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Ernesto Rosen Velásquez
University of Dayton

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Chapter 2

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By Ernesto Rosen Velasquez

Abstract: In my piece I reflect on a few aspects of our cohorts in-country experience in some regions of Argentina and Peru. In particular issues of political sensibilities and spontaneous political mobilization are discussed. Some observations about different senses of what a free university might potentially mean are also noted. Furthermore, as a way of framing different kinds of activities a distinction between two kinds of projects are made: projects that follow a logic of inclusion and projects that recognize alterity. These two kinds of projects are tied respectively to two conflicting views of the good life: vivir mejor (living better) and buen vivir (collective living). As a matter of morality I suggest the pursuit of the latter.

One of the first impressions I experienced while in Buenos Aires Argentina is the political consciousness of the people. Immediately when our University of Dayton cohort arrived we saw people protesting in unlikely spaces. When we landed in the airport our cohort walked toward the immigration customs line. There were about four or five different aisles with their respective desks and suited customs agents reviewing and stamping passports. As we were waiting in one of the lines for a few minutes some people started feeling impatient that the line seemed to be moving too slow. So one of the people in line who was talking to a friend said, “estan tomando mucho tiempo, verdad,” in English: “They [the immigration customs agents] are taking too long, right?” The other person said “si” and they both started clapping and saying “apurate” or in English “hurry up.” Then in a matter of a few seconds almost everyone in that section of the airport was clapping and chanting “apurate.” As the claps and roar of the people grew louder the line moved faster—a few people just went through without inspection, the agents just waived them pass the checkpoint line.

This was impressive because there was this implicit social contract—an unspoken agreement—that the people, when acting in concert, can change circumstances they find
unsatisfactory, even in such seemingly “non-political” spaces such as an airport. Thus a loose assemblage of seemingly random bodies—a somewhat arbitrary collection similar to the paper clips, calendars, pens, computer and coffee cup on my office table—became a group with a higher level of organization. Travelers in an airport might not typically see themselves as having an airport identity because they might be thinking at a more individualist level; what time is my flight? Where is my gate? I need to call person X, I want some water, I want to use the restroom, where can I get some food? But the people in the airport in Buenos Aires became a unified collective in a very short period of time without any meetings, deliberations, debates or discussions of strategic planning. Most of the individuals in that section of the airport recognized themselves as part of a group that is being treated in a certain way by another. I did not clap because I was surprised and in a sense still processing what I was seeing. I may have clapped a few times toward the end but by that time some of the people went through the checkpoint and by that point the clapping died down. My delayed response might be due in part to my naiveté, tiredness from a long flight and training in philosophy; the reflex of simply being a spectator, objective observer who writes about people’s practices without participating in them with the people. Whatever the reasons for my ineffectual behavior it was impressive to see that kind of spontaneous eruption of an organized bloc in the space of an airport.

Traveling internationally in an airport involves several routines; waiting in line, getting off the plane, getting one’s luggage, going through inspection, getting questioned, being asked by security agents “where are you going?” “Why are you going?” “How long are you staying?” “What did you buy?” “How much money do you have?,” presenting your ID documents. These practices are all so normalized to the point that they are unquestioned. Overtime these customs become sedimented habits that form a congealed common sense, an understood or unspoken
agreement that becomes unchallenged—we expect to do these things and expect to be treated in these ways. The people in the Buenos Aires airport, however, ruptured these airport norms. Instead of seeing themselves as individuals doing their own thing there is this sense of being part of a collective, speaking out, that part of being human is to be heard, to voice an opinion, to feel like active agents of social change. What is also impressive about this social mobilization in the airport is those people do not have a thin conception of political action that is often reduced simply to voting, going to a booth or designated space where “political action happens.” Their sense of the political is wider. This small resistance-in-airport experience can be refreshing if one is habituated to hearing cynicism about changing society or people who have given up and rationalize their negligence. Why do the people in Buenos Aires mobilize much quicker than people in America? The violent repression in Argentina due to the Dirty War is a partial explanation, as Dr. Katie Kinnucan-Welsch noted, for why there is such a value for freedom of expression in that region which in turn triggers resistance when this freedom feels infringed upon. It is as if people value things when they are violently taken away from them. Whereas in other places people feel a level of comfort that keeps them sedated and just going along with things and not mustering enough will to work to change social conditions.

Upon reflection this small incident in the airport is inspiring. But it did not stop in the airport. I saw other protests. When Dr. Julius Amin and I visited a museum students were out in the streets protesting budget cuts of music programs. A full blown orchestra was playing loudly outside the museum. Then after that was the Madres de plaza de Mayo walking in front of the Pink House to commemorate and remember the disappearances of their children, husbands and loved ones as a result of the state sponsored terrorism during the Dirty War. There was also a demonstration for Serbians, people who from an outsider’s perspective might seem unconnected
to Buenos Aires. So as you spend time in Buenos Aires you can see this political sensibility and can expect to see four or five demonstrations a day on a variety of local and global issues.

The primarily middle-class high school students at Colegio Marianista in Buenos Aires made an impression on me because of the student’s political consciousness and informed views of education. I was impressed by their frank, courageous expressions on issues pertaining to higher education. These high school students visited the University of Dayton and enjoyed their experiences there but did not see it as a live option to attend when compared to the university options available to them locally. They were excited about attending the University of Buenos Aires; a free university, with a high-level of student diversity and rigorous, quality faculty. When one of our cohort members, I forgot whom, mentioned something about how the University of Dayton put a lot of money into the Recplex the students mentioned they were not interested so much in expensive facilities but the quality of the education and its links to off campus community projects. This group of lively energetic youths who were about sixteen or seventeen years old were asking tough questions. For example, while multiple conversations were happening at the table I heard one young female student who was so full of life, energy, curiosity, and sense of social justice asked in English, with her wonderful accent, a flurry of questions to Dr. Kinnucan-Welsch such as the following, which I am reconstructing from memory (Katie may have a more detailed account of this conversation in her chapter):

**Marianist Student**: Do you have free universities in the U.S. like we have here in Buenos Aires?

**Katie** I cannot think of any off the top of my head and I am not sure that there are. I would have to investigate that. That is a good question.

**Marianist Student** Do you think university education should be free?

**Katie** It’s a tough question that is complicated to answer.
**Marianist Student** Do you think the University of Dayton will in the future be a free university?

**Katie** That topic is something that has not really been talked about. We have some scholarships that we offer. To answer your question my sense is I do not see that happening. But your questions and comments I will report them and mention them when I return to the University of Dayton.

In general when thinking about international and diversity initiatives there are projects that follow a logic of inclusion and others that have a logic that recognizes alterity. Let me give an example of the former then the latter. While in Buenos Aires Argentina our cohort went to a school in Barracas which is one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. These areas are numbered, slum #21, slum #22, which is interestingly ambiguous in the sense that on the one hand these zones are not publicly invisible but clearly acknowledged by the state, but on the other hand this mathematical demarcation of spaces of poverty has an aura of cold logic about it. Picture a group of experts—urban planners—mapping from a birds-eye view the cartography of power in such a way that urban renewal development projects are designed by “the experts” for the people struggling to live in those spaces without engaging in a horizontal dialogue/praxis in which the people living in these zones take an active part in the construction of those designs and spaces.

Our bridge person Perico curiously referred to these areas as “the slums” which to some of our cohort members seemed an interesting choice of words. When he mentioned that term it rung odd in my ears too because I have not heard that word used in a long time. I also noticed his use of that phrase because the way the expression sometimes gets used in the U.S. tends to have a lot of negative connotations—there are no positive connotations associated with the term “slums” as opposed to terms used on the streets in the U.S. by inner city youth such as “the ghetto” or “the hood” which have both positive and negative connotations in the U.S. In noticing
Perico’s use of the term “slum” I am not making a point about “political correctness.” I was not offended when he spoke this way. I did not think he was an immoral insensitive person when he used the term. If anything he is the one working with these human beings. Many people do not care about the people Perico is working in solidarity with—people who are treated as non-human like cattle—unless they provide some form of entertainment or service for consumer subjects enjoying many kinds of privileges. Perico could have made a typical move and simply ignored them and taken a career route secluded from all that. But he did not. He is paying attention to these people living in a metropolitan center yet are on the periphery of the world-economy.

Perico mentioned to me, I am guessing after others may have asked about his use of the word “slums,” how Americans seemed to have this sense of speaking in a politically correct fashion. He said something to the effect that “in Buenos Aires we just speak more openly about things, we do not think ‘oh I should not say that word’ because it might offend people.’” There is something to be said for openness and not holding back your tongue—at least more is out in the open. This point about openness reminds me of when Malcom X said he thought a Klu Klux Klan member was more honest than silent racists because at least with the former we know where they are coming from. I am certainly not making an analogy between Perico and the Klu Klux Klan; it is about the value of Perico’s point of being open and honest. Having said this there is an ambiguity with being honest in the sense that one can be honest but it does not follow that the things said by an honest person are necessarily true and/or politically useful for mobilizing communities. Thus is it true that those children in Barracas live in slums, if understood in a strictly economic sense? Perhaps yes. Do the children in Barracas describe themselves as living in “slums?” Some may and some may not. I ask because terms get invented by outside parties and international organizations and foisted on a people and then slowly over
time with repetition become naturalized and internalized in ways that shape their being in the world and self-understandings. Expressions that have negative senses have historically been re-claimed by communities in a positive way for their own purposes such as “gay” “queer” “nigga” “dyke” “flips” and “mutts.” Thus meanings are changeable and the use of terms need not be determined solely by descriptive adequacy but other considerations—ethico-political, aesthetic—since language use can have multiple combined functions.

How would those youth describe, in their own terms, what the problems and solutions are in their community? What is the relationship between language and power? Is teaching English—the language of business and power—a means by which economically disenfranchised people can be upwardly mobile in a way that includes people on the margins into the world global economy? Yes, one might say. This gets poor people jobs in a world where having money is necessary. We could think of creative ways of having some of these children in Barracas learn to grow their own local food through urban community gardens. It is happening in other urban spaces around the world. They can think of growing not so much a corporate tomato with its chemicals and pesticides that enter into their production processes but indigenous methods of growing tomatoes. One positive feature of organic indigenous methods of agricultural cultivation is food is not commercialized and sold on the market because food is not a commodity. This is different from the expensive organic foods one might find in a supermarket. The organic food industry has interesting tensions because on the one hand, we want to be ethical politically conscious healthy eaters that are aware of the processes by which our food gets to our plate but on the other hand most foods organically grown are more expensive than other non-organically grown products. Shopping for organic food can feel like purchasing ethics. Why can’t Barracas initiate urban gardens projects where the community tends to the garden and cultivates their own
food, for their own purposes, for free and the youth in these neighborhoods deliver groceries to
the elders? Is English necessary to acquire horticultural knowledge? It can be helpful but it need
not be. Some of the students in Barracas are relatively recent immigrants. Some may be from
Paraguay, Bolivia, and Uruguay. Their ancestors who may speak Guarani or Aymara, indeed
languages/knowledge viewed as un-profitable from a Western gaze, have knowledge about many
things such as agriculture that is not being orally transmitted because students speak the
colonizers language—Spanish— and are learning English thus doubly colonized and twice
removed from their ancestral languages. Why not consider the possibility of having students and
faculty learn indigenous languages in addition to English? There are many Romance Language
Departments across the U.S. which become entry points to learn about Latin America, but where
do the hundreds of indigenous languages fit in (for instance over 10 million people speak
Quechua)? Why is it that when traveling outside the U.S. in regions such as Latin America more
children and people are bilingual—speak some rudimentary English and Spanish— but most
Americans are monolingual? While some of this might have to do with colonization, tourism and
English as a lengua of power, it opens the question of should this be the case? Some people
cannot communicate with their grandparents or understand some of the things they say, as our
cab driver in Lima reminded me. Should these ancestral languages/knowledge remain in
obscurity?

A limitation with projects that follow a logic of inclusion, for instance teaching ESL to
poor youth in Barracas to assimilate them in the economy with its logic of accumulation of
wanting to live better or what is called vivir mejor, is the uncritical acceptance of what people on
the margins are being included into. The economy with its deep historic ties to race and gender is
so naturalized that it becomes hard for even caring compassionate people to think of alternative
solutions in a way that are outside a capitalist framework. Our imaginative horizons have in this sense become limited. Does our creative imagination have to be restricted in this fashion? In fact it is not. There are other worlds slowly being created in which the economy is being marginalized—not totally eliminated—and being constructed from below by-with-for people on the periphery. This decolonized option with more emphasis on _buen vivir_ or what is called “collective well-being”— instead of _vivir mejor_ are spaces and places we should learn from and build relations of solidarity with.

As a contrast to projects that follow a logic of inclusion into the same, let me end with a brief description of one real, living, contemporary example of a process that is unfolding that involves recognition of alterity. There are more but I will focus on one. The Universidad de la Tierra (University of the Earth) in Chiapas Mexico is a university built from the ground up by students and various Mayan peoples. Everything from the bricklaying, to the wood-carved chairs and tables, to the graffiti murals are designed and built by these people. There is no bureaucracy, city contracts, no experts determining behind closed doors in a committee what the interior design of the school should look like for everybody else dwelling in that education space. The construction of this university gives highest priority to those at the bottom of society. To treat them as such is to listen to what their needs and wants are and acknowledging they have philosophies, languages, knowledges, ways of being and asking yourself how can I take part in the slow construction of this process? The campus grows its own food for the students; you find chickens, rabbits and rows of all kinds of vegetables, coffee and spices which are organically grown without pesticides and relying on indigenous knowledge of agriculture orally transmitted and taught in the school. Since the majority of the students are Mayan then languages such as Tzotzil or Tzeltal or Tojolabal or Chol are primary and Spanish is secondary. When a
Venezuelan sociologist gave a talk in Spanish to an auditorium packed with poor Mayans and babies the talk was first given in Tzotzil then Tzeltal and lastly the scholar presented in Spanish and his theorizing deployed indigenous categories. This is not Sears Recital Hall, no forcing students to go for extra credit, the place was packed with Mayans—some without shoes—who wanted to be there because the talk was relevant to their lives and the people had interest. The food on campus is free because food, according to indigenous wisdom, is not viewed as a commodity. This is not a cafeteria with minority wage-laborers and processes that involve a whole economy of production and consumption in which people pay for food. This alternative non-westernized university is free because the people at the bottom have the view that education should not be a commodity only for the upper-middle class. This university challenges the idea of a university as a means of upward economic mobility for poor people and others. This university is not free in the sense that there is tuition and the state or federal government or scholarships pays for it. It is free in the sense that there is no tuition fee. Also one should not expect to see a TV advertising commercial for Universidad de la Tierra which tries to recruit more education consumer subjects. In this school students’ success is measured by their service and contributions to their communities and not their marketability for obtaining a salaried position. This school does not give out diplomas because you pass your courses and get good grades. There was one diploma that was given to an Austrian anthropologist community activist/scholar—a large wall-sized poster diploma up in one of the rooms—who built several schools and hospitals in communities that needed them. If you do these kinds of works the coordinators of the Universidad de la Tierra say “We will make you a big diploma so it means something.” This university which is de-linked from capitalist imperatives and the commodification of knowledge is not so interested in producing professionals or wage laborers
that aim to *viver mejor* but living laborers working towards *buen vivir*. The former is more about formal training, professions, salaries, marketing one’s individual skills and making money to accumulate more consumer items. The latter is about establishing collective well-being not only with humans but all animals, dead ancestors across generations, and living things embedded in nature and in the cosmos; it is about service to people, nourishing a collective identity, a vocation; it is about direct face-to-face interactions de-linked from bureaucracies and the world filled with wasteful documents and forms and is about what the versatile artist/bridge/double-translator Violeta embodied and mentioned to me about giving freely out of love to nourish one’s soul—living to work.

I asked the students in the poor area of Barracas if they knew or could say anything about the difference between *vivir mejor* (living better) and *buen vivir* (collective well-being) and one of the young ladies in Perico’s class introduced a third notion that was illuminating. She said she is concerned with *sobrevivir* which in English is translated as “surviving.” I hope that with the transition from the Sacred Heart’s work in that neighborhood to Marianists new work in that specific zone that part of the philosophy of education would work, in the future, towards reaffirming in deeper ways the Marianist value of the “preferential option for the poor.” It is a chance for Marianists to work with the poor in a way that sees them as agents that have views and can take part in the construction of that space in Barracas. It is an opportunity to build community in a way that links Barracas in a global network with others who are also at the margins of society responding to their conditions. Some of these other processes unfolding elsewhere are in a sense not exactly engaged in changing society. Projects that follow a logic of inclusion do change society in the sense that some individuals who formerly were on the periphery get included into the center. In this sense of social change the center is the same and in
fact grows now that people who were on the exteriority are now in it, they “make it.” Instead of changing society, which is very hard and sometimes seems impossible, people are creating other worlds. Simply put I hope those students in Barracas and that perceptive young lady in our group discussion in Perico’s class will begin imagining that other worlds are possible—and currently exist— and that her life trajectory need not be limited only to the typical, historically traditional movement from sobrevivir to vivir mejor but also sobrevivir to buen vivir.