peoples and the planet.

Clearly, there is a serious risk of simplifying and idealizing the term, either because of an exaggerated optimism from those who proposed it, the difficulty of translation that limits understanding, or the difficulties that these governments have to effectively break with these remaining colonial structures. Both the governments that became famous for propagating *buen vivir* (Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador) and the governments that succeeded them (Jeanine Añez and Lenin Moreno respectively) have serious problems in terms of producing public policies from this goal. Morales and Correa were contradictory when they appropriated the idea to promote neoextractivist policies. The best known examples are TIPNIS (*Territorio Indígena Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécuré*) in Bolivia and Yasuní in Ecuador. In Bolivia the conflict was about the intent of the government to build a highway at TIPNIS, an important indigenous territory, against the will of indigenous organizations in the region. The center of the dispute is on the understanding of the meaning of development to be pursued and this case highlights the differences between the indigenous organizations and the 'cocaleros' (coca growers) points of view. In Ecuador, Yasuní-ITT was an initiative to protect the Yasuní National Park against oil exploration, but it was not successful, once the government considered this economic activity important to collect capital necessary to adopt redistributive policies in the country. These cases show how the different understandings about development create deep ruptures between indigenous movements and developmentalist governments.

How has the *buen vivir* as a political project changed Bolivian and Ecuadorean societies in the last 15 years?

The changes promoted after the Constituent Assemblies (2006 in Bolivia, 2007-2008 in Ecuador) go beyond *buen vivir*. These processes of constitutional change were a consequence of years of organized political activities against neoliberal policies and were promoted by indigenous organizations in both countries, especially in the 1990s and early-2000s, when events like the Water War (2000) and Gas War (2003) in Bolivia, or the Financial Crisis in Ecuador (1998-1999) provoked widespread dissatisfaction against the IMF and neoliberal governments.

I believe it is possible to summarize the main contributions of *buen vivir* three ways: the new vision of development, plurinationality and the rights of nature. In terms of development, like several other countries in the region, Bolivia and Ecuador have also experienced a commodity boom, which has brought resources to these countries. However, what

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differentiates these experiences from those of their neighbours is the way in which it was carried out. Bolivia came through a series of changes that allowed the state to receive much more royalties than it did before, previously the gain was mostly directed to private companies. This change allowed the development of redistributive policies, such as *Bono Juancito Pinto* conditional cash transfer policy. In Ecuador, the first changes were visible through large constructions, such as the *Escuelas el Milenio* (Millennium Schools). Over time, however, *buen vivir* ended up being appropriated by the Correa government to justify neoextractivist policies. In other words, the partial results of the research I have been carrying out show that, in fact, the *buen vivir* applied by the Ecuadorian and Bolivian state have distanced itself a lot from the “sumak kawsay”/“suma qamaña” suggested by some indigenous leaders since the 1990s.

In terms of plurinationality, the new constitutions were an important part of increasing the recognition of the existence of dozens of peoples and nationalities in these countries, as well as allowing a series of themes to advance. Examples include the incentive for the study of indigenous languages by public servants in Bolivia, as well as the reinforcement of the autonomy of Ecuadorian indigenous peoples and nationalities. These are important advances, but they are still a long way from avoiding discrimination against indigenous people seeking public services.

Finally, the rights of nature are part of an innovation that, although not introduced in the context of the Ecuadorian Constituent Assembly by indigenous movements, was well received by them because it fits very well with the logic that recognizes nature as a person, as a living being that constantly interacts with humans. The biggest challenges are found in the operationalization of nature as an agent of law and in the need for greater commitment by the executive, legislative and judicial powers in the defense of nature, therefore not acting as allies of the denounced extractive companies.

The economy of Bolivia has been growing steadily in recent years, but this did not prevent the political turmoil and coup d’Etat of November 2019. Could you briefly describe the main factors that may explain the removal of Evo Morales from office?

The fall of Evo Morales can be analyzed from three complementary perspectives: the question of democratic procedures, the limits of his economic policy and the historical tensions between indigenous people and the most conservative sectors in the east of the country. Regarding democratic procedures, a series of controversies took place involving the possibility of reelection. Although a popular consultation resulted in rejecting the possibility of another term, Morales insisted on his candidacy, which created a great malaise that eroded his image for a long time, especially among the middle class. Suspicions of fraud in the 2019 elections increased mistrust over how far the president would be willing to go to get re-elected. The discussions are still great today and recent information from MIT researchers shows that the problems that occurred would not alter the result, which would statistically suggest Morales’ victory even in the first round. After a preliminary OAS report suggesting that there was fraud, Morales calls for new elections, but moments later he was pressured by the military to resign, allowing us to understand the end of his government as a traditional coup, regardless of the criticism against him.

The Bolivian economy faces a broad history of GDP growth, reduced inequality and excellent socio-economic numbers. However, there are criticisms of the little diversification promoted, the slowdown in growth in recent years and the high level of government spending. These criticisms help to understand the structuring of a competing ticket in the 2019 elections that brought together many different interests around the candidacy of ex-president Carlos Mesa. This anti-MAS platform (Movement to Socialism – Evo Morales’ Party) was instrumental in the formation of the *Revolución de las Pititas*, massive street protests against Morales after the first suspicions of fraud.

Finally, there is a history of disputes in the country between more conservative sectors, concentrated in the lowlands of the east and indigenous peoples and nationalities, concentrated in the Andean highlands. This fragmentation of the country had already been evident in other historical moments, such as in the political crisis of 2008. This division resurfaced strongly in the current crisis, in which symbols such as the Bible and *Whipala* (traditional flag of indigenous movements and official national symbol) were widely used to reproduce differing views about the Bolivian nation (as a Christian nation despite the indigenous, or as a secular and plurinational country).

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How does the Bolivian case compare to other recent upheavals in Latin America, such as in Chile and Ecuador?

The Chilean and Ecuadorian cases are more similar, as they are popular and indigenous resistances against neoliberal policies that have led or would lead to the impoverishment of the population. In Ecuador, this takes place in a controversial context, where despite the continuity of the government of Alianza País, there is in practice a turn to the liberal right. In Chile, however, neoliberal policies have been implemented since the Pinochet government, being maintained in some way in the democratic period, by both center-right and center-left governments. Bolivia, however, is different: there was no contestation of neoliberal economic policies in the 2019 demonstrations, but rather a contestation against the continuation of Evo Morales as president. What is on the agenda is more about democratic procedures and less about economic policy as Bolivian GDP has grown consistently over the past 14 years.

What are you currently working on?

I just returned to Brazil after two months of research in Bolivia and Ecuador. My PhD research is a study that explores how these two states and the leaders of indigenous peoples and nationalities understand the concepts of *Buen Vivir*. I hope that this study can help to understand how different ontologies interact from a pluriversal logic, generating dialogues and contradictions as certain groups seek to voice their anti-colonial political agendas. In addition, in relation to teaching, I have been working on some subjects related to the contributions of Latin American authors to IR, mainly Brazilians and in particular those from marginalized groups, who are not usually read in IR, and who have not had their texts translated for English. There are many good texts that have been and continue to be produced in this part of the world and I believe that the IR field has a lot to gain by recognizing these other existing worlds.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

It is difficult to give any advice as I am also a young scholar. But, thinking about my mistakes, successes and my undergraduate students, I think the main thing is to understand that we live in a fast-paced world, which can cause great anxiety, but there are still some familiar processes. Knowing how to deal with time is essential for mental health. It is important to understand that ideas do not come when we want them. There is a specific maturation cycle and this needs to be respected. I think this advice is valid for young scholars from around the world, but specifically for those in the Global South, I would like to remind them that we are not smaller than others. Nobody ever told me that I am any worse than someone from the North or someone white, but that feeling of inferiority has always been present in me. Fighting it and understanding that it is not true has been a long and delicate process. It involves issues such as access to opportunities to connect with the community in your field of study at events such as ISA meetings, as well as the recognition of the theoretical production of your region, country and people as relevant. This is very important to create a sense of belonging when I am with my peers. Acceptance of your non-native English accent is also critical in this context: I always remember the ISA annual meeting in Baltimore in 2017. I presented my paper and at the end I asked a friend if it was understandable. Her response marked me: "You spoke well, you spoke English with a Brazilian accent and that is great". It's great to be who I am. And it is very important to believe that this is true.