

The Tension Between Reason, Nature and Cosmologies in the Americas. A Polanyian Approach

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Abstract: This paper argues that since the end of the Cold War, a new regional “double-movement,” unleashed by the quest for land and natural resources, was in the making. The shift from closed to open regionalism and the expansion of foreign direct investment from the centre to the periphery –of the South as well as the North- was immediately met with the stern opposition of the Indigenous Peoples of *Abya Yala* –“Continent of Life.” In 1990, the same year in which President Bush Sr. called for the creation of a Free Trade Area of the Americas from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego; the first continent-wide Indigenous Peoples’ meeting in Quito, Ecuador called for the formation of a “continental consciousness.” Paradoxically, the neo-liberal conquest of the Americas was launched at the same time in which Spain and Latin America were preparing to celebrate the 500 anniversary of the “discovery” of the continent. Meanwhile, Indigenous peoples organized a Continental gathering entitled “500 Years of Indian Resistance” to reject those “celebrations.” Since then, Indigenous Peoples had four *Continental Summits of Abya Yala*, in the ceremonial and sacred sites of Teotihuacán (Mexico), Quito (Ecuador), Iximché (Guatemala) and Puno (Peru) to defend their rights to the land. This was a superstructural or legal battle between Western transnational regimes making a law that originated at the “center of the earth.”

Drawing on a Polanyian analysis of the land question, this paper is organized into three main parts. It starts by addressing how traditional and contemporary cosmologies understand the relation between human beings and land/nature, which is the key to understand the origins of today’s climate change problematique; then it moves to the dialectical interaction between regionalism “from above” and “regionalism from below.” In other words, this is a tension between two different worldviews, one based on the conquest of nature and the other on coexistence with Mother Earth. Karl Polanyi’s legacy is indeed, still relevant for the 21st century.

We don't consider ourselves the owners of the land. It Is our Mother, not a piece of merchandise. It is an Integral part of our life. It Is our past, present, and future. We believe that this definition of the interaction between humans and the environment Is not only valid for our communities but for all Indo-American peoples (Declaration of Quito, Ecuador. Indigenous Alliance of the Americas on 500 Years of Resistance, July 1990)¹

What we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man's institutions. To isolate it and form a market out of it was perhaps the weirdest of all undertakings of our ancestors.

Traditionally, land and labour are not separated; labor forms part of life, land remains part of nature, life and nature form an articulate whole. Land is thus tied up with the organizations of kinship, neighbourhood, craft, and creed -with tribe and temple, village, guild, and church ... The economic function is but one of many vital functions of land. It invests man's life with stability; it is the site of his habitation; it is a condition of his physical safety; it is the landscape and the seasons. We might as well imagine his being born without hands and feet as carrying on his life without land. And yet to separate land from man and organize society in such a way as to satisfy the requirements of a real-estate market was a vital part of the utopian concept of a market economy ... To detach man from the soil meant the dissolution of the body economic into its elements so that each element could fit into that part of the system where it was most useful. The new system was first established alongside the old which tried to assimilate and absorb, by securing a grip on such soil as was still bound up in precapitalistic ties. Whether the dislocation was swiftly healed or whether it caused an open wound in the body social depended primarily on the measures taken to regulate the process (Polanyi 1944:178-80)²

Introduction

In the wake of climate change and the global economic meltdown it is imperative to revise the way in which human beings relate to the land, its resources and the environment and, it is also necessary to pay attention to the specific moment in which the struggle for land and natural resources has intensified. As Polanyi has demonstrated, the origins of the land question has arisen since the moment in which the land has been dis-embedded from society and attached to the market, becoming, together with labour and money, another “fictitious commodity” (Polanyi 1944:72). According to Polanyi, it is “fictitious” because land/nature is not produced by men nor for sale and, “(t)o allow the market mechanism to be the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment...would result in the demolition of society (Polanyi 1944:73).” This premonition is of enormous relevance to the analysis of the Post-Cold War period, because it is in the 1990s, with the end of the East-West dichotomy that a new reconfiguration of space

¹ Declaration of Quito, Ecuador. Indigenous Alliance of the Americas on 500 Years of Resistance. July 1990. <http://cumbrecontinentalindigena.org/quito_en.php>, Accessed May 10, 2010.

² Polanyi refers here to the feudal and market systems. However, the objective here is to analyze today's coexistence of subsistence and market economies. While the former has been penetrated in different degrees during the past 518 years of Western domination, the intensification of new regionalisms have brought to light the fact that subsistence economies continue to exist, in fact, Indigenous struggles to maintain their ways of life are the best testimony to it.

forged by the three regional sub-hegemonic orders, Europe, Asia and the Americas started to take place. As Marchand, Boas and Shaw have demonstrated, regionalisation is an integral part of the globalization process (1999:900). Indeed, regionalisation is taken here as the way in which the transnational elite in each region is articulating into the global political economy.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the rise of the Americas as an hegemonic project and the response of one of the groups most affected by it, the Indigenous peoples of the continent. It is argued that since the end of the Cold War, a new regional “double-movement,” unleashed by the quest for land and natural resources, was in the making. The shift from closed to open regionalism and the expansion of foreign direct investment from the centre to the periphery –of the South as well as the North- was immediately met with the stern opposition of the Indigenous Peoples of *Abya Yala* -Americas. In 1990, the same year in which President Bush Sr. called for the creation of a Free Trade Area of the Americas from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego; the first continent-wide Indigenous Peoples’ meeting in Quito, Ecuador called for the formation of a “continental consciousness.” Paradoxically, the neo-liberal conquest of the Americas was launched at the same time in which Spain and Latin America were preparing to celebrate the 500 anniversary of the “discovery” of the continent. Meanwhile, Indigenous Peoples organized a Continental gathering entitled “500 Years of Indian Resistance” to reject those “celebrations.” Since then, Indigenous peoples had four *Continental Summits of Abya Yala*, in the ceremonial and sacred sites of Teotihuacán (Mexico), Quito (Ecuador), Iximché (Guatemala) and Puno (Peru) to defend their rights to the land. This was a superstructural or legal battle between Western transnational regimes making and a law that originated at the “center of the earth.”

In other words, this is a tension between two different worldviews, one based on conquest and the other on coexistence. “From above,” the objective of the social construction of the Americas as a region was to secure the expansion of transnational corporations and their appropriation of land for exotic food production, water resources, forests, biodiversity, oil, gas and mining. The appropriation of these resources also implied the de-territorialization, displacement or killing of the population that inhabited the desired lands, who in their majority were Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants. This attack in livelihood is at the core of the emergence of counter-hegemonic movements. “From below,” Indigenous Peoples strongly opposed to free trade agreements because they represented an attack to their way of life, which is strongly connected to land/nature and spiritual values. As Vine Deloria and Clifford Lytle put it, their position was one of “refusing developing schemes that would injure our lands beyond repair (1998:264).”

Drawing on a Polanyian analysis of the land question, this paper is organized into three main parts. It starts by addressing how traditional and contemporary cosmologies understand the relation between human beings and land/nature, which is the key to understand today’s climate change *problematique*; then it moves to the dialectical interaction between regionalism “from above” and “regionalism from below.” Karl Polanyi’s legacy is indeed, still relevant for the 21st century.

1.Traditional and Contemporary Cosmologies. Two Distinct Wholes

Cosmologies refer to the way in which human beings relate to nature (Dickens and Ormrod 2007:609). The concept traditional cosmologies is used here in very broad terms, to non-Western societies, which includes the period before the enshrining of “reason” in the West and current Indigenous knowledge. Although there are a huge variety of traditional cosmologies, the objective here is just to sketch out the “pattern” that emerges from them and how they differ from the Western contemporary cosmology that had their origin in the period of the Enlightenment and, today, it reached its highest level with the globalization project. In fact, traditional and contemporary cosmologies represent two distinct wholes, two ways in which to construct the relationship between human beings and the universe or cosmos.

The main characteristic of traditional cosmologies is that everything in the universe is relational, everything is connected and, the relationship between human beings and land/nature is a spiritual one in which all life forms are respected, human and non-human. Indigenous Peoples’ relation to nature is one of learning from it, rather than control it, own it or “develop” it (Deloria 1992; Lauderdale 2008:1838). Caring for nature is about taking responsibility for securing individual and collective rights -not property- to the land, which is the source of nourishment, autonomy and security for the existence of the future generations (Lauderdale 2008:1839). Ultimately, it is about securing life by maintaining a subsistence economy or what Polanyi has called the “substantive economy”:

The substantive meaning of economic derives from man’s dependence for his living upon nature and his fellows. It refers to the interchange with his natural and social environments, in so far as this results in supplying him with the means of material want satisfaction (Polanyi 1957:243)

In fact, the “human economy” entails the existence of kinship ties and social relations based on reciprocity, it is, in other words, an embedded “instituted process of interaction between man and the environment,” it derives from the “laws of nature” (Polanyi 1957:245). It is necessary to clarify that there are many different types of subsistence economies in the Americas and, although some of them still coexist with the capitalist economy, they have suffered different degrees of erosion along the 518 years of contact with the Western world. This erosion has intensified since the frontal attack to subsistence economies in the Post-Cold War period, which had the objective of integrating Indigenous Peoples into the globalization process through changes in the superstructure or transnational law. The natural resources regimes contrasted with the Indigenous understanding of law, for whom “law and nature are bound together (Lauderdale 2008:1837).” According to Lauderdale, Indigenous law derives from oral tradition, which makes it accessible to all and it is based on both the notion of individual and collective good, which becomes of utmost importance for the search for autonomy and collective determination (2008:1837). Joanne Rappaport sustains a similar argument in her study of a group of Nasa People from Colombia, who utilized the discourse on cosmovision, the Laws of Origin -teaching of the elders- and the Greater Right as a route to sovereignty:

(T)he Greater Right whose hegemony they sought, was a law originating at the center of the earth, and was meant for all people because all living beings were born from the Mother Earth. They asserted that their territory was at once cosmic and earthly, harmonized by rituals that ensured equilibrium among its inhabitants and ruled by the laws of the creator ancestors. They couched their demand for political autonomy in a discourse that combined the political language of self-determination with an acceptance of the role played by the spiritual world in orienting indigenous authorities. Their denunciation of the municipal mayor accused him of having violated ancestral law and of 'trampling our dignity and integrity as Originary Peoples, charged with and pledged to the conservation and preservation of Harmonic Life in what we call planet Earth.' Their condemnation was delivered 'in the name of the Earth, the Sun, the Water, the Moon, and the cosmic, earthly, and subterranean spirits (Rappaport 2004:127)

In sum, for Indigenous Peoples nature is spiritual and sacred and it is intertwined with subsistence economy, political life, the law and the cosmos, a unity in harmony and equilibrium for the individual and collective good.

In contrast to traditional cosmologies, contemporary cosmologies represent a hierarchical or vertical separation between human beings and the environment. The rational scientific individual detaches itself from the land/nature and sees it as an object to be conquered, dominated, owned and developed. By doing so, this evolutionist mind based on an unlimited notion of self-improvement sees nature as a commodity susceptible to being sold in the market and does not care about the enormous costs that this action will have in future generations. They just care on their own infinite desire for "progress." With the globalization project this attitude has reached its maximum expression, leading contemporary psychoanalytic theory to consider that the predominant personality in the West is one of "adult infantile narcissism," the dominant elite failed to grow and, as infants do, they remain dramatically detached from the world in which they live (Dickens and Ormrod 2007:613-4). This includes the detachment of nature and society, what Polanyi called the "formal economy":

The formal meaning of economic derives from the logical character of the means-end relationship, as apparent in such words as 'economical' or 'economizing.' It refers to a definite situation of choice, namely, that between the different uses of means induced by an insufficiency of those means. If we call the rules governing choice of means the logic of rational action, then we may denote this variant of logic, with an improvised term, as formal economics (Polanyi 1957:243).

Thus, the main difference between the "human economy as a social process" and the "formal economy" is that the latter dis-embeds the economy from the institution of "symmetrical organizations" based on kinship ties and social relations of reciprocity and, re-embeds it into the institution of the "price-making market", which is dominated by social relations based on "exchange". The shift from one "form of empirical integration" to the other is a rational action that derives from the "laws of the mind" rather than the "laws of nature" (see Polanyi 1957: 243-266). The rational man believes there is always a possibility to choose between alternative uses of insufficient means. However, the empirical reality is showing today that the massive and genocidal penetration of the hegemonic mode of production into the periphery does not leave

room for choice on the side of the affected. In other words, Indigenous Peoples as well as people in the periphery –of the South and the North- do not choose to be assimilated into the Western culture, nor to be displaced, kidnapped or murdered. In sum, the tension between traditional and contemporary cosmologies is a tension between life and genocide and it has intensified since the end of the Cold War and the re-enactment of the Monrovia dream in the social construction of the Americas as a region.

2.Regionalism “From Above”: The Quest for Land and Natural Resources

As mentioned above, the demise of the Soviet Union and the bipolar system gave rise to the emergence of three competing “regional orders,” Europe, Asia and the Americas. The main characteristic of this new order was the emergence of “strategic regionalism,” or the search for an integration pursued through an alliance between states and transnational corporations and, its objective was to penetrate existing protectionist economic blocs (Briceño-Ruiz 2007:296-7). The result in the continent was the social construction of the Americas as a unitary region through the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) project, which refloated the old Monrovia dream of Pan-Americanism as a justification for such an expansion. As in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, the FTAA had the objective of keeping foreign interests out of the region, the message was that the American continent was a space “for the Americans”. In 1990, George Bush Senior, announced the “Enterprise for the Americas” as the ideal project for hemispheric relations into the twenty-first century and, it was his successor, President Clinton who in 1994, at the Miami Summit, presented the formal proposal. Robert Pastor, Clinton’s advisor on Latin American issues explained, in the following terms, why this new geo-economic and political project was so significant:

In the post-cold war, the United States needs a new compass that realigns our geopolitical interest. Since World War II, we have sought allies to contain the Soviet Union; today we need to seek markets and production-sharing ventures to compete against Germany, Japan and the other industrialized countries (Pastor, 1993, quoted in Briceño Ruiz 2007:298)

In this seek for markets and production-sharing ventures, Canada became the first allied of the United States. Canada joined the Organization of American States in 1990 and, four years later, together with Mexico and the United States, became a member of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This was the first step towards a broader, in Lefebvre’s terms, “production of space,” or the moment in which the dominant space penetrates the peripheral one (1974:61). Indeed, most of the old sub-regional economic blocs, that previously followed the protectionist guidelines of the import-substitution industrialization model, shifted now to open sub-regionalism and, new governance regimes were created. This superstructural or rules-based expansionism was a deeper penetration than the former commodification of land/nature, when human beings by processing natural resources converted them into commodities (Toly 2004:47). In fact, the key of the creation of sub-regional policy regimes –e.g. Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP), the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC)- was the capitalization or valorization of natural resources (Toly 2004:47).

However, this hegemonic expansion towards the periphery was more than just regional or sub-regional, it was multi-scalar; at the national scale, it involved changes in the national constitutions of each country in the region to conform to neo-liberal lines and to allow for the penetration of transnational corporations; at the sub-national scale, it promoted municipal decentralization and, at the ethnic/community scale it tried to incorporate Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants into the regional and, eventually global political economy. The main objectives of these multi-scalar arrangements was, on the one hand, the appropriation of what formed the former social contract, health and education and; on the other hand, the appropriation of land for the production of goods for the global market, which included oil, gas, mining, forestry, biodiversity, food and water resources. The appropriation of natural resources also implied the forceful de-territorialization or displacement of the population that inhabited the desired lands through the increased militarization of the region. This attack in livelihood is at the core of the emergence of Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants counter-hegemonic movements.

The point that I want to make here, when looking at the American-Canadian led multi-scalar hegemonic process, is to critique those authors that have argued that the FTAA was “killed” in 2005 at the Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata, Argentina, when five Latin American Presidents resigned to sign it. This was seen as the emergence of a turn to the Left. Those authors paid attention to only two scales, the regional and national, which are the more “westernized scales,” however, the reconstruction of hegemony along neo-liberal lines was more diffused and complex, it involved many scales and people were affected differently according to class, gender and ethnic lines. The dialectical emergence of new movements such as labour, women, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and landless peoples is the sheer indication that hegemony continued advancing in other more micro-scales. Moreover, the multiplication of resource conflicts all along the continent demonstrate that the hegemonic push of transnational corporations in remote areas is stronger than ever –even under many of the so-called “New Left” governments. Hegemony is a chameleon-like process that advances hidden under an ideological veil and, it entails, as Robert Cox has argued, the economic, political and social dimensions (Cox 1996: 137). I will now turn to the main focus of this paper which is how these dimensions were implemented with a particular group, the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas.

As mentioned above, Indigenous Peoples were seen as the main “obstacle” to the neo-liberal World Order because they lived in the land that the new transnational capitalist class desired. Therefore, through the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) -the World Bank, IMF and Inter-American Development Bank- a series of development policies, which involved both coercive and consensual measures, were designed to “incorporate” indigenous peoples into the globalization process. In the 1980s, *economic reforms* such as structural adjustment programs (SAPs) had the objective of eliminating the subsistence economy, and incorporating Indigenous Peoples into the market economy as agricultural workers. For example, in the case of Mexico, the shift to an export-oriented agriculture increased the demand of cash crops such as fruits and coffee and, the government, at the beginning, gave economic assistance to Indigenous peasants to incentivise them to shift from staple-food production to cash-crops, by doing so Indigenous Peoples became indebted and therefore dependent from the government. This insecurity led the

Maya people to organize under the banner of the newly created Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN).

In the 1990s, there was the introduction of *politico-juridical reforms* under the IFIs “Good Governance” framework, which implied changes in the national constitutions and the consolidation of free-trade agreements. Continuing with the example of Mexico; in 1992 the government passed a constitutional amendment to article 27, this amendment allowed for the selling of the *ejido* lands –common lands-, while, at the same time, the government ended the former assistance given to Indigenous Peoples to grow coffee and fruits for the external market. Indigenous Peoples could not pay their debt to the government and were, therefore, forced to sell their land. Parallel to these policies, the government promoted, in Chiapas, large-scale capitalist development in agriculture, cattle, hydroelectric power and lumber. These enterprises either bought at a very low price the former *ejido* lands or literally displaced the Mayas from their territory (Bayes and Kelly 2001:158-9). Some of the displaced population searched for jobs in the *maquiladora* industry in the north of the country; others, migrated to the United States - between 1982 and 2000, about 4 million Mexicans left for the neighbouring country (Quintana, Borquez et al 2000) and; the rest decided to organize for the defence of their own way of life. When in January 1st, 1994 NAFTA entered into effect, the Zapatistas rebelled because the import of cheap, genetically modified corn from the United States posed a death sentence to the Maya people who depended on cultivating that crop for survival and autonomy. This struggle was both social, anti-racist and a cry for the recognition of Mexico as a pluricultural nation (Gilbreth and Otero 2001:21). As a search for consensus, Indigenous Peoples, not just in Mexico but in all the Americas, were given the chance to enter into the political arena in legislatures. Some saw this as an intent of co-optation, others as a challenge and as a possible venue for change (see Birnir and Van Cott 2007; Yashar 1999).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the *socio-cultural* inclusion into the globalization process, or hegemonic push, was realized through the Millennium Development Goals and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, which pretended to reduce poverty through the export of a Western educational and health systems. This authoritarian social contract was an assimilationist and racialized project that aimed to the homogenization of culture and, it was not different from the questionable “No Child Left Behind Program” in the United States or the residential schools in Canada. According to Lee, indigenous peoples rejected this “colonization of the mind” and proposed instead the “regeneration of historical Native ways of thought and living ” and to restore “indigeneity,” a process that starts with the person, individuality as opposed to individualism, and transcends to a worldview that incorporates all society or “nationhood.” Lee called for a return to an indigenous epistemology which includes the recovery of indigenous cultural values, languages, philosophies, historical concepts and the balance between the triad formed by the teacher, the student and the community. To this end, educational policies and the curriculum needed to be indigenous, however, he accepts Paulo Freire’s “foreign” notion of education as a “permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed.” Finally, the practice of traditional medicine and indigenous knowledge was seen as more desirable than western one (Lee 2008:98-106).

In sum, the penetration of American and Canadian hegemonic interests into an Indigenous space also included the project to incorporate Indigenous Peoples' into the market economy and the Western political and socio-cultural systems. When Indigenous Peoples opposed, were labelled as "terrorists," a label that substituted the "subversive" one implemented to the opposition of the Left to dictatorships during the Cold War era. This process of "otherness" had the objective of legitimizing the re-launching of the conquest of the Americas, this time an American-Canadian one. This happened at the same time in which Indigenous Peoples of the continent were organizing the reject the 500 years celebrations of the Spanish conquest of the Americas.

3.Regionalism "From Below": Indigenous Peoples' Summits of Abya Yala

In 1990, one hundred and twenty Indigenous nations of the continent gathered in Quito, Ecuador, to reject the "celebration" of the 500 years of the Spanish conquest of the continent that Indigenous Peoples call *Abya Yala*³, Continent of Life. However, their objective was also to start organizing against oppression, for self-determination and for the construction of a "new society, pluralistic, democratic and humane, in which peace (was) guaranteed."⁴ Ten years later Indigenous continentalism became the broadest regional opposition -much larger in scope than ALBA, the Hemispheric Social Alliance and UNASUR- to the American-Canadian expansionism towards the periphery -Northern and Southern. Until today, there were four International Indigenous Summits that had the objective to initiate discussion and dialogue between the *Confederation of the Eagle* -Abya Yala North- and the *Confederation of the Cónдор* -Abya Yala South- and to unite in their common struggle. The site of the gatherings were carefully and symbolically selected, they were all ceremonial centers or sacred sites of the largest indigenous civilizations of the continent, Teotihuacán in Mexico; Quito in Ecuador; Iximché in Guatemala and Puno in Peru. In each of the Summits the Indigenous Peoples prepared a declaration with the main issues discussed in their meetings, it is these documents that will be analyzed here. Before entering into the specificities of each Summit, this paper will address the main critiques to "regionalism from above" and the main demands from "regionalism from below" that run all along those documents.

The common thread in all the declarations is a critique to neo-liberal globalization and the institutions at the global, regional and national scales that promote it. The target at the global scale are the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations (UN) and multinational corporations. This is because of the financial policies imposed, the looting of the land and natural resources conducted by extractive industries, the imposition of unsustainable development plans and the militarization of Indigenous territories. There was also a constant critique posed to the UN because it organized

³ Abya Yala is the name that the Kuna people from Panama and Colombia utilized to denominate the continent and, since 1990, it was adopted by all indigenous peoples in their documents and declaration. It meant the rejection of the term "Americas" utilized by the conquerors.

⁴ Declaration of Quito, Ecuador. Indigenous Alliance of the Americas on 500 Years of Resistance. July 1990. <http://cumbrecontinentalindigena.org/quito_en.php>, Accessed May 10, 2010.

an “empty Decade of the Indigenous Populations.”⁵ At the regional scale the target were the FTAA, all free-trade agreements and a diversity of neo-liberal plans -such as the *Plan Puebla Panama*, *Plan Colombia*, *Plan Andino*, *Plan Dignidad* and *Plan Patriota*⁶- which “make vulnerable the sovereignty of our Pueblos.”⁷ Finally, at the national scale, the Latin American states were accused of being “terrorist democracies” because they criminalized the legitimate Indigenous struggles for social justice, they militarized their territories⁸, generated forced migration, promoted divisions among indigenous peoples and imposed racist and oppressive policies.⁹

The main demands posed by Indigenous continentalism in all four declarations were the right to self-determination, their collective rights to their lands and the defence of Mother Earth, which are all interconnected. The indigenous definition of the concept autonomy or self-determination requires clarification because it is the most controversial point between native communities and the states of the region. The concept was defined very well in the first meeting that gave rise to the continental Summits,

We Indigenous People make our own rules to love and respect each other. These notions do not have to necessarily coincide with those of the academicians. Each Indigenous nationality has the right to adopt the rules that would be best adapted to their political struggle in their respective countries. We have achieved common laws that have been accepted by the United Nations and the Organization of American States where it has been recognized that all peoples have the right to self-determination....Autonomy means the right to control our lands, including the management of natural resources under and above ground, as well as control over our airspace...By the same token, autonomy (or sovereignty, in the case of North American Indian Peoples) implies the defense and the conservation of nature, of Pachamama (Mother Earth) of Abya-yala (the American Continent), of the equilibrium of the ecosystem and the conservation of life....create our own governments (self-governments)...We urgently, demand,...the modification of the constitutions In each American country, in order to establish In clear form, the rights to self-determination of Indigenous peoples In regard to Judicial, political, economic, cultural and social matters...our goal of self determination will be achieved only after the rejection of the capitalist system and the elimination of all forms of sociocultural oppression and economic exploitation. Our struggle Is geared toward the construction of a new

⁵ Kito Declaration. II Continental Summit of the Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala, 21-25 July, 2004, Quito, Ecuador. <http://www.cumbreindigenaabyayala.org/index_en.html> Accessed May 10, 2010.

⁶ Kito Declaration. II Continental Summit of the Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala, 21-25 July, 2004, Quito, Ecuador. <http://www.cumbreindigenaabyayala.org/index_en.html> Accessed May 10, 2010.

⁷ Declaration of Iximche. "From Resistance to Power". III Continental Summit of Indigenous Nations and Pueblos of Abya Yala, March 26-30, 2007, Iximulew, Guatemala. <http://cumbrecontinentalindigena.org/index_guate_en.php> Accessed May 10, 2010.

⁸ Declaration of Iximche. "From Resistance to Power". III Continental Summit of Indigenous Nations and Pueblos of Abya Yala, March 26-30, 2007, Iximulew, Guatemala. <http://cumbrecontinentalindigena.org/index_guate_en.php> Accessed May 10, 2010.

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society, pluralistic, democratic and based on popular power (Declaration of Quito, Ecuador. Indigenous Alliance of the Americas on 500 Years of Resistance. 1990)¹⁰

The fear of the states was that in international law self-determination means to secede from existing states and form a new state, but this is not what the majority of indigenous peoples meant nor wanted, as seen above, their concept is much broader, it includes the right to collective rights over land and natural resources, to the coexistence of their own juridical, economic, cultural and social spaces *along* a Western one, it is about, as the Zapatistas have well put it, to live in “one world in which many worlds coexist.” It is about the right to their own identity, to the maintenance of their own way of life. The focus is on the search for a dialogue and diplomacy with the Western world (see Smith 2007, Muehlebach 2003). The specific demands were historically addressed as follows,

The *First International Indigenous Summit (25-28 October, 2000)* took place in the ceremonial centre of Teotihuacán, Mexico, and focused on a critique to those governments that did not ratify nor respected the three main international legal mechanisms pushed by Indigenous Peoples, the *International Labour Organization Convention 169*, by which Indigenous Peoples had the right be consulted when development projects took place in their territories; the *United Nations Declaration of the Right of Indigenous Peoples*, which, after a long struggle, in 2007, was ratified by all countries in the world but Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, who refused to sign it. The controversy was around the word *Peoples* or *People*, the former was preferred by Indigenous Peoples because it entailed their collective rights over land, language, culture, the economy, the political and social space; whether the latter was the option preferred by states because they were afraid that an Indigenous secession from them would compromise their current boundaries (see Smith 2007). The third legal instrument under scrutiny was the *International Convention Regarding Biodiversity*, which in its Article 8 recognized certain Indigenous rights, however, neither multinational corporations nor national governments respected them when expropriating the land and natural resources in Indigenous territories. Besides those three legal instruments, the *UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples* was also criticized for not incorporating in its mandate the concept “*Peoples*” and; finally, the states of the continent were asked to modify their *national constitutions* in order to guarantee Indigenous participation, the protection of their lands and territories and their rights to determine their own destiny¹¹. In sum, the collective rights to the land and self-determination were at the heart of the Declaration of Teotihuacán.

The *Second Continental Summit of the Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala (21-25 July, 2004)* in Quito, Ecuador, started with a strong rejection to neo-liberal development and

¹⁰ Declaration of Quito, Ecuador. Indigenous Alliance of the Americas on 500 Years of Resistance. July 1990. <http://cumbrecontinentalindigena.org/quito_en.php>, Accessed May 10, 2010.

¹¹ Declaration of Teotihuacan. First International Indigenous Summit, 25-28 October, 2000, Teotihuacan, Mexico. <<http://www.nativeweb.org/papers/statements/state/coninc1.php>> Accessed May 10, 2010.

the institutions that fomented it and ended by drawing guidelines for organizing against the neo-liberal intrusion into Indigenous territories. The critique to Western development sustained that,

Our ancestors, our grandparents taught us how to love and revere our bountiful Mother Earth (Pacha Mama) and how to live in harmony and freedom with the natural and spiritual beings that inhabit Her... National governments, following the guidelines emanating from the IMF, WB and IDB, are devastating us for the payment of the external debt and are disregarding our collective rights to our land, changing legislation to allow privatization, corporative alliances, and individual appropriation...They promote division, confrontation and armed conflict among the communities to impose their excluding, racist, and oppressive policies...We reject the implementation of territorial organization plans, the exploitation of minerals and hydrocarbons, the establishment of natural protected areas and forest plantations, the payment for environmental services, the privatization of water and air, fumigations, the granting of patents on natural and cultural resources, and the use of transgenic seeds in our territories which only intend to guarantee the reproduction of large transnational capital to detriment of our lives (and ends by declaring that) the territories we inhabit are ours due to time, history and right, and so they are inalienable, imprescriptible and inembargable...we have our own models which guarantee the reproduction of our Peoples and Nationalities in harmony with nature, and are rooted in our ancestral cultural heritage (Kito Declaration 2004).’’¹²

The guidelines for action called for the creation of a space for debate, for setting a common agenda, the establishment of alliances with other oppressed civil society actors, the freedom of those Indigenous leaders imprisoned for defending their rights, the repatriation of genetic resources and a call for states’ intervention to resolve all conflicts arising from the exploitation of natural resources. Then, the guidelines called for the Indigenous participation in the Americas and World Social Forums and, ended by proclaimed its solidarity with the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Ecuador (CONAIE) -who were struggling, against the opposition of Colonel Gutiérrez, to build a plurinational state- and with “anti-imperialist struggle” of President Hugo Chávez and the Cuban people.¹³

Three years later, the *Third Continental Summit of Indigenous Nations and Pueblos of Abya Yala (March 26-30, 2007)* met in Iximché, a Kaqchikel Maya ceremonial centre located close to Guatemala city. A couple of weeks before the Summit was initiated, President Bush visited Iximché, therefore, in order to eliminate the “bad spirits,” Maya priests cleansed the site as a symbolic way to replace his politics of terror and genocide by one of life (Becker 2008:87). The Summit started with the announcement of a continental resurgence of the Pachakutik, the dawn of a new era, to make of Abya Yala a “land full of life” and it ratified the millennial principles of complementarity, reciprocity and duality, the struggle for territories, for the preservation of Mother Nature, for autonomy and self-determination. The Summit was entitled “From

¹² Kito Declaration. II Continental Summit of the Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala, 21-25 July, 2004, Quito, Ecuador. <http://www.cumbreindigenaabyayala.org/index_en.html> Accessed May 10, 2010.

¹³ Kito Declaration. II Continental Summit of the Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala, 21-25 July, 2004, Quito, Ecuador. <http://www.cumbreindigenaabyayala.org/index_en.html> Accessed May 10, 2010.

Resistance to Power,” a title that entailed a drastic change with the former general position of indigenous peoples in rejecting power because it was seen as inherent to the capitalist system and therefore a co-optation of Indigenous Peoples into it.

This shift in attitude was due to the extraordinary advances on behalf of Indigenous Peoples carried out by President Evo Morales in his first year in power, in which he put into practice the long-standing demands of the Original Peoples, the nationalization of natural resources and modification of the neo-liberal constitution to include Indigenous rights. Morales was not only welcomed to the Summit, he was also nominated to the Nobel Peace Prize. Thus, the center of the Summit was the call for “construction of pluri-national states and pluri-national societies via Constituent Assemblies with direct representation of Indigenous Pueblos and Nations.”¹⁴ According to Becker, this shift in attitude re-initiated the old debate whether to follow a “Leftist popular line” or an “ethnic Indianist path.” Indigenous peoples always had an ambiguous relation with the Left because they felt that leftist forces just focused on material demands while their demands were centered on spirituality, deeply embedded in Indigenous cosmologies. In fact, as mentioned before, this holistic worldview included the interconnection between land, culture, law and traditional knowledge. Moreover, Indigenous peoples felt that they remained colonial when they were reduced to class (Becker 2008:97). The declaration of Iximché also alerted the population regarding the action of international organizations such as,

the Inter American Development Bank, the World Bank and organizations of the like that penetrate our communities with actions of assistance and cooptation whose aim is the fragmentation of autonomous and legitimate indigenous organizations (and demanded to)... the international financial institutions and the government states the cancellation of policies that promote concessions for the extractive industries (mining, oil, forestry, natural gas and water) from our indigenous territories (Declaration of Iximché, 2007)

The declaration ended with a call to fortify the indigenous struggle with the full participation of women, children, adolescents and young people; to organize a continental mobilization to save Mother Earth; to actively engage in diplomatic missions of Indigenous Peoples and; finally to decriminalize the use of coca leaves.

Finally, the *Fourth Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples of The Abya Yala (27-31, May 2009)* gathered in Puno, Peru, in the shores of Lake Titicaca, a sacred site of the Ancient Tiwanaku cultures of the Aymara and Quechua nations. The global economic crisis set the tone of the meeting, where it was argued that there was a need for a “Cosmetic Cultural Transformation of Humanity” in order to “regenerate a balanced and harmonious relationship with Mother Earth and Nature,”¹⁵ and toward this end, there was a proposal to create an

¹⁴ Declaration of Iximche. "From Resistance to Power". III Continental Summit of Indigenous Nations and Pueblos of Abya Yala, March 26-30, 2007, Iximulew, Guatemala.
<http://cumbrecontinentalindigena.org/index_guate_en.php> Accessed May 10, 2010.

¹⁵ Fourth Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples. Working Group 1.1 Cosmovision, Identity and Spirituality. Puno, Peru, 2009.

alternative parallel structure of global governance to the United Nations.¹⁶ The fourth gathering included two other Summits, one of Women and the other on Children, Adolescent and Youth and, this time, the main themes were plurinational states and *sumak kawsay*, a Quechua concept that can be translated by “living well.” The dialogue on plurinationalism intensified when Ecuador, following the Bolivian example, also modified its constitution to recognize the rights of Indigenous peoples. However, there was a recognition that plurinationalism should also incorporate the rights of Afro-descendants, workers, poor people and all those marginalized by neo-liberalism.¹⁷

“Living well” meant a harmonious coexistence in diversity and according to the millenary practice of complementarity, duality, gender equilibrium and balance with nature. Capitalism was seen as the antithesis of “good living” because it entailed structural racism through media messages of acculturation, assimilation and folklorisation that tended to undermine Indigenous culture; it imposed neo-colonial educational systems that tried to erase “cosmocimiento” – knowledge of the cosmos- and; it pressed for a Western health system rather than one based on traditional medicine. Hence, the achievement of self-determination, the notion of horizontal coexistence that included democratic community, traditional health and educational systems, spirituality, language and community relations, was seen as a pre-requisite to “good living.”¹⁸ This Indigenous “social welfare system” was also included into the Bolivian and Ecuadorian constitutions.

Other issues discussed were migration, food sovereignty, climate justice, the de-criminalization of social movements and the eternal opposition to extractive industries and the privatization of natural resources. The women’s summit organized three panels, one on cosmology and identity as model of development, another on the rights of women, violence and racism and the last one on the role of women in the construction of power and democracy.¹⁹ In sum, the Indigenous peoples organizing “from below” against a regionalism “from above” was a struggle for peace, for life and world dignity, something that has been lost with the implementation of neo-liberal restructuring.

¹⁶ IV Continental Indigenous Summit Abya Yala Unites Indigenous Decolonization Movement. 2009. <http://moviminetos.org/enlacei/iv-cumbre-indigena/show_text.php3?key=14474>.

¹⁷ Becker, M. (2009). “Moving Forward: The Fourth Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples.” Upside Down World: <http://upside-downworld.org/main/content/view/1903/1/>>.

¹⁸ Policy Statement From the Fourth Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples of The Abya Yala. 27-31, May 2009. Puno, Peru. <<http://indigenouspeoplesissues.com>> Accessed May 10, 2010.

¹⁹ Becker, M. (2009). “Moving Forward: The Fourth Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples.” Upside Down World: <http://upside-downworld.org/main/content/view/1903/1/>>.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that since the end of the Cold War, there has been an emergence of a regional “double movement,” characterized by the quest for land and natural resources. It started by clarifying the distinction between traditional and contemporary cosmologies, or how human beings interact with land/nature. Traditional cosmologies put emphasis on coexistence and a spiritual relationship with land/nature, harmony and balance are the key ingredients. Instead, contemporary cosmologies are about conquering, about dis-embedding land/nature from society and attaching it to the market. It is here that Karl Polanyi’s warning that allowing the market mechanism to be the only one to control nature would lead to the demolition of society. It is this tension between life and genocide that has intensified in the 1990s.

“From above”, the hegemonic intention to create a Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), which although rejected in 2005, it has continued through different and more micro mechanisms, has led to the penetration of the American-Canadian corporate alliance into the periphery –of the North and the South- in search for land and resources such as oil, mining, forests, water, food and biodiversity. This continentalism from above was counter-acted by Indigenous continentalism, which, “from below” have called for the defence of *Pachamama* or Mother Earth, for autonomy and self-determination. By doing so, the Indigenous Peoples of *Abya Yala* have signalled the heart of the problem of climate change, which is very different from the one that was addressed by the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize winners, Al Gore and the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The heart of the problem was the separation of man and nature, free-trade agreements and the capitalization of land and natural resources, what Polanyi has called “fictitious commodities.” Karl Polanyi got it right!

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