



## On being both academic and activist

June 20, 2013

By Ben Mandelkern

The half-hour film *Sumak Kawsay: the Sarayaku Case* opens with César Rodríguez Garavito boarding a single engine plane in Puyo, Ecuador. Rodríguez is slight, his polo shirt untucked. He carries a backpack over one shoulder. After flying over the Amazon jungle, the plane lands on a grass strip in the remote Sarayaku territory in Ecuador's southeast, where he greets a group of men in a clearing. The film cuts forward. Sitting on a stump under a canopy of woven grass, Rodríguez speaks into the camera.

"I'm here following a lead that started with a project in northern Colombia," he says, "where a dam was built 20 years ago which led to a case that is still before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights." The jungle is lush behind him; a child fidgets in a large wooden chair. "I heard of a case that is much further along, the Sarayaku case. ... If the Court rules in favor of the community the case could create a fundamental precedent for indigenous rights in Latin America."

Rodríguez is a lawyer with a PhD in sociology and a professor of law at the University of the Andes in Bogota. But his professional niche is not easily defined. He is also an activist with journalistic intentions, a vocal advocate for indigenous rights, and an accomplished sociologist. He has written or edited 15 books, authors a weekly column in the Bogota daily *El Espectador*, and is a founding member of Dejusticia, the Center for Law, Justice, and Society. Bogota-based Dejusticia advocates for human rights and social justice through what the

organization terms "action research." It is a method that, like Rodríguez himself, bridges the sharply defined institutions of the public sphere, integrating academic research, legal intervention, and public debate.

It might be easy to explain Rodríguez's life and work by calling him a public intellectual, but for him this term doesn't resolve the underlying pressures of his professional identity, of the desire to engage simultaneously in parts of society that often work in parallel. "Usually, what public intellectuals do is to live double lives. And I've come to the conclusion that this is unfeasible."

---

**Usually, what public intellectuals do is to live double lives. And I've come to the conclusion that this is unfeasible.**

- César Rodríguez Garavito

---

For Rodríguez, synthesizing the worlds of the *public* and the *intellectual* has not meant adjusting the nature of his work to fit more easily into prescribed categories, but rather finding new ways to talk about it. Rodríguez is fluent in the languages of the lawyer, the sociologist, and the human rights activist. But to make sense of his work, he's had to develop a hybrid voice that integrates all three languages.

An academic explaining her ideas in the traditional way, Rodríguez says, "would first lay

out methodology and then review theory and then discuss the materials, and then come to a conclusion based on a syllogism – this is the theory, these are the facts, this is my conclusion.”

In *Sumak Kawsay*, on the other hand, the academic tells a story, and Rodríguez’s opening narration is the beginning of that story: in 2002, an oil company began prospecting for oil in Sarayaku without consulting the indigenous community. The company desecrated the territory, altering its environment and its culture with helicopters, explosives, and pollution. But after a few minutes, Rodríguez as narrator recedes. He remains in the film, but as listener. He hardly speaks at all. Sarayaku community leaders take over the storytelling, describing their decade of legal and

social struggle over land rights. The result is a story about people, and its logic requires no syllogism. Rodríguez has written widely about indigenous rights: an academic article in English, “Ethnicity, gov: Global Governance, Indigenous Peoples, and the Right to Prior Consultation in Social Minefields”; a newspaper feature in *El Espectador*, “Los hijos del jaguar y la locomotora ecuatoriana” (The Children of the Jaguar and the Ecuadorian Oil Boom); and a book, *Adios río: the conflict over land, water and indigenous rights within the context of the Urrá Dam*.

*Sumak Kawsay* is an example of what Rodríguez calls multimedia sociology, a mode that crosses boundaries of medium and discipline to reach people who will never read his articles or book.



Photo Karen Philippi

It's part of Canal Justicia (Channel Justice), a Ford Foundation-funded online portal for short documentaries and video tutorials on human rights issues that Rodríguez, Dejusticia, and the University of the Andes established in 2011. The film is a vibrant example of the hybrid discussion that Rodríguez aims for, traversing both the expected manner of legal and academic discourse and its traditional media. It is also a test of what he calls "the risky proposition" of his life: that the planes of academia, law, and human rights can converge to an effective point.

---

Rodríguez earned his PhD in the United States, at the University of Wisconsin, and he has been a visiting professor at Brown, Stanford, and NYU, as well as at universities in Ireland, South Africa, Argentina, Mexico, Finland, Hungary, and Brazil. He's had the chance to watch how his counterparts around the world negotiate the converging and diverging roles of academic and activist. In the US, he has found, the institutional boundaries are entrenched. An academic has to follow a set route to secure funding and has to produce work within a closed discursive loop to succeed professionally. And it's not a path that rewards or encourages creative public engagement.

Being a hybrid, he says, is easier in Latin America. In Colombia, Rodríguez doesn't have to justify his engagement in different professional and social zones. Indeed he finds that across the Global South, the borders between activist and academic are less rigid. "There is more porousness, you can circulate more easily between advocacy and academia — the degree of division of labor is not such that this type of double engagement is looked down upon."

The historical realities in countries in much of Africa, Latin America, and South Asia have made it much harder for academics to be disengaged from public concerns like human rights. Civil war,

independence struggles, and the recent experience of widespread human rights abuse have all contributed to a robust tradition of public academic engagement. But Rodríguez doesn't let popular acceptance of the role — in his case, pursuing what sociologist Michael Burawoy calls "public sociology" — resolve the uncertainties and anxieties that accompany this kind of work.

Rodríguez is meticulously self aware, methodical in his engagement with both what he does and how he does it. In a recent essay he argues for the value of hybrid academic-activism and defines its challenges. To succeed at it, he writes, one must become "amphibious. In the same way that amphibious animals or vehicles move from the air to the water or ground, the public sociologist should be able to move through various media without surrendering in the attempt. In violent contexts, in addition to navigating air, water, and earth, the public sociologist must be able to face the fire."

The academic process offers advantages, and Rodríguez is determined that his "public" engagement not succeed at their expense. "Without research to back you up," he says, "you're just another op-ed writer." On the other hand academia's timeframe — the lag between a dynamic reality and the scholar's intervention — is often measured in years. The rigor of internal procedure and disciplinary process must not be allowed to undermine the relevance and value of research.

---

In 2005, Rodríguez edited a scholarly volume called *Law and Globalization from Below: Towards a Cosmopolitan Legality*. It explored the rise of transnational networks of traditionally disenfranchised communities, from indigenous people combining forces to lobby for land rights to right-to-health advocates united for liberalized intellectual property for pharmaceuticals. The book is a look at what Rodríguez describes as a "veritable

alternative globalization that is as ambitious as corporate-led globalization.”

The book’s title and undertaking get at a fundamental tension in the kind of work Rodríguez and his colleagues do: he stands squarely at eye level with globalization. He is its beneficiary; unlike the people for whom he advocates, he does not gaze up at it from below.

His presence in the Sarayaku film makes this manifest. As he boards the plane he explains that to reach the Sarayuka territory from Puyo, “you can take either a canoe or, as we did, a plane.” Does his seat on the chartered plane, his place among the global elite, undermine his legitimacy as an advocate for the disenfranchised?

For Rodríguez, what matters is whether you can be useful. Rodríguez remembers traveling to Peru with an American law student to serve as advocates for an indigenous community. She carried guilt about her American-ness and the gulf separating her from the people she had flown in to help. Rodríguez recalls that, before this trip, “My retort to that anxiety had been ‘If you can serve, if you’re useful, you bracket your anxiety and you do your work.’”

But a conversation with the leader of the group they were working with provided a more useful response. “He told us about activists who love to dress in indigenous costumes, to go native. He said, ‘What we need is for you is to wear a tie and look like a lawyer. We can do the work of making the case from the point of view of the indigenous people.’ That was revealing. It revealed not just how I should dress and act, but what my role should be.”

Fittingly for a sociologist, César Rodríguez has come to understand the position he occupies in society, and to marshal its power.

As he sees it, his task is not to wrestle with institutional boundaries and professional definitions, but to move among them, using each to advantage and creating intermediate institutional spaces that overcome those boundaries. He has learned to be comfortable in the absence of clarity, to embrace the slippage of role, technique, and language. In his essay on “amphibious sociology,” Rodríguez parses his experience in the Sarayaku territory: “I did not know which was my identity or exact role in the story of the project. I was all at once and none in particular.”