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**LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES**

# Latin American Critical Epistemologies toward a Biocentric Turn in Communication for Social Change: Communication from a Good Living Perspective

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This article reviews the historical and theoretical foundations of communication for development and, in particular, communication for social change, a recently coined concept that remains anchored to an anthropocentric and unsustainable perspective of development. Based on the review of literature, we would like to open a dialogue between the field and Latin American contemporary debates, with a special focus on a number of theoretical frameworks that share a radical critique of modernity and stand for a biocentric turn in social sciences: the so-called modernity/coloniality research program, critical ecology, and indigenous epistemologies. We propose approaching communication theories from the indigenous worldview of “good living” (*buen vivir*) and quote several inspiring participatory projects that apply the new epistemologies to the field.

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El artículo revisa los fundamentos históricos y teóricos de la comunicación para el desarrollo y, en particular, del nuevo paradigma de la comunicación para el cambio social, un concepto acuñado recientemente que permanece anclado a una visión en exceso antropocéntrica e insostenible del desarrollo. Basado en la revisión de bibliografía de referencia, se invita a abrir un diálogo entre el campo y los debates latinoamericanos contemporáneos, en especial con un conjunto de perspectivas teóricas que comparten su crítica radical a la modernidad e invitan a establecer un giro biocéntrico en el ámbito de las ciencias sociales: el programa de investigación modernidad/colonialidad, la ecología crítica y las epistemologías indígenas. Finalmente se propone una aproximación a la teoría comunicacional desde la cosmovisión del buen vivir y se citan un conjunto de proyectos participativos inspiradores que ponen en práctica las nuevas epistemologías sobre el terreno.

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## Introduction

The notion of development began materializing with its debut in President Harry Truman’s 1949 inaugural speech, the so-called Point Four Speech, which divided the world into developed and underdeveloped countries, thereby plunging all non-Western regions into a hypothetical “undignified condition” from which they had “to escape” (Esteve 1992, 7). In a broad sense, during the second half of the twentieth century, development became synonymous with the universal expansion of northern cultural values over those of the global South. And this is because it recycled a series of meanings accumulated throughout history—above all, the Enlightenment ethos and its blind faith in unlimited technoscientific progress at the expense of nature (eighteenth century) along with colonialism and its imperialist and indoctrinatory northern mission over the primitive and uncivilized southern regions (nineteenth century).<sup>1</sup> Heavily linked to commercial and geostrategic interests, the new concept marked a particular “geometry of development” in the shaping of

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<sup>1</sup> Other epistemological roots of development can be traced back to the monotheistic ideals of tutelage and salvation, as well as to the evolutionist conception of the gradual advancements toward more perfect natural stages.

the nascent cooperation system that justified the positioning of the wealthier states as a normative model and legitimized their intervention over the underdeveloped (Shah and Wilkins 2004, 397).

Parallel to the birth of cooperation, development became the main object of research of so-called economic and sociological modernization, and theories were developed, according to Shah (2010, 1), “by American functionalists and behaviorists interested in foreign policy initiatives designed to establish geopolitical bulkheads against the Soviets during the Cold War.” Shortly after its adoption, the modernization paradigm showed serious deficits, since it paradoxically led to bad development, a concept used by José María Tortosa (2009, 69) to highlight the failure of the twentieth-century development programs and the bad living conditions observed in the world, as development involves “a normative element (the desirable),” whereas “bad development” contains the “empirical (the observable) or even a critical component (the undesirable).” In this regard, this article reviews the origins and theoretical foundations of communication for development and social change from a set of promising critical perspectives that are currently being problematized in Latin America: the modernity/coloniality research program, critical ecology, and indigenous epistemologies. We exemplify the former notions through a set of paradigmatic experiences that put them into practice and where communication is playing a vital role.

### **Communication for Development: From Modernization to the Participatory Paradigm**

Since the late 1950s, the incipient field of communication research approached the modernization theories to wonder about the persuasive potential of mass media to introduce economic and technological innovations in the low-income countries. The ultimate goal of the Bretton Woods school (Manyozo 2012) was to transform the southern “premodern” and “laggard” cultures, which were perceived as barriers to development (Lerner 1958). In this framework, communication was used to persuade underdeveloped nations to imitate the modern capitalist values of the North, and forerunners Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, and Everett M. Rogers respectively conceived of media as magic multipliers, growth indicators, and tools for the diffusion of innovations.

The first epistemological challenges emerged precisely from the global South regions: Asia, Africa, and particularly Latin America. This region pioneered a turn in the first development conceptions and defied the bases of modernization through two key debates. The first is the groundbreaking task carried out by the dependency theories and their denouncement of the historic and structural domination of the central industrialized nations over the peripheries. This critique contributed to move the traditional understanding of underdevelopment as an essential or natural condition of the South itself to its interpretation as a state of dependence from the North.<sup>2</sup> The second debate derived from a group of communication thinkers—the so-called Latin American critical communication school (Marques de Melo 2007)—headed by pioneers such as Antonio Pasquali, Luis Ramiro Beltrán, Juan Díaz Bordenave, and José Marques de Melo. This group, characterized by its bonds of friendship (White 1989) and its search for a common and autonomous communication science, explicitly committed to social change as a way to escape cultural dependence (Beltrán 2007). The school also emphasized grassroots-generated knowledge (Huesca 2002), as its thinkers were strongly influenced by a broad range of alternative communication experiences emerging from the 1950s: Bolivian miners’ radio stations, the Colombian Sutatenza-ACPO radio school project, and thousands of popular edu-communication projects across the continent (Beltrán 2007).

These appraisals need to be interpreted in the Latin American context of the second half of the twentieth century, which, beside local differences, developed within a dialectic relation of dependency and liberation, and an explicit challenge to imperialism, oligarchic governments, and social exclusion by the means of countless emancipatory struggles and projects at the service of the lower classes, influenced by both critical theories—Marxism, dependency theories, liberation theology, and so on—and historical benchmarks such as the Cuban Revolution (1959) and Salvador Allende’s reforms in Chile (1970–1973).

The findings of these struggles and Latin American communication thought marked the beginning of the so-called participatory paradigm of communication for development that was progressively adopted by the most radical and democratizing debate ever held in the field of communication policies in the 1970s decade: the new world information and communication order, or NWICO (Beltrán 2007). This influence is easy to verify in its milestone, the McBride Report (UNESCO, 1980, 254), which claimed “a new attitude for

<sup>2</sup> The center-periphery approach was originally anticipated by Prebisch (1949) and further developed by Cardoso and Faletto (1967), among others.

overcoming stereotypical thinking and to promote more understanding of diversity and plurality, with full respect for the dignity and equality of peoples living in different conditions and acting in different ways.”

The new paradigm departed from a deep examination of the modernizing approach (Beltrán 1976; Díaz Bordenave 1976; Rogers 1976) and situated dialogue and community participation at the core of the development programs, influenced, among others, by the theories and methodologies of Paulo Freire (1969). Nevertheless, the modernization paradigm is still prevalent in the planning and policy-making of the major development agencies and donors (Servaes 2012, 77), as well as in the significant United Nations–sponsored World Summit on Information Technologies, or WSIS (Hamelink 2004). In contrast, this hegemony can also be found in Anglo-Saxon academia, where metatheoretical studies have confirmed the prevalence of the approach in communication research journals published in English from 1958 to 2007 (Fair 1988; Fair and Shah 1997; Shah 2010; Ogan et al. 2009).

### **The Unsustainability of Communication for Social Change**

After the so-called lost decade of the 1980s,<sup>3</sup> Latin American communication experiences and reflections again played a central role in the construction of a new concept for the field: communication for social change. This label was coined after two relevant meetings held in Bellagio (1997) and Cape Town (1998) and supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Communication for Social Change Consortium (CSCC), which brought together relevant scholars and practitioners in order to design a new agenda for the twenty-first century. This moved away from the long-questioned concept of development and adopted communication for social change as the new horizon, which was defined as “a process of public and private dialogue through which people define who they are, what they want and how they can get it” (Gray-Felder and Deane 1999, 8).

These debates helped revitalize the field, underpinned by the publication of its first readers and anthologies (Gumucio-Dagron 2001; Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte 2006; Wilkins, Tufte, and Obregon 2014), the celebration of the First World Congress on Communication for Development in Rome in 2006 and the creation of the Communication for Development and Social Change University Network in 2005 in Los Baños, Philippines. Besides, the rubric marked a significant shift from the former colonial and economic conception of development since it began to focus on the promotion of participation and cultural diversity as central tools for social change, as claimed by Dutta’s (2011) “culture-centered approach” or Servaes’s (1999) “multiplicity paradigm.” The new concept has become increasingly popular since its inception; while there are valuable reasons to adopt it, the political and ideological constraints underlying the label have not been examined yet, as recent studies have warned (Wilkins 2009; Chaparro 2015).

First, the concept subordinates communication to social change within the disciplinary relation, given that it continues an understanding of communication as a mere tool or instrument *for* development. Consequently, this neglects that communication is, in essence, a holistic and transversal social process that should not be considered a subsidiary element but an autonomous dimension that helps connect the political, economic, or cultural dimensions of development. Hence, communication can be also helpful in avoiding the trend to fragmentation and overspecialization of modern positivist sciences (Wallerstein 1996), which are still far from reaching “a more integral understanding” of both social and natural phenomena as part of the same process (Max-Neef 2005, 96).

Second, the social change notion was proposed without previously undertaking an in-depth analysis of its functionalist grounds. If we trace its sociological origins, the concept was first used by a set of pioneering functionalists (e.g., Robert K. Merton, Paul Lazarsfeld) to analyze the class and status mobility processes and to describe the ever-increasing labor division and bureaucratization of modern industrialized societies. Nevertheless, as Piotr Sztompka (1993) has asserted, this functionalist bias leads to an understanding of social change from the perspective of consensus, which neglects that conflict and power are at the core of any development program.

Third, the term *social* ignores an essential aspect of development: individual progress based on the multiple layers of human subjectivity (Alfaro 2006) and the view that communication can become an essential process to promote the individual capabilities that may provide the freedom to choose one’s own development (Sen 1999). Additionally, by privileging the social, the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of change become marginalized. According to Karin Wilkins (2009, 5): “Political dimensions are considerably critical in the broader field of development, drawing our attention to media development,

<sup>3</sup> The “lost decade” refers to Latin American economic crises as a consequence of structural adjustment policies promoted by major global financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund during the 1980s.

governance, civic engagement, and activist movements. Economic conditions matter in terms of recognizing the importance of material conditions, poverty, and distributive equity. Cultural identity also needs to be incorporated into a broader framework attesting to cultural production.”

Fourth, *social* is even more problematic given that it is still anchored in a too-anthropocentric view of development that reinforces the idea that human beings are somehow “exempt from ecological constraints” thanks to their symbolizing capacity (Dunlap and Catton 1979, 250). The omission of nature can be explained by the communitarian and populist bias of the new notion, which somehow romanticizes and mystifies community decision making when it describes social as change autonomously defined by people (Gray-Felder and Deane 1999, 8). Jesús Martín-Barbero (1993) forewarned that many of the first Latin American communication scholars and practitioners were not able to perceive that the popular is not a space of alleged purity and goodness at the margins of mass culture, but, on the contrary, is a conflictive space embedded in the multiple and contradictory mediations between the communities and the massive processes. Additionally, this position ignores that all development projects must be conceived not from human interventionist reason over nature (Cimadevilla 2004) but from a deep natural concern, as the Earth is currently facing the first dramatic consequences of climate change, forewarned by the first theoretical approaches to communication for sustainable development (FAO 2005; Mefalopulos 2008; Servaes et al. 2012). Last, a few scholars have also criticized the oblivion of time and space in contemporary social concepts, because they are not able to indicate to what extent societies are being observed as separate from each other while consensus or structural conflict are conceptualized as internal to each society, “whose boundaries were coterminous with the nation-states” (Urry 2004, 3).

Finally, we can sustain that many appropriations of the new notion have lightly substituted the word *development* for social change, disregarding that development is still unconsciously associated with economic growth and with the use and exploitation of nature beyond “the problem of scale in human/environment relations” (Young 1994, 430). Furthermore, the term *change* connotes a previous state or condition that needs strategic intervention to be altered, but, at the end, not all change encompasses benefits for people and some changes “can hurt, or even kill” (Wilkins 2009, 5). Thus, social change proposes a new utopian horizon but ends up involuntarily preserving and recycling the mechanistic and linear direction of the old development notion, pointing to an ultimate goal: constant economic growth based on unrestricted production at the expense of nature.

### **Toward a Necessary Shift and a New Place for Communication *Decolonial and Postdevelopment Thinking in Latin America***

In recent years, Latin America is fostering a regeneration of critical thinking through the works of the so-called modernity/coloniality research program, which shows significant cohesion in its search for social change (Escobar 2003, 52).<sup>4</sup> This group stems from a radical critique of the irrational excesses of modernity and its colonization over the Latin American imaginaries, lifestyles, and sensibilities. As coloniality is the hidden and “inevitable reverse side of modernity” (Mignolo 2000, 22) and globalization is today’s “universalization and radicalization of modernity” (Escobar 2010b, 32), the world system is constructed over a particular geopolitics of knowledge, which guarantees the colonial North access to knowledge and hides or makes invisible any peripheral or border thinking from the South (Quijano 2000). Furthermore, the European modern or colonial thinking has not been able to understand the world’s enormous complexity and exceptionality and, on the contrary, explains it from a set of hierarchical and dichotomist concepts that finally reinforce inequalities: North versus South, West versus East, modern versus traditional, developed versus underdeveloped, culture versus nature, male versus female, black versus white, and so on.

Postdevelopment is also at the heart of this research program.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Arturo Escobar (1995, 213) argues that the binomial Modernity-Coloniality transformed the cooperation system into an imperialist enunciation regime, by which the privileged North qualifies the deprived countries of the South as underdeveloped, reproducing therefore “the tale of populations in need of development.” As a result, he denounces the idea that the dependency theories also failed in their search for social change because they unintentionally legitimized development as a cultural category. Instead, there is an urgent need to construct a paradigm “other” or a “novel perspective from Latin America but not only for Latin America but for the

<sup>4</sup> This group is led by a large list of scholars, including, among others, Walter Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, Arturo Escobar, Edgardo Lander, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramón Grosfoguel, Daniel Mato, Enrique Dussel, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and Catherine Walsh.

<sup>5</sup> Postdevelopment approaches were originally devised by thinkers such as Arturo Escobar, James Ferguson, Ivan Illich, Serge Latouche, Gilbert Rist, Wolfgang Sachs, Gustavo Esteva, Majid Rahnema, Helena Norberg-Hodge, and Vandana Shiva.

world of social and human sciences as a whole" (Escobar 2010b, 33). From this conception, Latin America can become a new enunciation locus (Mignolo 2000) from which it is possible to articulate epistemologies from the side of exclusion: "Post-abysmal thinking is not a derivative thinking; it involves a radical break with the modern Western thought . . . from the perspective of the other side of the line, [which] has been the realm of the unthinkable in Western modernity" (de Sousa Santos 2010, 32).

To decenter knowledge, the program is currently rescuing the Latin American classical thinkers—such as José Martí, Simón Bolívar, Domingo Sarmiento, Paulo Freire—together with vindicating the neglected epistemologies and worldviews of social movements, indigenous people, and other resistance nuclei along the continent. Nevertheless, the modernity/coloniality research program has not yet incorporated the legacy of the Latin American communication thought and this fact undoubtedly limits its potential for transformation. According to Juan Carlos Valencia, the new program has advanced toward a critical comprehension of communication from the perspective of language. Nonetheless, its approach to media and mediated communication is still too simple, given that it "does not acknowledge the value of urban popular cultures neither the persistence of the colonial difference underlying in the massive processes." This falls back into a strict "functionalist view of communication that ignores the re-signifying processes of the audiences, who are either accomplices of domination or have the capacity to challenge and subvert it" (Valencia 2012, 162).

On another front, Latin America has recently stood out for a range of environmental approaches based on the rescue of the cultural and biologic diversity that still persists in the region, among which we can mention exemplar findings such as the proposals of environmental rationality (Leff 1994), eco-pedagogy (Gadotti 1990), or studies on needs and human-scale development (Max-Neef 1991). All these fruitful theoretical frameworks encourage reconsideration of the often ignored traditional ecological knowledge that endures in many regions, since many indigenous and rural communities have succeeded to articulate a closer and more respectful dialogue with nature, from the epistemological assumption that all living species are interdependent (Toledo and Barrera-Bassols 2008). In this sense, it is also convenient to underline the theoretical inputs from the Latin American environmental movement, described as the ecology of the poor by Joan Martínez Alier (2005) and among which we can quote numerous paradigmatic examples, including *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra*, *Vía Campesina*, and the social movements around the *Isiboro Sécuré National Park and Indigenous Territory* and the *Yasuní National Park* in the Amazonian region.

Finally, these ecological reflections and experiences emerging from "the social periphery of the world's periphery" (Tortosa 2009, 3) also stand for a necessary biocentric and bioethical turn in social and communication sciences. It might be helpful to understand that nature is not a simple resource to be (over) exploited by human beings, but, on the contrary, is above all a holistic and systemic totality that supports human life on Earth as well as human thought, expressions, and behaviors. In communication terms, this turn can prevent scholars from approaching media and information technologies as mere cultural apparatuses. On the contrary, media need to be gradually understood from a material and ecological point of view, as they have a radical impact on nature and, especially, on the working and living conditions of both low-wage and highly industrialized countries (Maxwell and Miller 2012). Nevertheless, we observe that the adoption of these materialistic approaches is still limited and in need of further development.

## An Overview of Good Living

To Grosfoguel (2005, 291), many emancipatory projects and even the first revolutionary left governments in Latin America (e.g., Cuba, Nicaragua) failed because they were unable to problematize the racial-ethnic hierarchies built during the European colonial expansion: "No radical project in Latin America can be successful without dismantling these colonial and racial hierarchies." Regarding the former theoretical constructs, since the early 2000s Latin America is witnessing the emergence of another fertile debate concerning "good living" (*buen vivir*), or GL, an ancestral Andean and indigenous worldview that may enrich communication theory (for social change) through the incorporation of the asserted postdevelopment and biocentric premises, as well as a vision of rights based on the "articulation of individual capacities and wellbeing, nature, and resource distribution" (Radcliffe 2012, 240). It is necessary to make a few preliminary remarks on the multiple senses and political implications of the concept before introducing its relevance for the field.

First, the equivalent expressions for *buen vivir* in both Quechuan (*sumak kawsay*) and Aymaran (*suma qamaña*) come from oral and nonsystematized coding systems that are currently being examined by both academics and indigenous communities, so we must assume that it is difficult to translate their exact, complex

and integral meanings into Spanish or English (Medina 2011, 39). Consequently, communication scholars must take due epistemological caution to not alter the original senses in the forthcoming theorization and rather approach it as a gerund form, *living*, which better encompasses the dynamic character of GL. Second, GL is the articulation of a variety of Latin American indigenous worldviews and has been recently incorporated in the constitutions of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009).<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, it remains an “ongoing and incomplete project” (Stefanoni 2012, 15–16) in need of further theoretical approximation, especially when implemented in policy making or translated into Western epistemological standards. This is the case in a set of contradictory regulations passed after the incorporation of GL in the Ecuadorian constitution, as many public projects (e.g., oil and gas extraction in the Amazon) foster natural preservation, on the one hand, and “endogenous industrialization” on the other. Third, even if GL is not a universal model but a set of particular and contextual imaginaries (Gudynas 2011, 443), it offers a more ambitious critical framework than the Western-based notions that traditionally enlarged the development field (i.e., human, sustainable, integral) although a deeper dialogue between GL and Western-based perspectives on deep ecology and de-growth is necessary (García 2012). Fourth, GL has not been problematized yet in the field of communication, although a number of works currently explore this direction (A. Acosta 2010; Arrueta 2012; De Souza Silva 2011; Díaz Bordenave 2012; Torrico 2010). In the following, we artificially separate the integral view of GL to synthesize its potential to problematize the field.

### ***The Sustainable Biocultural Memory***

GL highlights several cultural legacies that have survived since ancient times, overcoming the dramatic consequences of colonization and globalization. By creating a closer and nonutilitarian relationship with nature, these sustainable worldviews differ from modern positivism and its search for universal laws to explain and intervene on nature. On the contrary, they integrate both the material and symbolic dimensions of life and move “beyond the strictly material towards those intangible aspects that determine our lives” (Huanacuni 2010, 34), recognizing that there is “an immaterial realm one cannot see” but “sustains the material world one can see” (Deneulin 2012, 3). Besides, while modern science abuses from universal measure and quantification, the multidimensional Andean principle of *ayni*—broadly translated as “reciprocity”—as a central part of GL acknowledges the qualitative interconnection between the human being and nature: “The emphasis is absolutely qualitative. *Ayni* involves the human values of friendship, alliance, trust: the social networks that produce humanity and, *a fortiori*, Community” (Medina 2011, 130). Given that nature is “priceless” (Mires 1996, 49), it is thus difficult to quantify development, welfare, or wealth. Moreover, material goods are no longer decisive as “knowledge, socio-cultural recognition and ethical and even spiritual codes” (Acosta 2008, 34).

### ***The Communal Experience as the Basis of Knowledge***

GL aims to build applied knowledge and does not distinguish between thinking and transforming things, as fostered by modern rationality. This approach is comparable to participatory communication’s emphasis on community praxis as the core of development (Huesca 2002). Nevertheless, unlike the former, GL assumes practice from the human linkage to the environment, because “all *praxis* is always aligned with a *corpus* of knowledge (or to any material ‘life’ always correspond a ‘symbolic life’)” (Toledo and Barrera-Bassols 2008, 70). From this perspective, local worldviews are the basis of theoretical reflection and can be emancipatory insofar as they integrate daily life, meanings, emotions, and natural materiality. This is why several studies have concluded that there is a spatial—and not accidental—coincidence between the regions that have better preserved biodiversity and those with the highest cultural and linguistic diversity (Toledo and Barrera-Bassols 2008, 29). These areas comprise rural, indigenous, native, and peasant populations that have developed familiar and small-scale production and consumption patterns based on ordinary needs and natural concerns, instead of becoming large-scale economies in which the individual is the only scientific parameter (Huanacuni 2010, 13 and 53). Furthermore, GL epistemologies stress the community, understood as common-unit (*común-unidad*), what moves communication beyond the Western conception of the community as a social structure and rather understands it as the unity-oneness of humanity and nature. In other words, it means the Western ideals of quality of life, but from its endorsement within “a community which includes nature” (Gudynas 2011, 411).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, the Aymaran *suma qamaña* combines such meanings as “peaceful living,” “living comfortably,” “living together in harmony,” “sweet living,” and “raising world’s life with care,” and it may also be translated as “living in harmony with the whole of social relations with an attitude of thanksgiving” (Albó 2011, 22).

### ***A New Approach to Postdevelopment Studies***

GL encourages not a linear advancement into the future but an ongoing process of nature-community living enhancement, “always in the making, done and undone” (Deneulin 2012, 3). Many Andean populations do not even share the traditional Western concept of development as a transition from a developing state into an ideal development that is often evaluated as mere material growth. Therefore, poverty is not associated with “material scarcity,” nor is wealth conceived as “abundance” (Acosta 2008, 34). GL helps rethink development from the standpoint of poverty and exclusion, not in material terms but as a mechanism of power control at the service of capitalism. From this position, the objective of the cooperation programs would not be solving poverty with instruments derived from the current dominant neoliberal structure. Instead, GL proposes a radical transformation or even replacement of the capitalist system itself, given that poverty “is structured in the same format, in its same episteme” (Dávalos 2011, 212). Thus GL invites a new socioeconomic and living system in which “the use value precedes the change value” and the production-consumption patterns are designed in accordance to the real needs of people (Farah and Vasapollo 2011, 23–24). Good examples of this new approximation to development can be observed in many ancestral reciprocity experiences in Latin America that are based on philanthropic and bartering practices, support networks, cooperative associations, and community rituals and fairs (Escobar 2010a). Likewise, GL is against any kind of domination or exploitation among human beings or over nature. On the contrary, it proposes a complementary relationship without exclusion and based on respect and coexistence “because nothing and nobody is useful by itself” (Huanacuni 2010, 53).

### **Communication from Good Living**

On the basis of the three epistemological debates described in the previous lines, GL is an inspiring framework if we want to incorporate the sustainable, decolonial, and postdevelopment challenges into communication studies. In fact, GL offers an invitation to consider the ferment that Latin America and the global South provide to de-Westernize media studies in general (Curran and Park 2000) and communication for social change in particular, as also claimed by different scholars (Dutta 2011; Manyozo 2012; Melkote and Steeves 1991; Riaz and Pasha 2012; Wilkins and Mody 2006). In this realm, the GL perspective is remarkable because it helps integrate the voice of subaltern scholarship, since communication studies, as the broader social sciences, have been traditionally shaped from a modern/colonial worldview that can be also qualified as capitalist, military, Christian, patriarchal, white, heterosexual, and male, paraphrasing Grosfoguel (2002). This is easy to verify in a few of the most relevant metatheoretical accounts on the history of communication for development published in English, which usually credit the field as an US invention with theoretical inputs from other regions, which are often deemed as peripheral and too ideological or political (e.g., Stevenson 1988).<sup>7</sup> Rather than suggest a final scenario, the following paragraphs focus on a few possible paths to integrate GL into communication for social change studies.

First, scholars are invited to move ahead toward a more integral comprehension of communication and change when they incorporate the GL perspective. This means that many cultures around the world do not have or share the Western idea of development. Besides, other populations have historically approached communication not from a linear media-centered perspective, but from a dialogic and procedural view. In both cases, GL helps realize that many communities need communication not to develop, grow, or evolve to in any direction or goal, but to proceed towards a broader and all-encompassing human coexistence with the natural and material environment. From this approach, communication involves thus an endless, dynamic, and even conflictive process that can empower people to create knowledge and better articulate their lives within the environment thanks to the integration of the cultural and natural dimensions of communication.

Second, observing communication from a GL perspective exceeds the limits of simple instrumentalism (communication *for*), but rather understands it as a symbolic space where it is possible to resist and destabilize the unsustainable imaginaries disseminated by mainstream media and commercial advertising. In contrast, GL can help deepen the necessary epistemic decolonization of modern sciences (Escobar 2000),<sup>8</sup> as well as rescue and revalorize the sustainable epistemologies hindered by modernity, such as the fore-previously mentioned biocultural memory or even the critical ecological frameworks stemmed

<sup>7</sup> This is also evident in the recent historical accounts of communication for development by McAnany (2012), Rogers (1994), and/or Stevenson (1988). Additionally, several authors have claimed that the first research on communication and development in the United States was strongly determined by hidden political, economic, and military interests (Samarajiva 1987; Simpson 1993; Tunstall 1977, quoted in Barranquero 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Also referred to as decolonization of the imaginary (Latouche 2012) or mental structures (Sachs 1992).

from northern academia and social movements: such as de-growth, ecosocialism, slow movement, and philosophy on the commons, etc.

Third, embracing GL helps communication for social change studies get rid of any adjective or label—such as participatory, for development, for sustainable development—realigning it from its subordinate position (*for*) to the core of the disciplinary relation. What is at stake in a GL approximation is the ideal of communication as dialogue and network-creator, not just among communities themselves—as stated by the participatory paradigm—but also through a deeper dialogue between the human being and the natural and material surrounding.

Fourth, GL leans to a radical questioning of the current cooperation system and the traditional views and patterns adopted by many development stakeholders. From this view, the actions of the North should not be limited to the development of the South but rather aim at a better resource distribution between the North and the South. Also, though, it is also convenient to incorporate GL to promote a finer analysis of the real human needs beyond any artificial need created by commercial advertising or cultural industries. In other words, it is urgent to adopt a position of self-containment based on a reconsideration of real human real needs not to surpass the limits of growth (Acosta 2013, 56). Thus, human austerity and the de-growth of the North become the prerequisites to construct a new sustainable welfare model both for the North and for the global South: “The cooperation models should focus their intervention axes on the implementation of a socio-ecological readjustment in the Global North in order to adequately redistribute the control and use of the planet’s resources. . . among its inhabitants . . . , as well as to respect the biosphere limits and the regenerative capacities of the planet. The objective will no longer face the scarcity of the South but handle the excesses of the North” (Monsangini 2012, 248).

As previously stated, Western scholars must handle GL with due caution when incorporating it to communication studies. Among the main risks, we can mention the hypothetic idealization and romanticization of the worldview as a happy Arcadia at the margins of the dominant world system. When we earlier described the GL concept, we attempted to observe it from the perspective of the Weberian ideal types, because, first, in practice, it is difficult to discover pure native people aside from any Western, global, or neoliberal influence. Conversely, most indigenous populations live endorsed in the realm of the nation-states where their ancestral territories are located. Second, we have not examined the unavoidable power relations that exist in all human communities, and also in those which are led by the GL principles: dominations according to race, gender, sexuality, age, social status, and so forth.

Further research on these contradictions will surely enrich the integration of GL into the communication theories, but a possible epistemological solution for these impasses might be achieved if we try to systematize today’s existing GL communication practices as well as other sustainable experiences, in tune with Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s (2005, 175) concept of translation. Santos advocates for the construction of a new cosmopolitan and decentered model of reason, articulated from the present experiences rather than on the grand narratives and the too abstract reflections of the past, since “translation is a process aiming at the creation of mutual intelligibility among the world experiences, both available and possible. . . . It is a procedure that does not attribute neither exclusive totality nor homogeneous partial status to any set of experiences” (Santos 2005, 175).

The reference to the necessary translation delves us into the possibilities to open a global dialogue among the epistemological frameworks emanated both from the North and the South, given that the North/South difference is also a modern/colonial dichotomy. A good path way to build interregional bridges is the notion of the right to communicate, a concept that emerged in the new world information and communication order (NWICO) debates, proposed by Jean d’Arcy of France in 1969 but mostly enhanced by Latin American scholars. From a GL perspective, Ana María Acosta (2010, 156) considers that this concept is a good way to transform the liberal and individualist view regarding the still prevalent freedom of the press and information rights: “This right should not be subordinated to the market trends, but involve a redistribution and democratization in communication access, production and circulation.”

Concerning this translation task, we can mention the inexhaustible source of inspiration of the global repertoire of practices proposed by the *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*. Coordinated by John Downing (2010), this work opens communication for social change to the mutual intelligibility of a range of alternative communication experiences along around the world, since they are “pivotal vehicles within which the global civil society can collectively chew on solutions, float and discard them, track their trajectories and evaluate them, from the most local and immediate to the international and long term.” (Downing 2010, 26). Another valuable example is the recently launched Civic Media Project (<http://civicmediaproject.org>) site and book (Gordon and Mihailidis 2016), which describes a collection of more than one hundred civic media



cases along around the world on a diverse range of topics from the fights for transparency to media literacy and hacktivist movements.

Other synergies can be observed in Ecuador's the 2008 Ecuadorian constitution and its integration of the right to communicate into the GL framework. Among the legal achievements, it is important to mention "the recognition of communication, information and culture as fundamental human rights and articulators of the Regime of Good Living. In fact, communication is transversally incorporated into the constitutional text. Several articles concerning plural-nationality, education, culture, health, [and] social participation . . . refer to communication as well as media access and freedom of expression" (ALAI 2013, 238).

To conclude, we will finally describe three paradigmatic case studies which are presently implementing the subaltern philosophy of GL and whose practices become a source of inspiration for the future reflection and action in the field. We refer to the Flok Society, the Sistema Autónomo de Educación Zapatista, and Usina de Medios.

### ***Flok Society***

The Flok Society (<http://flokociety.org>) is an Ecuadorian initiative promoted by the National Institute of Advanced Studies (Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales, IAEN), the Coordinating Ministry of Knowledge and Human Talent (Ministerio Coordinador de Conocimiento y Talento Humano), and the National Secretary for Science and Innovation (Secretaría Nacional de Educación Superior, Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación, SENESCYT). Launched in 2013, it is oriented toward developing state policies to shift the Ecuadorian capitalist matrix to a social economy of knowledge. This challenge wants to be articulated through a new relationship among the state, civil society, and the market, as they understand that value in a postcapitalist society will be promoted "by citizens, paid or voluntary, which create open and common pools of knowledge, co-produced and enabled by a Partner State, which creates the right conditions for such open knowledge to emerge; and preferentially ethical entrepreneurial coalitions which create market value and services on top of the commons, which they are co-producing as well" (Bauwens 2014, 3). From this alliance, the project is attempting to build up connections between the GL worldview and the commons theories thanks to knowledge constructed through an online dialogue between civic society and prominent scholars and practitioners. The Flok Society is divided into five main areas of reflection: productive capacities, legal and institutional frameworks, open technical infrastructures, commons' infrastructures for collective life, and human capabilities. This last area integrates education, innovation, and open science as well as free communication and culture, on the basis of from the view that open access and online-generated content can play a vital role to in rescuing and disseminating the ancestral aboriginal knowledge in order to incorporate it into the new information and knowledge society. This is why Flok is based on the perspective of *sumak yachai* (translated as *buen conocer*, or "good knowing"), an essential dimension which is encompassed in the broader notion of GL. *Sumak yachai* involves knowledge has to be managed and supported by the indigenous people but can be discussed in interaction with nonindigenous populations, which might be able to create the new cultural framework that helps open the transition from capitalist economy towards a social economy of knowledge. Within this logic, Flok is developing the Minga en Red, a map of the existing international and national collaborative projects which that operate from the perspective of the commons and free culture and is divided into nine areas: communication, education, scientific policies, and open data, among others.

### ***Sistema Autónomo de Educación Zapatista***

The Sistema Autónomo de Educación Zapatista (<http://www.serazln-altos.org>) is supported by the Zapatista movement born in 1994, which introduced a new primary education system (EPRAZ) in 2000 and a secondary system (ESRAZ) in 2002. Before the Zapatistas set up their own education system, many rural communities in southern Mexico had no schools or had schools that were precariously funded. Furthermore, content was not taught in indigenous languages or based on any local tradition or worldview. To solve this problem, the new educational model has been designed collectively and by the grass roots, and it attempts to incorporate the needs of the indigenous population, thus presenting a challenge to the Mexican education system. In this way, the Zapatistas have promoted the idea of free access to primary and secondary school, on the principle that learning must be a shared experience and methodologies should be founded on connections between experts and populations who want to learn about issues that are central to their development. From the communities' own needs, a special focus is given to the environment, agro-ecological approaches, and the implementation of instruments for the care for the land. Values such as community solidarity and respect for elders are also highlighted in the new curricula. The new educational system aims to provide

self-cognition and empowerment through the decolonization of positivist knowledge, as well as through the empowerment of endogenous communication and cultural traditions. One of the most acknowledged projects of this new type of education system is the University of Earth (UniTierra, UT) in Oaxaca, which was founded in 2001 and later spread to other places, including Puebla, Mexico, and Califa and San Diego, in the United States. Influenced by postdevelopment thinkers such as Ivan Illich, Gustavo Esteva, Paul Goodman, and John Holt, UT is committed to regenerating the conditions through which indigenous people have traditionally learned and acquired skills for living and generating resources. At these centers, students learn whatever they want—practical issues, social research, video production—and are helped by a set of practitioners and educators. Prominent visiting scholars who reinforce the centers' academic structures have included Immanuel Wallerstein, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and Pablo González Casanova, among others.

### ***Usina de Medios***

The Usina de Medios initiative (<http://www.usinademedios.org.ar>) is promoted by the nongovernmental organization alliance Cooperar (Confederación Cooperativa de la República Argentina) and the National Institute of Partnership and Social Economy (Instituto Nacional de Asociativismo y Economía Social, INAES). This is a strategic coalition between the cooperation sector and the state whose main objective is to design and develop communication policies from and for an economy of solidarity, as well as to create a new associative entrepreneurial landscape that serves as an alternative to the extremely concentrated private media sector in Argentina. Especially oriented to the development of regional projects, Usina de Medios is promoting the movement of media and telecommunications cooperatives and subject-matter experts from the ideals of participation, autonomy, and solidarity and through the development of an ethical code for the organizations and their media projects. Before Argentina's Law on Audiovisual Communication Services in 2009, cooperatives were prevented from developing media and communication projects, but the new regulation guarantees 33 percent of the radio spectrum for community and nonprofit media. Usina de Medios aims to put into practice small- and medium-scale cooperativist projects (e.g., radio, TV, web) distributed all along the territory and based on what they call a "four integrations" model: among media, their communities, and social economy organizations; of media into multimedia and multiplatform (e.g., TV, Internet, radio); of the different productive sectors into larger regional and national sectors; and of Latin American projects into international networks.

### **Discussion**

The three projects described here provide different inputs for theoretical reflection. Whereas Usina de Medios and Flok Society include an alliance with the state, this coalition is absent in the Zapatista autonomous education system. In the case of Ecuador and Mexico, the references to GL and to the promotion of endogenous knowledge are explicit, but Usina de Medios is mostly constructed on the basis of reflection on the necessity to open a third media sector regarding public and private media that is operated and at the service of civic associations. Flok strategically emphasizes the collective control of information and communication technology (ICT) hardware and software, whereas media form the core of the Usina de Medios project. Nevertheless, the three case studies emphasize the centrality of the communicative dimension for these new development projects, as well as a non-media-centered approach that integrates media and culture with telecommunication and ICTs.

In summary, the new debates that derive from Latin American subaltern epistemologies are helping to strengthen the reflection and practice on communication and social change, while overcoming a few of the contradictions observed in the new communication agenda. First, they no longer focus on media and technologies *for* development but rather concentrate on their potential to promote new sustainable imaginaries and cultural frameworks. Second, rather than trying to discover a universal recipe to achieve development, they concentrate on the global translation of the local epistemologies and existing experiences as a way to open a transition from the capitalist model that led us into a global environmental crisis. Third, they are useful to definitively break away from anthropocentrism in communication sciences and stand for a more integral biocentric perspective of development and social change.

This epistemic decolonization task should be connected to another proposal by Boaventura de Sousa Santos: the "sociology of emergences." This means a radical transformation of the ideas that are presently tagged as impossible into possible horizons, which involves a shift from their absence, denial, or invisibility into their presence. This is not pure volunteerism, since what will emerge as possible refers to existing but undervalued experiences and worldviews. The sociology of emergences works therefore in the field

of social expectations, not in the expectations of the modern discourse (i.e., great, abstract, and universal grand narratives and expectations) but in the specific potentials of each social context. Accordingly, this new sociology can promote the “possible dialogues and conflicts, derived, on the one side, from the revolution of information and communication technologies, among the global flows of information and global social media, and, on the other, from independent transnational communication networks and autonomous media” (Santos 2005, 173).

Last, the different projects provide a few central reflections in order to build up a new research program regarding communication and good living. On the one hand, favorable regulation from the state is a precondition for building communication projects from a GL perspective, although a wide range of living third sector experiences are currently providing fruitful responses to improve the living conditions of the populations. On the other hand, GL needs to be considered in light of the complex and hybrid realities of the Latin American context, given that many indigenous populations have been pushed to migrate to big cities, which has also increased social inequalities. To reiterate, communication is an essential space to unveil the unsustainable imaginaries that lead to inequalities and develop autonomous worldviews that help spread social justice and environmental protection.

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