

The fantasmatic narrative of 'sustainable development'. A political analysis of the 2030 Global Development Agenda

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Abstract

The article offers a critical analysis of the United Nations 2030 Global Development Agenda, whose stated aim is to "transform the world" in such a way that no one is left behind. Drawing on post-Marxist theory, we argue that the 2030 Global Development Agenda is a fantasmatic narrative seeking to conceal the conflictual causes and the antagonistic origins of global development and sustainability issues. Within this fantasmatic narrative, 'sustainable development' is the empty signifier that articulates and sustains the agenda's discourse. Our analysis of the ontological assumptions underpinning the documents that frame the agenda shows that, rather than transforming, the agenda naturalizes and consolidates the existing status quo: a status quo that has created (and continues to perpetuate) the global problems that the agenda aims to solve.

Keywords: SDGs; Sustainable Development; United Nations; Laclau & Mouffe; post-Marxism; discourse analysis.

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INTRODUCTION: THE 2030 GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) published three documents that will shape international development strategies and policies until 2030. The first is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, generally known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which propose a set of multidimensional and multi-actor development goals that aim to build a new development model that 'leaves no one behind'. The second is the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (or Paris Agreement, PA), which seeks to confront the ecological and civilizatory crisis the planet faces by linking development and environmental sustainability. The third is the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA), which defines the complex development finance system that aims to combine development finance and climate finance. Together they form what, in what follows, we call the 2030 Global Development Agenda (2030 GDA) (Mediavilla and Garcia-Arias, 2019).

Each of these pillars is the last installment of a series of development, environmental and financial strategies and agreements published in recent decades. The SDGs substitute the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs, 2000), which did the same with the previous four 'Development Decades' by the UN General Assembly (1961, 1970, 1980 and 1990) (Stokke, 2009). The PA carries on the debates started in the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 and the agreements in the Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992), the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009. Finally, the AAAA is the last chapter of the series of international conventions for development finance: the Monterrey Consensus (2002), the Doha Summit (2008) and the Busan Forum (2011). However, for the first time since the creation of the UN, these three dimensions of international policymaking are coordinated in at least two important aspects. First, all of them were passed during the second half of 2015 by the UN: the AAAA on the 16th of July, the SDGs on the 25th of September, and the PA on the 12th of December. Second, all of them explicitly explain that their proposals are coordinated within a single view. The AAAA affirms that it seeks 'to establish a holistic and forward-looking framework and to commit to concrete actions to deliver on the promise of (the SDGs) agenda' (UN, 2015b, article 2); the SDGs state that the AAAA is an integral part of the SDGs and that its full implementation 'is critical for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets' (UN, 2015a, Article 40); the SDGs also explain that they underscore 'the commitment of all States to work for an ambitious and universal climate agreement' in 'the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties in Paris' (UN, 2015a, article 32); and the Paris Agreement's (UNFCCC, 2015) preamble explicitly welcomes the

adoption of the SDGs and the AAAA by the UN General Assembly (UNFCCC, 2016: preamble). These two aspects – coordination in time and content – back the idea that the three pillars form a single global agenda – the 2030 GDA.

Since 2015, many voices have praised the 2030 GDA as timely and novel. From this perspective, it is a paradigm shift in international development, one based on novel cognitive, technological, socio-economic and cultural narratives that will ‘leave no one behind’; it brings new aspirations and policy recommendations seeking ambitious goals; it overcomes obsolete binary approaches – e.g. developed/developing, North/South, donor/recipient; and it has a universal, horizontal, inclusive and multi-stakeholder approach to global issues (Kutesa, 2015; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Langford, 2016). The President of the UN General Assembly summarized this optimistic perspective by stating that “(...) this transformative agenda will open a new chapter in development history” (Kutesa, 2015). However, many other voices stressed that, regardless of the novel aspects of the 2030 GDA, it is based on a market episteme which reproduces and consolidates the neoliberal and hegemonic development paradigm of the Washington and Post-Washington Consensus logic, based on the marketization and privatization of international development (Berndt, 2015; Carroll and Jarvis, 2015; Weber, 2017). In relation to the SDGs, for example, critics point out that implementing them in practice is impossible (Kedir et al., 2017), that the goals and targets are ambiguous and lack a clear definition (Soederberg, 2017) and that they do not confront existing structures of power relations (Telleria, 2018). Regarding the Paris Agreement, it has been described as a missed opportunity (Spash, 2016), because its goals are impossible to achieve (Raftery et al., 2017) and because there is no solid evidence that shows that an *absolute decoupling* is achievable in terms of materials, energy, water, greenhouse gases, land, water pollutants, or biodiversity loss (Ward et al., 2016; Parrique et al., 2019). Finally, the AAAA has been criticized because it prioritizes the private sector and their mechanisms, and because it financializes the fundamental development finance instruments (Bayliss and van Waeyenberge, 2018; García-Arias et al., 2014; Garcia-Arias, 2015; Kunz et al., 2021; Mediavilla and Garcia-Arias, 2019).

Regardless of the critical or optimistic approach to the 2030 GDA, most literature on these UN proposals focuses on the practical dimension of the agenda: on its structure and corpus (the negotiations, the definition of the goals, the selection of the targets); on its implementation (indicators, budget-funding, coordination); and on the expected results (accountability, sustainability of the results, political, economic and social implications). Accordingly, these critiques rely on the analysis of the adequacy of the specific development, environmental and financial goals and targets established by the 2030 GDA. On the contrary, the analysis in this

article focuses on the ontological assumptions of the 2030 GDA: on how the agenda understands and conceptualizes the social and political reality it seeks to transform. We fathom the unthought-out assumptions that may have negative impacts on the diagnosis and may jeopardize the results of the practices the agenda proposes to solve the problem. In brief, the analysis in this article does not focus on ‘what’ the agenda proposes and ‘how’ it should be achieved; it focuses on the ontological, political and social implicit premises that set the conditions of possibility of these ‘what’ and ‘how.’

For that reason, our analysis does not focus on the specific goals and targets of the 2030 GDA, but on the previous implicit sociological and political basic assumptions that draw the scenario where the goals and targets sound coherent and feasible. The analysis shows that the scenario drawn by the 2030 GDA is a *fantasmatic narrative* intended to conceal the internal conflicts and contradictions of the current status quo. To do so, the evocative rhetoric of the 2030 GDA represents the world based on a single antagonistic divide between, on the one side, *humankind* understood as a single and homogeneous group and, on the other side, a *horrific outside* that menaces the existence of the former. To conduct the analysis, in the first part we present the theoretical post-Marxist framework that guides the inquiry; in the second part we describe the fantasmatic narrative of the 2030 GDA and explain that ‘sustainable development’ functions as an empty signifier in it; in the third section we deconstruct the antagonistic divide (humankind – horrific outside) constructed by the agenda, in order to make explicit the contradictions that the agenda conceals and, in this way, open the development debates that the 2030 GDA does not address. Overall, the article concludes that the 2030 GDA is a conditioned consensus where the different parts of the agreement have to assume the ontological and political foundations of the status quo. In other words, the 2030 GDA explicitly aims to transform the world, whereas implicitly reproduces the basic assumption that sustain the global order that generated the problems that the agenda (allegedly) wants to solve.

There is an interesting literature analyzing the political and conflictual nature of *the process of elaboration* of the documents that conform the 2030 GDA – e.g., Macharia et al. (2018), Caballero (2016), Denk (2016). However, as explained above, our analysis focuses on the documents resulting from these negotiations – not on the process – for two reasons. First, because it is in the 2030 GDA where the fantasmatic narrative takes form. Hence, the ideological object that promotes a specific conceptualization of globalization, development and sustainability – and, accordingly, excludes alternative conceptualizations – is the 2030 GDA, not the process of elaborating it. Second, because these are the documents that the UN General Assembly passed and governments, NGOs, international organizations and other activists and

practitioners consult to design their strategies, plans and actions. That is to say, because what influences the practices of other organizations and political subjects is the 2030 GDA, not the previous process of elaboration. Whether the conflictual negotiations in the elaboration of the 2030 GDA reproduced the global political, economic and social tensions and conflicts that the fantasmatic narrative conceals is an important issue that requires different research and, accordingly, is not addressed in this article. However, in the concluding remarks we contribute with some critical insights in this respect.

Many authors relied on post-Marxist concepts to critically analyse international development and sustainability issues before: Brown (2016), Davidson (2010) and Gunder (2006) show that 'sustainability' historically played the role of an empty signifier – moreover, Brown reflects on the connection between 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' as empty signifiers; Mert (2015) analyses the processes of sedimentation and the construction of empty signifiers in environmental governance; Remling (2018) relies on the concept of fantasy to research the EU climate adaptation policy; Methmann, Rothe and Stephan's (2013) edited volume gathers several works that deconstruct different aspects of the climate change global discourses; and Telleria (2018, 2019) draws on the work of Laclau and Mouffe to critically research the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and on the work of Laclau and Derrida to deconstruct the human development discourse of the UNDP (Telleria, 2021). However, the post-Marxist theoretical framework was never used to address the 2030 GDA as a whole – i.e., the AAAA, the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. That is the main contribution of this article.

ANTAGONISM AND POLITICS

During the 1980s, the political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe elaborated a post-structuralist approach to Marxist theory. They sought to overcome the class and economic reductionisms of traditional Marxist theory by stating that the class division is not the only social antagonism and that economic structure does not necessarily determine social and political issues. On the contrary, they proposed the existence of diverse, changing and plural conflicts within society, which could account for the formation of political identities and struggles. Their proposal received severe criticism from traditional Marxist authors (see, for example, Geras 1987 and 1990) but also a warm welcome from thinkers that looked for novel theoretical frameworks that could 'reformulate the philosophical ground of politics and multicultural debates' at the dawn of the new historical period after the Cold War (Critchley and Marchart, 2004: 6).

The post-Marxist discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe draws on three traditions of thinking (Howarth, 2000 and 2013). In the first place, on the post-structuralist critique of Jacques Derrida and the late Michel Foucault to the structuralist work of Ferdinand de Saussure on linguistics and of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes on social phenomena. Second, on the hermeneutic and phenomenological work of Martin Heidegger, who focused on the meaning and self-understanding of the lived world from an ontological perspective. Finally, on 20th century Marxist theorists, like Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, who put the basis for a non-reductionist and non-essentialist understanding of society and historical change. This theoretical framework was later further developed by scholars like David Howarth, Jason Glynos, Aletta Norval, Yanis Stavrakakis and Oliver Marchart, who set the theoretical framework for the analysis in this article – specifically, the concepts of hegemony as a form of rule (Howarth, 2013) and of fantasmatic narratives (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Howarth, 2013). The common thread of these authors' work is the critique of essentialist conceptualizations of social and political issues, which we explain below.

Identity, antagonism and the absence of neutrality

An essentialist perspective relies on the idea that any social being – be it an individual or a group – has an essential identity and that its natural evolution is the fulfillment and realization of such essential identity. In this sense, an essentialist framework assumes that *first* subjective identities emerge and *then* they relate with other subjects. A relational perspective, in contrast, defends that social beings constitute their identities through their relations with other social beings. In ontological terms, this means that subjective identities come into existence as they relate with other subjects: 'elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it' (Laclau, 2005: 68). In political terms, this means that every political identity is constituted *in relation to the identities of other groups*. For example, leftist groups constitute their identity – their political project – in relation (as a reaction) to conservative or right-wing groups, just as groups defending cosmopolitan ideas react against nationalist or relativist positions, or a group of neighbors protesting the construction of a motorway constitute their political project against another group running the local municipality. *And vice versa*. None of these identities would exist in a political sense – would be politically meaningful – without the parallel existence of other groups with different political identities/projects.

For that reason, *conflict* is a central element of the relational understanding of politics: it accounts for the constitutions of political projects and their competition for the articulation of a social order. Specifically, Laclau relies on the concept of antagonistic conflict (Laclau, 1996: 115). An antagonistic relation is not a simple conflict; it has two important characteristics. First, it

implies the existence of two groups whose identity is constituted through their mutual conflict (leftist-conservative, neighbors-city council, and so on). Each side 'needs' the other side since each identity at each side of the antagonistic relation would not exist *as such* without the existence of the other side. Second, none of the groups can fully develop its identity (i.e. implement its political project) due to the existence of the group at the other side of the antagonistic relation. As Howarth points out:

Antagonism emphasizes the constitutive role of negativity in political life. Social antagonisms occur when the presence of 'an Other' is discursively constructed as blocking or impeding the attainment of identity by a subject (Howarth, 2015: 10).

Thus, antagonistic relations have a paradoxical characteristic: they are *necessary* to constitute political identities and to enable political life and, at the same time, they *impede* the full realization of any political project. For that reason, from a relational perspective, the social is the locus of the irreducible tension between conflicting political projects – with different principles, interests and goals (Laclau, 2005: 80) – and any political project is the perpetual construction of a social order *vis-à-vis* a political 'Other' (Laclau, 1996: 115, Marchart, 2007: 7). Accordingly, no political decision is ever neutral. From an essentialist perspective, neutrality is possible: the common-universal essence enables the articulation of decisions that benefit all. On the contrary, the relational perspective understands that the political field is constituted by antagonistic groups with conflicting interests, principles and goals, so any decision has different beneficial/detrimental effects on each political group (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014: 170).

Sedimentation and Reactivation

The absence of neutral and beneficial-for-all decisions jeopardizes the stability of any social and political order. Accordingly, the stability and continuation of any order depends on the implementation of ideological dynamics 'to win the active or passive consent of subjects, or at least (...) to ensure the complicity of a range of social actors to its practices and dispositions' (Howarth, 2013: 203). In Laclau's work, *sedimentation* is the discursive process that conceals the decisions that have constructed the status quo, in order to gain the active or passive consents of subjects. It erases the contingent construction of a political order and blurs the traces of its original institution (Laclau, 2005: 154). In other words, sedimentation seeks to make a social order look neutral, natural and beneficial for everyone.

Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a "forgetting of the origins" tends to occur; the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade (Laclau, 2005: 34).

In this way, sedimentation conceals the antagonistic nature of social relations and, accordingly, depoliticizes the political. However, from a relational perspective, the antagonistic and plural nature of political relations can never be fully disregarded, neglected or concealed: 'if heterogeneity is constitutive of the social bond, we are always going to have a political dimension by which society (...) is constantly reinvented' (Laclau, 2005: 154). Eventually, antagonistic tensions will emerge and show that the status quo is a contingent closure based on a specific set of power relations. This act of burst is what Laclau calls *reactivation*, the opposite of that of sedimentation: 'Sedimented theoretical categories are those which conceal the acts of their original institution, while the reactivating moment makes those acts visible again' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014: viii). Reactivation is a process that deconstructs an allegedly natural and neutral discourse, makes explicit the forgotten decisions that constructed a specific order and, consequently, makes it appear 'in a strongly political light,' where the social world 'is suddenly perceived as contingent and conflictual' (Marchart, 2018: 98, 129).

The role of deconstruction is, from this perspective, to *reactivate* the moment of decision that underlies any *sedimented* set of social relations. The political and ethical significance of this first movement is that (...) it enlarges also the area of responsibility—that is, of the decision. (Laclau, 1996: 78)

Hence, reactivation has two important implications. First, the deconstruction of the discourse that presents itself as natural, neutral and universal to show that it is partial and particular – the result of political decisions that benefit some at the expense of others. Second, the detection and reactivation of the neglected antagonisms – that is to say, of the inherent social conflicts that the dominant discourse sought to conceal. On the basis of the relational theoretical framework presented above, in the following sections, first we present the 2030 GDA as a fantasmatic narrative that conceals the conflicts and tensions that generate the problems that the very agenda aims to solve and the contingent decisions that shaped the international status quo. Then, in the last part of the article, we reactivate the (sedimented) development debate by deconstructing such a fantasmatic narrative and by exposing its internal contradictions.

THE FANTASMATIC NARRATIVE OF THE 2030 GDA

Since the publication of *On Populist Reason* in 2005, most of the interest in Laclau's work focused on the concept of 'populism' – i.e., the construction of the 'people' and the formation of collective political identities intended to challenge the existing order (Laclau, 2005: ix) – generating what has been described as '(the) colonization of political analysis by the concept of populism' (De Cleen & Glynos, 2021: 2). However, Laclau was also interested in explaining how successful hegemonic projects were reproduced. He explained that mature capitalism makes difficult *the reproduction of a political centrality* because every identity is essentially unstable, and subject to constant change, transformation and displacement (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014: 131-134). That is why the success of a hegemonic project was for him 'a dangerous victory' (Laclau, 1996: 45) that requires constantly being alert. The continuation of any privileged position and the preclusion of alternative hegemonic articulations involves the constant rearticulation of the successful hegemonic project (Laclau, 2005: 131). The discursive rearticulation intended to reproduce a political centrality is what Howarth calls 'hegemony as a form of rule', which implies, among other discursive practices, the construction of fantasmatic narratives (Howarth, 2015: 202-208).

A fantasmatic narrative is a discursive construction that "structures the subject's 'lived reality' by concealing the radical contingency of social relations and by naturalizing the various relations of domination within which a subject is enmeshed" (Howarth, 2013: 205). It presents the successful hegemonic political project as free (or potentially free) of internal conflicts and antagonisms: a field where win-win solutions that favor everyone can solve social, economic and political issues (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014: xv). It grips subjects to certain norms, ideas and identities (Glynos, 2021: 101) and makes them 'complicit in covering over the contingency or unevenness of social relations' (Glynos et al., 2009: 11-12). Howarth explains:

The role of fantasy actively suppresses or contains the dimension of challenge and contestation. For example, certain social practices may seek to maintain existing social structures by pre-emptively absorbing dislocations, thus preventing them from becoming the source of a political practice. In fact, the logic of many management and governance techniques could be seen in this light: they seek to displace and deflect potential difficulties or "troubleshoot" before problems become the source of antagonistic constructions (Howarth, 2013: 205).

To do so, a fantasmatic narrative evokes fears and desires – at the unconscious level – to construct a twofold discourse that has a *beatific* and a *horrific* side. These sides work hand in

hand: the first one provides a promised fullness-to-come once an obstacle is overcome; the second foretells a disaster if the obstacle proves unsurmountable.

The beatific side (...) has a *stabilizing* dimension, which is governed by the dream of a state without disturbances (...), whilst the horrific aspects possesses a *destabilizing* dimension, where the Other (...) is presented as a threatening or irritating force (Howarth, 2013: 206).

The former is represented by images of omnipotence or of total control, while the latter is related to impotence and victimization (Glynos et al., 2009: 12). In this section, we explain how the 2030 GDA constructs a fantasmatic narrative intended to make subjects accept and conform to a specific understanding of globalization, sustainability and development.

An alleged universal agenda

Glynos and Howarth explain that fantasmatic narratives 'typically rely upon narratives which possess features distributed between public-official and unofficial forums. This is because fantasies seek directly to conjure up – or at least presuppose – an impossible union between incompatible elements' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 147). This is the case of the 2030 GDA, whose narrative presents *humankind* as a single political group with a single political project and with no internal antagonisms. To construct such a narrative, the agenda relies on the assumption that humankind as a whole can work together in a cohesive way:

We are setting out *together* on the path towards sustainable development, devoting ourselves *collectively* to the pursuit of global development and of "*win-win*" *cooperation* which can bring huge gains to *all countries and all parts of the world* (UN, 2015a: Art. 18, emphasis added).

That is to say, the 2030 GDA does not detect any internal conflict that may impede such a collective endeavor. This is an important depoliticizing feature of a fantasmatic narrative, since the concealment of internal conflicts reduces the risk of potential alternative political articulations to emerge. On the contrary, the 2030 GDA evokes a world where, regardless of any substantial difference, humankind behaves like *a homogeneous political group*. Indeed, the agenda has been praised by its *universality*: the 2030 GDA addresses the Global North and the Global South alike (which the MDG did not) (Fukuda-Parr 2016; Kutesa, 2015).

For that reason, the agenda presents itself as representing humankind as a whole: "(this) is an Agenda of the people, by the people and for the people (...). The future of humanity and of our planet lies in our hands" (UN, 2015a: Paragraphs 52 and 53). To do that, its rhetoric almost

exclusively uses the first person plural: we/us. ⁱ This is what Wolfgang Sachs defines as "the obtrusive use of the word 'we'" (Sachs, 2017: 3). For example, the central document of the 2030 GDA is entitled "Transforming *our* world" (emphasis added); most paragraphs begin with formulas such as 'We are determined to...', 'We resolve...' and 'We envisage...'. Similarly, the headings of the paragraphs that legitimate the actions proposed by the agenda use expressions that present humankind as a single group with a common political project: 'Our vision', 'Our shared principles and commitments' and 'Our world today'. Accordingly, the agenda is portrayed as the plan that makes humankind work together to 'advance fully towards an equitable global economic system in which no country or person is left behind' (UN, 2015b: Art. 1).

Who is the 'Other'?

The analysis so far shows that the fantasmatic narrative of the 2030 GDA presents humankind as a single political group with no inherent antagonisms that would prevent it from achieving its motivations and goals. However, the 2030 GDA is aware that humankind is diverse and plural:

We acknowledge the natural and cultural diversity of the world and recognize that all cultures and civilizations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development (UN, 2015b: Art. 36).

For the construction of the fantasmatic narrative, the agenda emphasizes the homogeneous characteristics of humankind: the agenda explains that we are different but, in some regards, we are all the same. Then, what is it that makes such a big and diverse group of people homogeneous? To strengthen the idea of a homogeneous humanity, the 2030 GDA relies on the horrific side of the fantasmatic narrative – the threatening and irritating side of the narrative – and constructs an 'Other'. That is to say, the 2030 GDA evokes a scenario where humankind is confronted, *vis à vis*, to a horrific outside. Within this discursive construction, the common characteristic that makes us all the same is that we are all threatened by a horrific Other: humankind is homogeneous *in relation to a horrific Other* that represents its opposite.

To do so, the agenda uses a rhetorical trope: it mixes up two different meanings of 'humanity.' On the one hand, when representing the internal side of the antagonistic relation ("Us", the homogeneous humankind), the agenda uses '*humanity*' as synonym of *humankind* – i.e. human beings thought of as a group. On the other hand, to name the 'Other' – the negative outside – the agenda uses '*humanity*' as synonym of *humane, kind or benevolent*. That is to say, the

agenda constructs the 'Other' by referring to inhumanity as lack of humanness. In other words, the agenda's fantasmatic narrative constructs a dualism where *not humane* is the opposite of *humankind*.

The documents of the 2030 GDA are very explicit in drawing the not humane side by constructing what Brown defines as an 'intolerable' and 'apocalyptic imaginary' (Brown, 2016: 124). The SDGs document precisely and extensively describe the horrific, inhumane 'Other' when it presents 'the challenges *which humanity faces*' (UN, 2015a: Art. 14). It lists a set of *not humane* economic, political and social issues: poverty; lack of dignity; inequalities; disparities in opportunity, wealth and power; gender inequality; unemployment; global health threats; natural disasters; spiraling conflicts; violent extremisms and terrorism; humanitarian crises and forced displacement; environmental degradation, desertification, freshwater scarcity and loss of biodiversity; and so on. The list ends by highlighting that humankind (the group) "is at risk" (ibid.). The AAAA and the PA also point to the horrific 'Other' when they explain the pertinence of the content and the aim of each document. The former explains that, despite some gains, humankind 'still faces considerable challenges,' such as increasing inequalities, exclusion, shocks from financial and economic crises, conflicts, natural disasters, disease outbreaks, environmental degradation and climate change threats (UN, 2015b: Art. 4). The latter affirms that climate change is 'a common concern of humankind' that 'represents an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies' (UNFCCC, 2016: Preamble).

In the fantasmatic narrative in the 2030 GDA, humankind is a cohesive, homogeneous, single group threatened by the horrific, inhumane 'Other'. Such a not-humane vs humankind narrative shows that the 2030 GDA needs an antagonistic 'Other' to construct its political discourse. In this narrative, humankind – that is, 'We/Us' – represents the political group with a collective identity and political project, and the 'Other' represents the destabilizing antagonistic negative outside that threatens the existence of humanity as such. The humankind vs not-humane narrative creates the antagonistic division that sustains the 2030 GDA plan to mobilize humankind in a collective way.

What is 'sustainable development'?

As pointed out above, the horrific side of the fantasmatic narrative works hand in hand with the beatific side in order to gain the consent of the subjects and keep the identity group cohesive. The horrific dimension relies on the existence of the 'other' to point to the threats that menace the group; the beatific one provides a promised fullness-to-come, which relies on the construction of an empty signifier.

Another important characteristic of fantasmatic narratives is that they structure ‘the ways subjects are attached to certain signifiers’ (Glynos et al., 2021: 66). In Laclau’s work, an empty signifier is a discursive construction that incarnates the fulfillment of a political and social system. On the one hand, it represents an ideal horizon where the aims and principles of such a system are achieved: a social and political stage where actual conflicts and problems disappear. On the other hand, it points to the negative outside (the ‘other’) that menaces such achievement. This twofold move has important discursive and political implications: an empty signifier aims to hold together multiple and even contradictory demands (Howarth, 2015: 12). To do so, an empty signifier lacks, by definition, a concrete and specific positive content – a concrete signified. For example, ‘order’ or ‘justice for all’ can play such discursive role: they represent an ideal social and political goal that can be accepted by diverse – and even contradictory – political projects. Similarly, these groups could agree that ‘disorder’ and ‘general injustice’ represent negative characteristics that should be avoided. For that reason, to gain such general acceptance, the *empty* signifier has to remain *empty*. Otherwise, defining such specific content – what is order? how to materialize it? through what institutions and rules? – would make explicit the differences and conflicts between internal groups and jeopardize the cohesion of the group (Laclau, 1996: 44). Thus, the empty signifier would not work.

Although empty signifiers have been generally linked with the construction of hegemonic and populist projects, Laclau explains that an empty signifier is a signifier that gives *symbolic unity to disparate struggles* (Laclau, 2005: 216), regardless if it is to challenge a political order – i.e., populism – or to consolidate it – hegemony as a form of rule. In the 2030 GDA’s fantasmatic narrative, the signifier ‘sustainable development’ fulfills the role of an empty signifier that aims to consolidate the actual order. It signifies the achievement of the desired (beatific) future for humankind – ‘our vision’, ‘our shared principles and commitments’ – and, at the same time, the opposite to the inhumane space at the negative (horrific) side of the antagonistic divide. In other words, ‘sustainable development’, as constructed in the 2030 GDA, is the umbrella signifier that, on the one hand, points to *the limit of the existing order* – the horrific Other – and, on the other hand, gives symbolic unity to disparate struggles and claims *within the existing order*.

In the SDGs, ‘sustainable development’ is synonymous with achieving ‘*full human potential*’ (UN, 2015a: Paragraph 20), which the 2030 Agenda describes as a world free of poverty, hunger, disease, fear and violence; where physical, mental and social wellbeing are assured; where food is sufficient, safe, affordable and nutritious; where there is universal access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy; with universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; with respect for race, ethnicity and cultural

diversity; in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected (UN, 2015a: Paragraphs 7, 8 and 9). In the AAAA document, achieving sustainable development implies promoting economic and social inclusion, protecting the environment, respecting all human rights, gender equality and women's and girl's empowerment, peace, decent work and preserving the planet for future generations (UN, 2015b: Art. 1). The PA explains that sustainable development (and sustainable lifestyles and patterns of consumption) are necessary to fight the threat that menaces humankind – climate change (UNFCCC, 2016: Preamble). That is to say, within the fantasmatic narrative in the agenda, 'sustainable development' is the process that takes 'humankind' to fulfill its potential and to fully realize its 'humane' nature. 'Sustainable development' also represents the final stage where humankind and humanness meet and become one. A future where, in relation to the most important global issues, everyone will benefit from an alleged inclusive political and economic global system that 'leaves no one behind'. An order that, according to the agenda, gains everyone's active consent.

The 2030 GDA is very explicit in explaining that 'sustainable development' is the signifier that holds humankind together:

[The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development] is an Agenda of unprecedented scope and significance. It is accepted by all countries and is applicable to all (...). These are universal goals and targets which involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike (UN, 2015a: paragraph 5).

Such unprecedented scope and significance rely on the use of 'sustainable development' as an empty signifier: the ability to name a beatific fullness-to-come (significance) that will leave no one behind (scope) is the most important characteristic of an empty signifier.

We conclude this section by noting that the 2030 GDA's discursive structure is the following: (1) the agenda portrays humanity (humankind) as a single, homogeneous and cohesive political group with common principles, interests and goals; (2) this group is threatened by a horrific, antagonistic outside, which menaces its existence (inhumanity as inhumane); and (3) sustainable development is both the process towards and the achievement of the beatific fullness-to-come where such a threat disappears and humanity lives a fully humane life. This discursive structure plainly reproduces the sedimentation process explained above. The 2030 GDA erases the contingent construction of the status quo: it blurs the traces of the decisions that shaped the actual undesirable (unsustainable, unequal and not inclusive) situation. It presents humankind

as a single and cohesive group to conceal the antagonistic nature of social relations and, in this way, depoliticizes development and sustainability debates.

THE REACTIVATION OF DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

As pointed out above, in order to reverse the process of sedimentation, Laclau proposes reactivation: a critical process that explicitly examines how a concrete political order was instituted and explains its contingent nature.

Reactivation does not therefore consist of returning to the original situation, but merely of rediscovering, through the emergence of new antagonisms, the contingent nature of so-called 'objectivity' (Laclau, 1990: 34-35).

From a post-Marxist perspective, this is political action *par excellence*: reactivating sedimented 'truths' and explaining their contingent foundations. That is to say, detecting antagonisms that the hegemonic discourse keeps latent – in 'sleeping mode' (Marchart, 2018: 97) – and reopening unconstrained political debates.

As explained above, Laclau affirms that the role of deconstruction is to reactivate the moment of decision that underlies any sedimented set of social relations. Accordingly, in this section we deconstruct the central binary opposition (humankind vs inhumanity) that sustains the fantasmatic narrative in the 2030 GDA. Then, we expose the discursive function of the 'sustainable development' empty signifier by analyzing its two basic characteristics – i.e., its function is more important than its content, and it points far into an impossible to reach future. In this way, we connect the contribution of the critical analysis in this article with the critical insights of many other scholars regarding the 2030 GDA.

Humanity is not always humane

As explained above, the 2030 GDA's narrative relies on an essential binary opposition: the antagonistic division between humankind (us) and a horrific, inhumane and negative outside (the other). That is the only antagonistic conflict we find in the agenda, since humanity is shown as a single group with common principles, interests and goals. However, a simple insight deconstructs the discursive structure of this narrative: *the causes* of the inhumane elements that constitute the horrific outside are mainly human. That is to say, the horrific not-humane issues that, according to GDA narrative, impede the full realization of humankind – and even menace its existence – are *the result of human actions*. Poverty, wars, inequality, environmental degradation, disparities, and so on, are the result of conflicts between different groups of

humans with different principles, motivations, interests and aims within the actual political and economic order. Inhumanity is human, because humanity is often inhumane.

The fact that the agency of the threat that menaces humankind is itself human deconstructs the agenda's fantasmatic narrative. It shows that the antagonistic divide is not between humankind and an in-humane outside, but *between different groups of humans*. It indicates that the humankind vs not-humane antagonism is a discursive fantasmatic construction that seeks to conceal the internal contradictions within the actual social, political and economic order. It turns the homogeneous political field evoked by the agenda – where the common characteristic of every human is that it is menaced by the Other – into a heterogeneous field where the assumption that we share common principles, interests and goals cannot be sustained. The deconstruction of the 2030 GDA's fantasmatic narrative internalizes 'the other' and insinuates that humankind is the only menace for the existence of humankind.

Many scholars pointed out that the 2030 GDA does not focus on the political, social or economic causes of the problems it (allegedly) aims to solve. According to these scholars, the agenda hides the causal sense of responsibility (Bexell and Jönsson, 2017); it conceals – rather than detect and analyse – the contradictions and problems that a neoliberal understanding of global processes generate (Mediavilla and Garcia-Arias, 2019); it bears no relationship to biophysical or social and economic reality (Spash, 2016); it is an example of the self-actualising discourse of neoliberalism where neoliberal solutions are shown as the only feasible ones (Soederberg, 2017); it subtly reinforces the power dynamics that sustain the status quo and hinder alternative practices (Telleria, 2018; 2019); and promotes highly contested neoliberal policies that reproduce, rather than solve, global issues (Weber, 2017). To put it briefly:

A systematic flaw in the Agenda's approach is the lack of analysis. It does not look into the underlying causes for the state of the world. There is no political economy approach to understanding the genesis and cycles of poverty and inequities. The agenda is oblivious to power relations (...) (Koehler, 2016: 152).

The deconstruction of the humankind-inhumanity binary opposition that sustains the fantasmatic narrative of the 2030 GDA opens up a different understanding of global issues where the antagonistic causes of the problem (and the power structures that reproduce them) come to the fore. In the following subsections we show how, once this binary opposition is deconstructed, the elements that sustain the fantasmatic narrative in the 2030 GDA get exposed too.

Vagueness and ambiguity

As a political and discursive tool, an empty signifier has two important features. First, its political function – symbolically uniting disparate struggles – is more important than its content, which is empty (Laclau, 1996: 59). Second, the beatific project it names – which represents the total fulfillment of the most sublime human desires – is impossible to achieve (Laclau, 2005: 114).

Regarding the first feature, the new complex, plural, diverse and heterogeneous understanding of global issues that the deconstruction of the 2030 GDA opens up, makes apparent the empty character of the signifier ‘sustainable development’ as used in the documents published by the UN. A critical analysis of the rhetoric of the 2030 GDA makes this emptiness explicit. Let us replace, in any of the 2030 GDA documents, the expression ‘sustainable development’ with any other term with no concrete content, that signifies the achievement of something desired (beatific) and the overcoming of any undesired (horrific) situation – such as ‘general wellbeing’.ⁱⁱ The reader will notice that the 2030 GDA can be read normally without mistaking the documents’ original spirit. For example:

We recognize that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for [*general wellbeing*] (UN, 2015a: paragraph 2).

While the Monterrey agenda has not yet been fully implemented, new challenges have arisen, and enormous unmet needs remain for the achievement of [*general wellbeing*] (UN, 2016b: paragraph 4).

[The Paris Agreement emphasises] the intrinsic relationship that climate change actions, responses and impacts have with equitable access to [*general wellbeing*] and eradication of poverty (UNFCCC, 2016: Preamble).

This rhetorical trick works as long as the terms remain empty. However, if we discard the oversimplified understanding of global issues of the fantasmatic narrative of the 2030 GDA – a homogeneous humankind with common principles, interests and objectives – and, on the contrary, we consider that any project of change implies decisions that benefit certain principles, interests and objectives at the expense of others, the trick does not work. That is to say, if the terms have clear content with important political, social, cultural and/or economic consequences – such as ‘capitalism’ or ‘communism’ – it would not work. For example, most readers would agree that the sentence ‘[*General wellbeing*] cannot be realized without peace and security; and peace and security will be at risk without [*general wellbeing*]’ (UN, 2015a: paragraph 35) fits within the uniting and well-intended spirit of the 2030 GDA. On the contrary,

that would not be the case if we used loaded signifiers to affirm, for example, that ‘[*Capitalism*] cannot be realized without peace and security; and peace and security will be at risk without [*capitalism*]’. In this case, the conflicting positions of the agenda’s signatories would impede agreement. That is why the agenda needs to rely on a truly empty signifier: sustainable development is empty enough to keep united the alliances and coalitions that the UN historically built with diverse subjects – national and local governments, NGOs, international organizations, universities, media, the private sector, etc. – without making explicit the disparate and even contradictory principles, interests and aims of each of them.

It could be argued that the agenda does not define the concept because it has already been defined elsewhere, that its purpose is to explain how to materialize it. However, a recurrent critique of the 2030 GDA is the vagueness and ambiguity in the definition of the way in which the goals and targets will be achieved (Langford, 2016; Cooper et al., 2017; Luebker, 2017), in the description of the problems that present tendencies represent in the implementation of the objectives (Adelman, 2017; Scheyvens et al., 2016; Soederberg, 2017) and in how this achievement will be measured (Sexsmith and McMichael, 2015). Koehler, for example, concludes:

It is not clear from the 2030 Agenda how poverty is to be eradicated, how inequities are to be redressed or how sustainability is to be achieved. (...) The SDG Agenda avoids analysis and shies away from policy recommendations towards sustainable development (Koehler, 2016: 152).

In other words, the 2030 GDA shies away from giving content to the empty signifier that sustains its discursive construction.

An impossible future

Regarding the second feature of an empty signifier – that the beatific project it names is impossible to achieve – there is solid (and growing) evidence to affirm that the sustainable goals proposed by the 2030 GDA are impossible to reach.

A study by the Overseas Development Institute (Nicolai et al., 2015) that projects progress across the full SDG agenda, concludes that: (a) several ‘reforms’ would be necessary to take three of the goals more than halfway to achievement in 2030 (Goals 1, 8 and 15); (b) nine of the goals would need a ‘revolution’ in order to speed them up ‘by multiples of current rates’ to meet the goals by 2030 (Goals 2, 3, 4, 5,6, 7, 9, 16 and 17); and (c) five of them are heading the wrong way and a reversal in the actual trends would be necessary in order to make them advance into their achievement (Goals 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14). That is to say, according to this study, none of the

goals will be achieved by 2030 without a drastic change, which the 2030 GDA is far from promoting.

In a similar vein, Kedir et al. (2017) explain that achieving Goal 1 of the SDGs (eradicate extreme poverty) would require, in the case of Africa, a GDP growth of 16.6% and an investment-to-GDP ratio of 87.5%. Considering that the SDGs state that 'domestic resources are first and foremost generated by economic growth' (Art. 66), Africa would have to invest 65% of the GDP every year in order to achieve Goal 1 (Kedir et al., 2017: 25). These values are unrealistic and far beyond the financial recommendations and objectives in the AAAA. Furthermore, it would make it impossible to direct any investment to the achievement of the recommendations in the PA. The conclusions in Kedir et al.'s research are similar to those in the report of the Overseas Development Institute: at best, low income countries in Africa would achieve Goal 1 by 2063.

Regarding sustainability and climate change, the idea that an absolute real decoupling can happen – in brief, the possibility of sustained economic growth that does not harm the environment – sounds unconvincing (Ward et al., 2016; Fletcher and Rammel, 2016; von Stechow et al., 2016; Hickel, 2019; Parrique et al., 2019). Raftery et al. (2017), for example, explain that the chances of limiting the rise of global temperatures to 2°C are lower than 5%, and Nieto et al. (2018) affirm that, according to current trends, 'an increase of 4°C would practically be assured' (Nieto et al., 2018: 81). Thus, the lack of realistic goals and accountability mechanisms make the PA a lost historical opportunity (Spash, 2016; Spann, 2017).

We can conclude that in the fantasmatic narrative of the 2030 GDA, sustainable development is an empty signifier that lacks specific, unequivocal content and that points far into an impossible, idealized, unreachable and unrealistic future.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis in this article shows that the 2030 GDA constructs a fantasmatic explanation of international development and sustainability issues that conceals the antagonistic dimension of social, political and economic issues. In this way, it blurs the political decisions that shaped the present, undesirable situation that the agenda describes. To do so, the 2030 GDA uses 'sustainable development' as an empty signifier that keeps disparate and even contradictory demands united. In this sense, the agenda is a depoliticizing political device that makes an inherently political issue look not political.

It could be argued that, rather than a fantasmatic narrative, the 2030 GDA is a utopian project that sets a desirable aim and enables different people to work together. The difference between

a utopian project and a fantasy is that the former is based on a rational narrative, whereas the latter relies on affects, fears and desires at the level of the unconscious (Glynos, 2021: 99). Regardless of the achievability of the utopic aim, a project constructed at the rational level would first diagnose the causes of the addressed problems and, then, would explain that not everyone shares the principles, interests and objectives promoted by the utopic project, and that, accordingly, any agreement benefits some at the expense of others. This is not what the 2030 GDA does. On the contrary, it relies on evocative rhetoric to draw the global scenario through a fantasmatic narrative that glosses over the causes of the problems to solve and assumes that the entire humankind agree on certain specific objectives and, accordingly, can work together.

Similarly, it could be argued that the vagueness and emptiness of the agenda are part of a political strategy intended to reach a wide consensus, flexible enough to let each member of the agreement (each country) adapt the goals set by the agenda to its national needs and preferences. Again, this is not what the 2030 GDA does. On the contrary, it sets the ontological and political limits that condition the way global issues are understood and tackled in practice. First, the agenda imposes a specific ontological essentialist position regarding social, political and economic issues. Such an understanding of global issues precludes a relational (non-essentialistic) approach that would take to the fore the power relations and structures that sustain the status quo where these problems emerged. Second, the agenda implicitly imposes a specific reading of recent history, where the economic and political events that took the world to the current situation are naturalized, and the political decisions that constructed the actual order are sedimented and forgotten. In this sense, the 2030 GDA is not a general and neutral framework that each country can apply according to its needs and interests; on the contrary, it is an ideological device that conditions the way we tackle global problems by imposing implicit ontological and political limitations.

In general terms, the analysis above shows that the 2030 GDA is diverting our attention from the real problems that humankind will face during the 21st century. At the moment, the challenge is not how to overcome the threat of a menacing 'Other' in order to achieve the common objectives of humankind, as the agenda proposes. Rather, the challenge is to find the way to manage diverse, different, and even contradictory legitimate principles, interests and objectives within a peaceful and respectful coexistence. Evoking a homogeneous humankind and, accordingly, assuming the existence of common principles, interests and aims may be motivational and inspiring. It can help to believe that people can be mobilized together to transform the world. However, the world is different to the post-war international order where

the UN was created and, accordingly, the oversimplistic diagnosis proposed by the 2030 GDA agenda does not help in realizing that the problems do not come from a horrific other, but from 'Us'.

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ⁱ Since it is an agreement and not an agenda, the Paris Agreement document uses a slightly different language. The Introduction adheres to the previously adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. However, the document uses the third person singular (he/she/it) throughout the text to refer to the 'Conference of the Parties' held in Paris between November and December 2015: it '*Decides* to adopt...', '*Requests* the Secretary-General...', '*Invites* all parties', and so on.

ⁱⁱ The substitution does not work in the expression "Sustainable Development Targets and Goals," which is a reduced form of "Targets and Goals in Sustainable Development," where the substitution does work – "Targets and Goals in [*General Wellbeing*]".