

Assistant Editor Laura Fano Morrissey interviews *Development* Editorial board member Arturo Escobar from USA and Colombia. This interview captures his thoughts on the current crises and his concerns and hopes for new institutions for development, particularly inspired by the Latin American experiment of *buen vivir*.

*Arturo Escobar, Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

**LF** Based on the work you have been doing lately, what are the changes that are happening in Latin America at the moment and why do you think they are so important?

**AE** As you say I have been working on this for a few years now, and there are several things that I would like to mention in connection with the changes happening in South America and what I mean by changes in South America. Of course most people have heard about Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales, Rafael Correa but it is something that is larger than these three places and also involves countries like Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil. It is important to mention that these are very heterogeneous cases. You cannot try to explain what is happening in Venezuela by looking at Brazil, or you cannot say that what is happening in Ecuador is the same as what is happening in Bolivia because they are very different, even if there are some commonalities.



The first aspect is that you have to look at not only what governments, progressive governments are doing, but also at what social movements are doing. Sometimes there are connections, but sometimes there are disconnections. At the state and governmental level, many of the social policies of these governments are having an impact on the levels of poverty, inequality, and on social indicators such as the status of women, ethnic minorities etc., but at the same time, even if these are very interesting policies of redistribution of wealth, they are very traditional in their development approach. They continue to be very modernizing. So although the economic policy is somewhat anti-neo-liberal and redistributive, nevertheless the overall thrust of the development model is that of modernization and conventional development.

The second aspect is that these transformations have to be seen in relation to a double conjunction related to the shift away from neo-liberal economic model and the critique of modernity. The neo-liberal model of the past two-three decades is undoubtedly in crisis. As a result many of these governments have reversed neo-liberal policies and the state has taken up a leading role in the management of the economy. State enterprises that were privatized are now coming back under the control of the state. But the second aspect of the conjunction - the crisis of modernity in the continent - I find even more interesting. Modernity is a project that started 500 years ago with the discovery and conquest of America and continues today. It is a project that has hit a crisis. Especially indigenous people and black groups in South America are calling it 'la crisis del modelo civilizatorio', the crisis of the civilization model. The most clear case is the case of Bolivia which elected an indigenous president for the first time in the country's history. This election was very telling in a country that has systematically suppressed and marginalized indigenous peoples, often brutally. It is an incredible change that indigenous people, once subject to such brutality are now in power.

Among the concrete changes in Latin America I would like to highlight the following. First, at the level of the governments there has been a shift to mixed economies, not just capitalist economies but also solidarity economies. The movement for social and solidarity economy is strong in these countries. In Venezuela there are cooperative economies, communal economies, non-capitalist economies etc. along with private property of course because it cannot be a question of getting rid of capitalism completely. The issue is how to bring in a more diverse economy. The second change is the redefinition of development, especially in Bolivia and Ecuador where the goal of development has been redefined as the pursuit of the *buen vivir*, the collective well-being of the community, the people and also the natural world. This is a very important redefinition, and one that is articulated in the new national constitutions in Bolivia and Ecuador. These constitutions are really amazing documents that I wish everybody read because they include this new aspect that the goal of development which is not economic growth, rather it is the promotion of the collective well-being of humans and nature. There is much debate in South America about what this means and how it is going to be implemented but nevertheless it is happening. The third change that is clearly stated in the constitutions is the right of nature, the right of the *pachamama*. The Ecuadorean constitution is the first in the world, in history, that has included the rights of nature as a legal aspect and mandates to the state to respect the environment and not only that, even to rescue it because it has been damaged.

The fourth change is that the role of knowledge is being redefined so that not only modern scientific knowledge is taken into account, but also indigenous world visions and indigenous knowledge. They are an important part of a nation building project and many of those knowledges exist and come out of indigenous worldviews that in anthropology now we call relational worldview as opposed to the dualistic, binary ways of thinking of modernity. It is a worldview in which everything exists in relation to another so that nature and humans are part of the same socio-natural world. In this sense there is continuity between the biophysical, the human and the supernatural world. And it can also be seen in terms of non-liberal practices. It goes beyond practices of liberalism of private property, representative democracy, the rights of the individual and the capitalist economy. There are more diverse practices, communal logics, diverse economies, non-capitalist economies etc. It is hard to predict what is going to happen with these changes in the long-run, or even in the medium-run. Many of the right-wing think tanks in both Latin America and the US are predicting, rather they are stating that this wave of progressive governments is over, that 'good' governments and regimes will return to the region. By 'good' they mean modernizers in a very conservative sense of the term. My feeling is that it is basically too soon to evaluate the achievements of these regimes and to say how much longer will they be able to continue to be in power and continue to promote change.

**LF** What does this new way of thinking development, which is taking place in South America, imply for global development institutions?

**AE** First, it is too early to say what the impact of the new language of and ways of thinking about development being crafted in Bolivia and Ecuador will have for these countries themselves. They certainly have changed the terms of the conversations about development, and introduced a measure of change at the policy level. But as I said earlier, the medium and long-term impact on development thinking and practice in these countries remains to be seen. Second, the implications for global development institutions will largely depend on the extent to which they --e.g., development as the *buen vivir* or collective wellbeing, or the rights of nature-- are taken seriously by global development institutions. By this I mean the extent to which they are given a fair hearing and discussed without much prejudice (e.g., without considering that they are local phenomenon, romantic etc.), and, particularly, supported; this support entails first of all not opposing them nor undermining them as the multilateral lending institutions are prone to do with ideas that depart

significantly from the mainstream, at least those they are unable to easily coopt. Second, there is the whole question of providing resources in order to try them out.

Given the context of the ecological and social crisis faced by the world, the Ecuadorian and Bolivian proposals are eminently practical. They are practical examples of an effective redesign of dominant socio-natural systems towards more sustainable worlds than the policies that continue to emanate at least from the most mainstream development institutions. It might be the case that --as in so many cases of pioneering thinking-- we realize the importance of these new ideas only many years from now, when governments and institutions are even more compelled by the multiple crises to change. Let us hope though, that we learn to listen to non-canonical ideas this time sooner rather than later.