

Can We 'Transform Our World' Without Affecting International Power Relations? A Political Analysis of the United Nations Development Agenda

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Abstract

The Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals are the latest instalments of a development endeavour started by the United Nations (UN) after WWII. This article conducts a discourse analysis of the UN development agenda, drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist thought – which combines post-structuralist discourse analysis and Marxist (Gramscian) political analysis. The essay exposes the ontological tenets underlying the UN's agenda, and how it conditions the way social issues are understood and addressed. It explains how the agenda conceals the political dimension of development and sustainability debates. Rather than 'transform our world', the UN development agenda 1) hinders practices that would truly transform it in terms of more emancipation and justice, and 2) subtly reinforces the power dynamics that sustain the status quo in which underdevelopment, poverty, inequality and exclusion emerged.

Keywords

United Nations, Development Goals, Laclau & Mouffe, Post-Marxism, Antagonism, Pluralism

‘A hegemony whose system of values has become so sedimented
that their political origin has been erased’

Chantal Mouffe

INTRODUCTION: ‘WHY DOES PLANET EARTH CONTINUE THE WAY IT IS?’

The following quote accurately describes the sensation that one has when reading the United Nations (UN) Millennium Declaration (MD) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (ASD) for the first time:

An extra-terrestrial beaming in and reading the Millennium Declaration would surely wonder: if all the leaders are so full of good intentions, and express them collectively in some form in some global city every five years, why does Planet Earth continue to be the way it is? (Saith, 2006: 1168)

This article starts from the critical perspective motivated by the feeling that Saith articulates, and analyses the political dimension of the UN development agenda – the six consecutive documents that have comprised the UN’s general strategy for development since 1961: the *UN Development Decade* (1961); the *Second UN Development Decade* (1970); the *Third UN Development Decade* (1980); the *Fourth UN Development Decade* (1990); the *Millennium Declaration* (2000); and the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015).¹ The analysis exposes the political consequences of a supposedly neutral agenda that presents itself as equally beneficial for everyone. To answer Saith’s jesting question, the article conducts a critical discourse analysis of the agenda and explains how it is reinforcing the implicit power dynamics that sustain the status quo, rather than ‘transforming our world’ in terms of emancipation and justice for everyone.

The inquiry starts from a post-Marxist approach following the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – whose influence has been very important in several social sciences, but

¹ These documents are available at: <http://www.un.org/en/sections/documents/general-assemblyresolutions/>.

quite absent in critical development studies.² This theoretical approach combines poststructuralist discourse analysis and Marxist (Gramscian) political analysis. In the following paragraphs, I explain the three key features of this theoretical framework that structure this essay, and briefly describe how the article engages with previous critical literature.

Web of meanings: the ontological tenets

From a post-Marxist perspective, discourse is not a positivistic, objective representation of reality that merely describes it *as it is*. Rather, it is the articulation of a web of meanings that mediates between reality and our understanding of it (Howarth, 2013: 10; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014: 79). Discourse is a practice that constructs a meaningful web of signifiers that conditions the way we understand and act upon social issues (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014: xi). For example, depending on how we link the meanings of poverty, freedom, democracy, the human, markets, rights, the state, equity and so forth, we will have a different understanding of what ‘development’ is and how to promote it. In other words, ‘development’ can only be conceptualised in relation to these other concepts; hence a meaningful web of interlinked concepts enables us to relate to all these social issues.

Part 1 of the article analyses the ontological tenets that enable and sustain the discursive articulation (the constructed web of meanings) within the UN development agenda. For that, I focus on how the agenda understands the social and the political.

Web of practices: the articulation of the discourse

From a post-Marxist perspective, articulating a web of meanings and constructing a discourse are intentional *practices* that imply active agency and decision-making. Discourse analysis

² During the 1970s and 1980s, Laclau’s ‘Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America’ (1971) had some influence in development debates within the Dependency Theory approach. His book with Mouffe, *Hegemony and Social Strategy* (1985), prolonged this influence during the early 1990s. When the cultural and discursive turns arrived in development studies, Arturo Escobar analysed and praised their work (Escobar 1992a, 1992b, 1992c; Escobar & Álvarez 1992). However, their influence is largely absent from critical development studies during the second half of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s – Mohan (1999), Mohan & Stokke (2000) and Kapoor (2002) are the only exceptions. In recent years a small number of articles on development issues have started by citing their work. Ziai (2004, 2007, 2009, 2014, 2015) and McKinnon (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008) are the best examples. See also Böhm & Brei, 2008; Cornwall, 2007; Geiser, 2012; Huber & Joshi, 2015; Ireland & McKinnon, 2013; Jones, 2014; Korf, 2010; Özen & Özen, 2017; Telleria, 2017b.

It is very meaningful, in this sense, that, since the publication of the MD in 2000, no authors have critically analysed the UN development agenda from a post-Marxist perspective.

thus involves examining *articulatory practices* – not mere ideas detached from real, material practices.

This articulatory practice occurs within a wider web of practices: 1) previous practices that influence the construction of the discourse – in the case of the UN development agenda, these include meetings, conferences and workshops intended to draft the agenda, previous discourses on the same or similar topics, the political-economic-historical-cultural context, institutional arrangements and constraints, and so on; and 2) later practices that may be consequently influenced by the articulation of the analysed discourse – such as debates about the content of the specific goals and targets, the design of policies, the implementation of strategies and plans, the coordination of different agents and the distribution of resources. Part 2 of this article analyses the articulation of the UN agenda's discourse on development and sustainability. Although I research certain previous practices and reflect on the consequences of this discourse, the article focuses on how the discursive construction of the UN agenda articulates particular concepts – the term 'we' and the phrase 'We the Peoples' – starting from the ontological tenets described in Part 1 in order to legitimise its content.

Descriptive and normative framework: reflecting on political consequences

Post-Marxism combines the descriptive ability of post-structuralist discourse analysis with the normative ability of Marxist (Gramscian) political thought. Parts 1 and 2 of this article are mostly descriptive; Part 3 exposes the political dimension of the agenda and explains its political consequences from a normative perspective. As the UN's agenda hides the political dimension of the development and sustainability debate, the conclusion reflects on how to repoliticise it, also in normative terms.

In this way, the article engages with previous critiques of the political dimension of the UN development agenda and contributes with several insights and theoretical-methodological variations. The discourse analysis in Part 1 complements the one implemented by Ziai on the MD (2011) and the ASD (2016). Following a post-structuralist, Foucauldian approach, Ziai develops a diachronic analysis of the continuities, discontinuities and dynamics that inform the rules of formation, continuous transformations and story lines of this discourse (Ziai, 2011: 28; 2016: 195; Telleria, 2017a: 352-354). By contrast, my analysis in Part 1 is synchronic inasmuch as I expose the fixed and invariant ontological tenets that have sustained

the UN development agenda over the last sixty years. Nevertheless, both approaches highlight the importance of the term ‘we’ in this discursive construction. Da Costa and McMichael (2007), Weber (2015) and Poge and Sangupta (2015) focus on how certain epistemological (methodological) elements legitimise the UN agenda. My inquiry in Part 2 complements these approaches by highlighting the ontological (not methodological) dimension of the discourse, which also legitimises the content of the UN reports. Finally, the normative reflection in Part 3 contributes to the debate about the intentionality of the power dynamics within the UN development agenda, which was sparked by Gabay (2012) in this journal.

PART 1: THE UN DEVELOPMENT AGENDA’S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE SOCIAL

In order to properly conduct a discursive analysis of the UN development agenda, I first explain two different philosophical approaches to the social (the essentialist and the antagonistic) and then demonstrate how the agenda starts from an essentialist approach. The different ontological tenets of each perspective generate a different way to construct a discourse – a different understanding of the social, therefore a different way to tackle social issues – which I analyse in Part 2.

The essentialist and antagonistic perspectives

The essentialist perspective relies on the existence of certain self-evident elements – a particular understanding of human beings, moral principles, rights, social dynamics, etc. – that lead us to acquire some fundamental truths (see Figure 1). In this way, concrete rationalities, logics and discourses are naturalised and considered to be universal, based on the ‘implicit assumption of a privileged point of access’ to truth and certainty (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: 175). This perspective assumes that starting from these fundamental truths, neutral and universal proposals that benefit all can be elaborated.

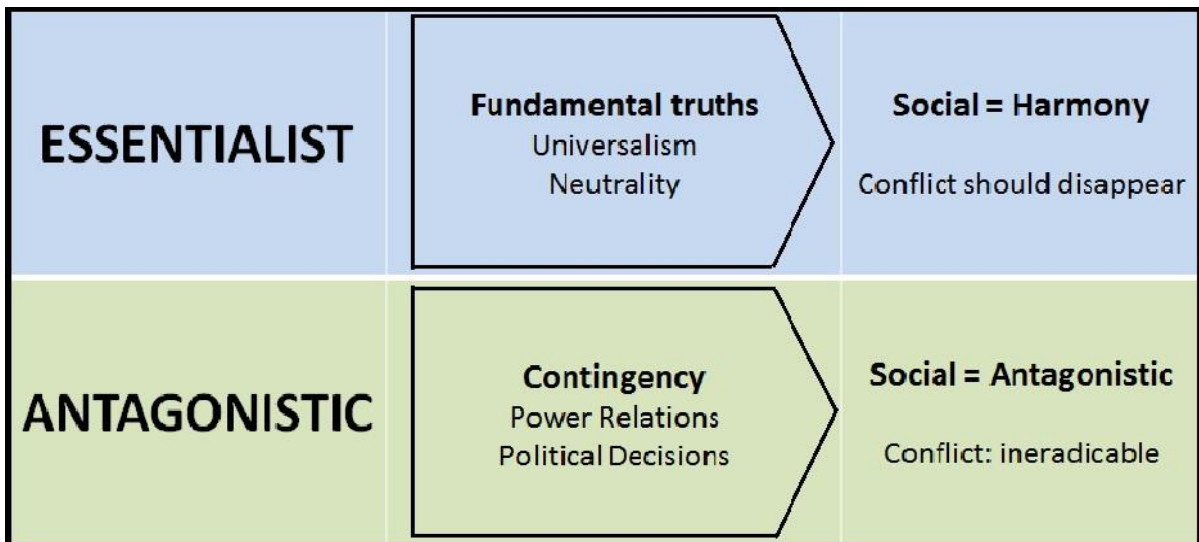


Figure 1. The Essentialist and Antagonistic Perspectives

Consequently, the essentialist perspective understands the social to be a ‘neutral terrain’ (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: xvi): an inherently non-conflictual, peaceful and harmonious field. This does not mean that those who adopt an essentialist perspective think the social realm is actually stable and peaceful; instead, they assume that following the content of fundamental truths makes it possible to shape social relations and coexistence in such a way that conflicts and domination dynamics could potentially disappear. In other words, this perspective assumes that the social has the potential to be stable, peaceful, non-conflictual and harmonious: the fundamental truths establish the necessary solid ground to achieve a desirable stage in which confrontation stops (Mouffe, 2013: 132). Within the essentialist approach:

Politics operates supposedly on a neutral terrain and solutions are available that could satisfy everybody. Relations of power and their constitutive role in society are obliterated and the conflicts that they entail reduced to a simple competition of interests that can be harmonized through dialogue. (Mouffe, 2009b: 110-1)

By contrast, the antagonistic perspective assumes that there are no essential truths. Since no political or moral positions are inherently self-evident and necessary, every political project is contingent on certain assumptions. This perspective holds that each social group may have its own truth, in relation to what a good life is, for example. Therefore the social is an

intrinsically plural realm in which ‘no social agent should be able to claim any mastery of the foundation of society’ (Mouffe, 2009b: 21).

Envisaged from an anti-essentialist theoretical perspective (...) pluralism is not merely a fact, something that we must bear grudgingly or try to reduce, but an axiological principle. It is taken to be constitutive at the conceptual level of the very nature of modern democracy and considered as something that we should celebrate and enhance (Mouffe, 2009b: 19).

Hence, as the social is comprised of diverse, plural social agents aiming to structure coexistence in different ways, it is inherently a conflictual and antagonistic field. There are no neutral and universal positions and solutions that benefit all. Every social order is the crystallisation and solidification of a set of power relations that ‘always entails some form of exclusion’ (Mouffe, 2009b: 104). For that reason, no political decision can be impartial and neutral: every political transformation implies a choice between different conflicting alternatives that benefits some groups’ interests and priorities to the detriment of other’s (Mouffe, 2009b: 136).

Political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved by experts. Proper political questions always involve decisions that require making a choice between conflicting alternatives (Mouffe, 2013: 3).

Consequently, from an antagonistic perspective, it is assumed that power relations cannot be eradicated from the social. On the contrary, they are considered a constitutive element of the social. There is no possible harmonious, stable and peaceful social order in which everyone’s aspirations and interests are impartially and equally considered and conflict disappears: every order implies the contingent stabilization of certain power relations in which particular hegemonic groups shape coexistence based on their fundamental convictions.³

³ From a post-Marxist perspective, the essentialist perspective does not *depoliticise* the debate: rather, it *hides the political dimension* of the debate. In other words, the essentialist perspective is itself political: by portraying itself as neutral, it plays a political, exclusionary role (as I explain in Part 3). In this article I use ‘to depoliticise’ as synonymous with ‘to hide the political dimension of’.

The UN development agenda's essentialist tenets

The UN development agenda adopts an essentialist perspective of social issues. The agenda entails: (1) the adoption of certain principles as the essential foundations that legitimate the solutions proposed by the agenda; (2) the assumption that the agenda is neutral and impartial; and (3) the promise of a peaceful, harmonious and non-conflicting future social order (conditioned on the adoption of these essential principles).

The essential foundations

The UN Charter – more precisely, its principles and purposes (Chapter I of the UN Charter, articles 1 and 2) – establishes the foundation of the UN development agenda's discursive structure. Both documents affirm it explicitly:

(We) reaffirm our faith in the Organization and its Charter as *indispensable foundations* of a more peaceful, prosperous and just world (MD, Art. 1, emphasis added).

The new Agenda is guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations (ASD, Art. 10).

Moreover, the UN development agenda assumes that these principles and purposes to be timeless and universal:

We reaffirm our commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, which have proved timeless and universal (MD, Art. 3).

In this way, the agenda assumes these '*fundamental values to be essential to international relations in the twenty-first century*' (MD, Art. 6, emphasis added), which should foster 'an ethic of global citizenship' (ASD, Art. 36). The agenda relies so strongly on these fundamental assumptions that the ASD recalls the constitutive moment of the UN, in 1945, and portrays the adoption of the new agenda as a repetition of that historical moment:

[Art. 49] Seventy years ago, an earlier generation of world leaders came together to create the United Nations. From the ashes of war and division they fashioned this

Organization and the values of peace, dialogue and international cooperation which underpin it. The supreme embodiment of those values is the Charter of the United Nations.

[Art 50] Today we are also taking a decision of great historic significance. (...)

Universal and neutral positions

Thanks to these essential, timeless, and universal purposes and principles, the UN development agenda portrays its positions and proposals as inherently neutral and beneficial ‘for all’. For example, in the MD, the agenda acknowledges that globalization is generating unfair exclusion and inequality. However, the proposals promoted by the agenda aim to change this trend from a neutral position:

The central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force *for all* the world’s people. (...) At present its benefits are very unevenly shared, while its costs are unevenly distributed (MD, Art. 5, emphasis added).

Similarly, the ASD understands its proposals to be neutral as they seek to be beneficial *for all*:

As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met *for all* nations and peoples and *for all* segments of society (ASD, Art. 4, emphasis added).

Starting from this impartial position, the agenda portrays its proposals as a global consensus that ‘is accepted by all countries and is applicable to all’ (ASD, Art. 5) and assumes that “win-win” cooperation [will] bring huge gains to all countries and all parts of the world’ (ASD, Art. 18).

Harmonious future without conflict

In this way, the UN development agenda assumes that these essential and universal values and principles enable a set of neutral practices that will result in a world free of conflict. For example:

We are determined to establish a just and lasting peace all over the world in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter (MD, Art. 4).

We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected. We are committed to (...) freeing the entire human race from want (MD, Art. 11).

We are determined to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions (...). We are determined to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives (...). We are determined to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence (ASD, Preamble).

We envisage a world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want, where all life can thrive. We envisage a world free of fear and violence (ASD, Art. 7)

The UN development agenda envisions a future free of war, conflict, poverty, hunger, disease, want, fear and violence: a harmonious future in which everyone can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives. Therefore, we can conclude that the UN development agenda's discourse perfectly fits what Mouffe and Laclau call the essentialist perspective: it relies on certain fundamental values that would enable neutral practices that should free the entire world from social problems and conflict.

The basic ontological foundations described in Part 1 have remain fixed and invariant since the end of WWII and the signing of the UN Charter (1945). In this sense, as mentioned in the introduction, this article complements Ziai's diachronic analysis of the UN agenda. Although his research focuses on the evolution of and changes in development discourses, his analysis of the continuities leads him to conclude – in concordance with my analysis – that 'some central discursive structures to be found in the SDG debate date back to the origins of development aid in the middle of the 20th century' (Ziai, 2016: 204).

PART 2: CONSTRUCTING A HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE

Part 2 analyses how a discourse is constructed on the basis of the ontological tenets described in Part 1. It focuses on the use of the term ‘we’, and the phrase ‘We the Peoples’ to legitimise the content of the UN development agenda.

The principles and purposes of... *who?*

The adoption of an essentialist perspective determines how the UN development agenda constructs its discursive structure. As shown above, the strength and solidity of this discourse relies on the following three argumentative steps:

- 1) Values: since the principles and purposes of the UN Charter are timeless and universal, they are the fundamental values and indispensable foundations for international relations in the 21st century;
- 2) Practices: for that reason, they enable the design of a set of practices – goals, targets, policies, strategies, plans, projects – that would benefit all;
- 3) Goals: the implementation of these practices would promote a peaceful and harmonious future free of conflicts and social problems.

However, *the first step relies on an assumption* that is not necessarily true: that the principles and purposes of the UN Charter are timeless and universal. Every document of the agenda, since 1961, assumes that these principles and purposes are inherently good, and therefore acceptable by anyone. However, an analysis of the UN Charter shows that they are *historically located* (not timeless) and *power-laden* (biased, not neutral, not universal).

- Historically located: the UN Charter was written at a very specific historical moment – the end of WWII – by two of the winners of the armed conflict. The USA and the UK – which started thinking about creating an international organization to replace the League of Nations ‘in the late 30s and early 40s’ (Simon Rofe, in Plesch and Weiss, 2015: 17) – drafted the Atlantic Charter in 1941, the Declaration by United Nations in 1942, and the Dumbarton Oaks Conference Agreements in 1944, and organised the San Francisco Conference in 1945 that resulted in the creation of the UN by 26 countries.

- Power laden: The main purpose of the UN is ‘to maintain international peace and security’ (UN Charter, Art. 1.1). It is not generally authorized ‘to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state’ (Art. 2.7). *However*, articles 2.7, 39 and 42 of the UN Charter enable the five permanent members of the Security Council (USA, UK, France, China and Russia)⁴ to veto the use of force (UN Charter, Art. 27). In other words, the drafted document ‘gave disproportionately more power to five of the major victorious powers of World War II, [and] recognized Great Power prerogatives as an important element of the UN Charter’ (Hanhimäki, 2008: 32).

The UN Charter codified the power structure of the post-WWII world order, and gives superior power to certain countries to ensure that their general interests prevail (Hanhimäki, 2008: 3). Hence, the charter’s principles and purposes are not timeless and universal: they represent the interests and aims of very specific and powerful political agents in a very specific historical context.

This point is crucial for this article’s argument: the supposedly solid essentialist discourse of the UN agenda turns into *a contingent construction* dependent on certain circumstances. It is not necessary: it is solid and meaningful *only if we assume* that the principles and purposes of the UN Charter are timeless and universal. In other words: only if we naturalise the interests, motivations and purposes of the winners of WWII and consider them to be universal and good for everyone. The development discourse of the UN agenda can only exist – is only sensitive and meaningful – within the political space opened by a concrete structure of power relations. This characteristic has important political consequences that will be addressed below.

For now, we can redefine the argumentative steps that *really* sustain the contingent discursive construction on the UN development agenda:

⁴ The USSR in 1945, Russia nowadays.

- 1) Values: the principles and purposes *of the most powerful countries* after WWII are the fundamental values and indispensable foundations for international relations in the 21st century;
- 2) Practices: the UN development agenda proposes a set of goals and practices *within* the general political framework shaped by the most powerful countries after WWII;
- 3) Goals: the implementation of these proposals will ‘transform the world’ *within the limits* established by the interests, motivations and purposes of the most powerful countries after WWII.

The principles and purposes of... *the people*?

Thus what is the basis of the legitimacy of the UN development agenda? Da Costa and McMichael (2007), Weber (2015), and Poge and Sangupta (2015) analyse the way in which certain epistemological and methodological assumptions legitimise the agenda’s content. Here I explain how the agenda also bases its legitimacy on the ontological tenets described in Part 1; I argue that its contingency jeopardizes its explicit legitimacy.

In his recent analysis of the ASD, Wolfgang Sachs points to ‘the obtrusive use of the word “we”’, and asks: ‘who is being addressed? Governments? Well-wishers? Or Humanity?’ (Sachs, 2017: 3). This question is important for analysing the sources of legitimacy of the UN agenda. From its inception in 1961 until the present, the agenda’s *real legitimacy* has been derived from the legitimacy of the UN itself: every document has been ‘adopted’ by the UN General Assembly. However, its *symbolic legitimacy* has evolved over time. During the Cold War, the agenda almost exclusively based its legitimacy in its real source – the General Assembly – arguably because the international tension between the capitalist and communist blocs imposed such administrative caution and correctness. In the documents from 1961, 1970, and 1980 the UN General Assembly ‘*calls upon* States Members of the United Nations and members of the specialized agencies’ to act (1710 XVI Resolution, 1961: Art. 2). The 1990 document – the *Fourth UN Development Decade*, at the end of the Cold War – inaugurates a new formula: it is ‘We, the States Members of the United Nations’ which urges action and designs the strategy (Resolution 45/199, 1990: Art. 1), which is used again in the 2000 document (MD, 2000: Art. 1). However, there is an important difference between these

two documents: whereas the 1990 text only uses the word ‘we’ in the first article, as an introductory declaration, the MD starts 30 out of 32 articles with the word ‘we’.⁵ Finally, the ASD (2015) uses the term ‘we’ profusely, and in a much more abstract and imprecise way. In contrast to the previous two documents – where the ‘we’ was precisely defined in the first line of the first article: ‘the States Members of the United Nations’ – the ASD uses the term ‘we’ without clearly explaining who is being addressed. The second paragraph of the Preamble states: ‘All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan. We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet’ (ASD, 2015: Preamble). Therefore, it should be assumed that the imprecise formula ‘all countries and all stakeholders’ represents the ‘we’. Article 52 offers a clearer explanation of the use of the symbolic ‘we’. It states:

"We the Peoples" are the celebrated opening words of the UN Charter. It is "We the Peoples" who are embarking today on the road to 2030. Our journey will involve Governments as well as Parliaments, the UN system and other international institutions, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business and the private sector, the scientific and academic community – and *all people*. Millions have already engaged with, and will own, this Agenda. It is an *Agenda of the people, by the people, and for the people* – and this, we believe, will ensure its success. (ASD, Art. 52, emphasis added)

In the ASD, ‘we’ symbolizes ‘the people’. Although ‘the people’ have not democratically chosen the development agenda, it is portrayed as a democratic creation *of the people, by the people, and for the people*, which implies that the people – ‘we’ – are the ones urging action and designing a plan. Adopting this formula symbolically transfers the source of the documents’ legitimacy from its original and real source – the UN – to the people. In 1961, the General Assembly promoted the ‘*United Nations Development Decade*’ programme; in 2015 ‘the people’ were raised to the central position in terms of legitimacy, and the heads of state and government just ‘serve’ them:

⁵ The March 2000 report by Secretary-General Kofi A. Annan was entitled ‘We the Peoples. The Role of United Nations in the 21st Century’ (Annan, 2000).

On behalf of the peoples we serve, we have adopted a historic decision on a comprehensive, far-reaching and people-centred set of universal and transformative Goals and targets (ASD, Art. 2, emphasis added).

By articulating the formula ‘we, the people’, the UN aims to strength its symbolic legitimacy: it seeks to appear to be implementing the principles and purposes of ‘the people’ rather than those of the most powerful countries after WWII.

PART 3: THE (HIDDEN) POLITICAL DIMENSION OF THE UN DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

In order to reflect on the political consequences of its development agenda in normative terms, Part 3 explains how the UN conceals the political dimension of reflections on development and sustainability. Following the debate triggered by Gabay in 2012, Part 3 also reflects on the intentionality of the power dynamics within the UN agenda.

Restricting the political debate

The essentialist discursive articulation within the UN development agenda results in the concealment of the political dimension of development and sustainability debates through two interlinked and complementary processes: the moralization of politics and the paradox of liberalism.

The moralization of politics

In *On the Political* (2005) Mouffe describes the tendency to obscure political interests behind a veil of moral purity.

What I want to indicate is that, instead of being constructed in political terms, the ‘we’–‘they’ opposition constitutive of politics is now constructed according to moral categories of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’. (...) It is in that sense that I am proposing to understand the ‘moralization’ of politics – to indicate (...) that nowadays political antagonisms are being formulated in terms of moral categories (Mouffe, 2005: 75).

The moralization of politics is a ‘tactical move’ (Thaler, 2010: 790) in which politics are transferred to a moral register. By invoking certain fundamental values – which are understood to be timeless and universal, and therefore naturally acceptable to everyone – and by representing the problem in an overly simplified way (who does *not* want to end poverty, hunger, fear and violence, after all?), the UN describes its development endeavour in moral, rather than political, terms. The agenda constructs a ‘we’ on the basis of these moral values, which is comprised of all the well-intentioned human beings who want a peaceful, harmonious world for everyone.

The agenda implements another essentialist discursive depoliticising technique: the ‘they’ – those who supposedly do not want a peaceful and harmonious world – is never explicitly mentioned. Indeed, the development efforts and struggles promoted by the UN are framed in opposition to abstract notions – such as hunger, poverty, underdevelopment, inequality, discrimination, climate change – but never any real entities, such as interest groups that could represent the ‘they’. In the discursive construction of the UN development agenda, all good people around the world – ‘We the peoples’ – are fighting against evil, abstract enemies.

The paradox of liberalism

Restricting the political debate – through the moralization of politics – reinforces the effect of what Mouffe calls the ‘paradox of liberalism’. This paradox happens when a political project – which aims to structure the social realm, institutions and coexistence in a concrete way – portrays its position as neutral, impartial and inclusive, *yet excludes alternative perspectives*. It eliminates adversaries ‘while remaining neutral’ (Mouffe, 2009b: 31).

By moralising the development agenda and affirming that it is of the people, by the people, and for the people, the UN portrays its plan of action as democratic and inclusive: it represents the peoples’ demands and considers everyone’s interests and motivations. The UN implies that this agenda will not leave anyone behind. *However*, the debate can only take place within the contingent discursive space opened up by the agenda’s ontological tenets. Any political position that does not share the UN development agenda’s fundamental truths is systematically excluded. In other words, proposals that aim to overcome the actual world order – the status quo in which ‘poverty, hunger, fear and violence’ emerged in recent decades – cannot be articulated within the agenda. Hence, they are excluded.

By moralising the debate and excluding alternative perspectives, the UN development agenda naturalises and normalises the status quo and neglects the inherent antagonism of the social – the fact that political struggles and clashes between different groups with different motivations and interests constitute the social. Mouffe affirms:

Once the very idea of an alternative to the existing configuration of power disappears, what disappears also is the very possibility of a legitimate form of expression for the resistances against the dominant power relations. The status quo has become naturalized and made into the way 'things really are' (Mouffe, 2009b: 5).

This approach precludes a genuine political debate that could address the political causes of underdevelopment and poverty: according to the agenda, the universal goals promoted by the UN can be achieved through expertise and technical arrangements. By flattening the social and hiding the political dimension of the debate, the agenda favours a unipolar world based on 'the absence of legitimate alternatives to the dominant hegemonic order' (Mouffe, 2009a: 552).

The intentionality of the power dynamics within the UN development agenda The analysis thus far in this article has shown that the UN's supposedly neutral agenda reproduces the power dynamics necessary to sustain the status quo: it restricts the political debate and portrays a hegemonic proposal as its single, neutral, feasible project. Hence, the question is whether this depoliticisation is intentional. Is it instead the consequence of nonintentional discursive practices? Gabay debates this issue in his analysis of the MDGs when he states:

[W]hile the goals themselves emerged from a neoliberal developmentalist paradigm, it would be inaccurate to ascribe straightforward intentionality to all the implicit logics contained within them (Gabay, 2012: 1250).⁶

⁶ Gabay aims to overcome overly reductionistic interpretations of the power dynamics in development studies, which work exclusively within a (Foucauldian) 'sovereign' framework, where power dynamics are mainly intentional. He proposes de-centring power and presents the MDGs as an 'ambitious development engineering'.

Given the findings in this article, can we affirm that the UN development agenda is an intentional project of domination? Or is it instead the unintentional consequence of the hegemonic logics that pervaded the designers of the agenda? The analysis in this article detects both kinds of dynamics.

1) *Intentional power dynamics.* As explained in the introduction, from a post-Marxist perspective, the articulation of a discourse is an intentional political practice that implies agency and taking decisions. Every disruptive moment – any crisis of a given order – exposes the fragility and contingency of existing discourses, and thus raises the possibility of articulating new discourses and alliances that may shape subsequent political practices. WWII was a massive disruptive historical moment, which transformed international power structures and introduced a new status quo. The series of meetings and conferences organised by a few powerful agents – especially the UK and the USA – between 1941 and 1945, during which the international institutional framework for the new era was designed, are examples of intentional practices intended to channel power dynamics in a specific way. The creation of the UN was one example of this re-structuration. The drafted principles and purposes of the UN Charter formed the political framework in which ‘legitimate’ political action could take place. They enabled a political field: in Foucauldian terms, they established the conditions of possibility of legitimate, acceptable political action. Hence, the articulation of these conditions of possibility was an intentional action.

2) *Unintentional power dynamics.* Once a hegemonic discourse is set, its inherent power dynamics are unintentionally reproduced by most of the agents – as these ‘logics (...) pervade them’ (Gabay, 2012: 1255). The manifold drafters of the ASD probably did not intentionally reproduce the ontological tenets that essentialise a particular understanding of the social: they were simply trying to combat certain social issues *within the legitimate political field* – within a concrete power–knowledge formation.

However, a discourse is never complete, solid and sutured (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014: 86): it is contingent, and is therefore dependent on specific conditions that may change. A discourse that naturalises and establishes a specific order can always be challenged by antagonistic, alternative articulations that may restructure the political field. Hence, no order is perfectly stable: rather, it is always struggling to maintain its hegemonic position. That is why the

social is a constant struggle between antagonistic positions that take the form of (intentional or unintentional) practices. For that reason, among the unintentional practices, we find examples of intentional actions intended to reinforce the hegemonic discourse at the micro level. The MD, for example, affirmed in 2000 that ‘a comprehensive reform of the Security Council in all its aspects’ (MD, Art. 30) was needed in order to achieve the declaration’s goals. However, this proposal was not mentioned in the MDGs the following year, or in the ASD in 2015. Given that the Security Council is a fundamental part of the status quo, it stands to reason that omitting this proposal was an intentional act designed to preserve the hegemonic discourse.

Post-Marxism offers a theoretical framework that builds bridges between those who find intentionality in every political practice – ‘the reductionists’ (Gabay, 2012: 1253) – and those who, following Foucault, understand political dynamics as ‘strategies without strategists’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 109).

CONCLUSION: REOPENING THE EXPLICIT POLITICAL DEBATE

The UN development agenda starts from an essentialist perspective that articulates the discourse on development and sustainability in a way that conceals the political dimension of the debate. The debate can only happen *within the political limits established by the most powerful countries after WWII*. Consequently, it is not possible to critically think about the profound systematic causes of the problems that need to be overcome. This approach implicitly reinforces the status quo and conceptualises the problem in exclusively technical – not political – terms. From the UN development agenda’s perspective, this is the answer to the question posed in the title of the article: yes, we can transform our world without affecting international power relations.

Is it possible to reopen the political debate about development and sustainability? Is it possible to force a field for debate that overcomes the actual political limitations? From a post-Marxist perspective, it is possible. It implies: 1) overcoming the essentialist tenets, and 2) starting an alternative hegemonic project.

In order to fulfil the assumption that essential truths exist and can take humanity to a stage that is free of conflict, first we need to *accept the antagonistic essence of the social* – of the economic, political and cultural realms at the global and local levels. Only by assuming that the social is constituted by diverse and plural groups – in terms of class, gender, ethnic or any other identity – with legitimate different interests can a truly political debate take place. In such a debate, different ontologies and different ways of conceptualising a good life can converse and find agreement. It does not imply reaching a stage at which conflict disappears: on the contrary, it means accepting that conflict will never disappear – as it is constitutive of the social – and that we should be able to (and get used to) constantly manage it.

Once it is accepted that the social is inherently antagonistic, the struggle for a more fair and just world – in which more groups find a way to achieve their aims – implies constructing an alternative hegemonic project in which different groups find links between their claims. For this, it is necessary *to detect an enemy/adversary* – which the UN development agenda avoids doing. As mentioned above, the endeavour of the UN agenda is addressed against impersonal elements – such as hunger, poverty, fear and so on – which lack a volitional dimension. These abstract enemies obscure the agency and the responsibility for the issues the agenda aims to address: thus, the problem itself is *dis-solved*. The problem is understood in terms of ‘lack’ – lack of food, lack of resources, lack of security, and so on – and technical solutions are designed to end shortages. No one’s volition – no one’s decisions, no one’s agency – is denounced; hence, the political dimension of the problem disappears.⁷

It is not easy thinking the world otherwise, accepting pluralism and antagonism, and articulating alternative, realistic political projects. However, it is equally difficult to believe that the current structure of power relations will lead to a world free of poverty, hunger, fear and violence in the near future.

⁷ Many researchers, practitioners and policymakers affirm (personal communications) that it would be impossible to find a global agreement if the final document defines specific causal responsibilities. This fact proves that the social is an antagonistic realm: different groups with different understandings of the problem and different interests, which cannot be solved in practice through rational consensus.

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