

Diversity vs the 2030 Agenda. A deconstructive reading of the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This article analyses the marginal position cultural diversity is granted in the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development. Drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, it analyses and deconstructs the ontological assumptions of the UN's discourse. The inquiry shows that the ontological structure of the UN's agenda creates an essentialist and teleological understanding of history that privileges universality – unity – at the expense of diversity. In this way, the UN's plan of action reproduces what Ernesto Laclau defined as hegemony – a particularity assuming the representation of the totality. The 2030 Agenda naturalises the international power structure designed after World War II and presents it as beneficial for everyone. The article concludes that the 2030 Agenda's ontological assumptions create an inherently ethnocentric understanding of global issues.

Keywords: Derrida, diversity, ontology, Sustainable Development, United Nations.

INTRODUCTION: AND WHAT ABOUT DIVERSITY?

In September 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) adopted a resolution entitled 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (UN, 2015). As the resolution's preamble explains, it is a 15-year action plan designed to tackle the most important, urgent and pressing global problems – such as hunger, poverty, climate change, and migration – and transform our world in a way that benefits all and leaves no one behind. To this end, the agenda sets 17 goals and 169 targets to achieve by 2030. This commitment is not new: between 1960 and 2000 the UN adopted four plans of action for international development – known as the 'Development Decades' – and in 2000 it passed a resolution entitled 'the Millennium Declaration' for the period 2000–2015; the 2030 Agenda is a continuation of this plan (2015–2030).

The 2030 Agenda explains that this plan of action is universal in nature, that its success requires 'the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people,' and that it is

'applicable to all' (UN, 2015: Preamble and Par. 5). One would expect that diversity and the consideration of the different beliefs, traditions, histories, values and principles, interests and goals of the different groups of people in the world would be one of the main concerns of a plan of action intended to transform the world. However, it is very striking that the 2030 Agenda grants diversity very little attention and only a marginal position in its description of the world and global issues. After 35 paragraphs – which stress the agenda's universal character several times – the 36th paragraph affirms:

We pledge to foster intercultural understanding, tolerance, mutual respect and an ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility. 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, 2015: Par. 36).

Although a genuine and careful consideration of diversity is a key aspect of the legitimacy and ownership of the global agenda, it only grants the topic these four lines. The document neglects to mention that different groups of people have different beliefs, values, principles and historical backgrounds that may require different plans of action, and uncritically assumes that global ethics and cultural diversity can be connected without a problem. Moreover, it is surprising that the agenda seems to consider diversity an unimportant and secondary aspect when the first line of paragraph 37 – right after the quote above – explains: 'Sport is *also* an important enabler of sustainable development' (emphasis added). According to the text, diversity, intercultural understanding and tolerance, mutual respect *and sport* are at the same level of importance in the implementation of a global plan of action to transform the world.

Motivated by the sensation that diversity is granted only marginal attention in a document in which, for the sake of legitimacy, ownership and effectiveness, the concept should be of the utmost importance, *this article analyses the articulation of diversity in the discourse of the 2030 Agenda*. This objective implies a paradox, for it is difficult to analyse the discursive articulation of a concept that is scarcely and marginally used. Accordingly, following Jacques Derrida's and Ernesto Laclau's approach to discourse analysis, and for reasons I explain below, I focus on a different but directly related concept: *universality*. This article analyses how universality is conceptualised and articulated in the 2030 Agenda, and how this conceptualisation influences the consideration of diversity in the discourse.

The article is divided into seven parts. The first part explains the structure of the 2030 Agenda and reviews the critical literature about it. The second part presents the theoretical and methodological aspects of the analysis in the article: the ontic-ontological difference proposed by Heidegger, and Derrida's deconstruction of traditional metaphysics. The third part describes the ontic dimension of the 2030 Agenda and shows that universality is the most important concept in the articulation of the UN's discourse. The fourth and fifth parts parallel Laclau's analysis of the universal/particular binary opposition and analyse the agenda's ontological assumptions. These parts show that, in the agenda, universality is directly related to unity – which is understood as the opposite of diversity. The sixth part deconstructs the discursive structure of the 2030 Agenda and shows that what the agenda calls universal is instead a particularity that *presents* itself as universal. The final section concludes. Overall, the article exposes the ethnocentric and political foundations of a global plan of action that, according to the UN, is accepted by all and benefits all.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE 2030 AGENDA: WHY, WHAT AND HOW.

The document 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' is divided into three parts. The first part (pages 1 to 12, paragraphs 1 to 53) introduces the plan that aims to transform the world: it describes the present world and the problems to overcome; presents the values and principles that guide the document; and explains the basic commitments by the agenda. The second part (pages 13 to 27, paragraphs 54 to 59) enlists the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets that form the plan of action. The third part (pages 28 to 35, paragraphs 60 to 91) proposes the institutional means of implementation and the global partnership for the achievement of the goals, and describes the follow-up requirements at the national, regional and global levels. In other words, the first part focuses on the *why* of the agenda – the need for and the legitimacy of the plan of action; the second part explains the *what* – the concrete goals and targets proposed by the plan; and the third part reflects on the *how* – the institutional structure and coordination necessary for the achievement of the goals.

Since the publication of the agenda in 2015, most critical literature focused on the second and third parts of the document – *what and how*. For example, on the capitalistic and neoliberal character of the goals (Carroll and Jarvis, 2015; Weber, 2017; Mediavilla and Garcia-Arias, 2019); on the difficulty of measuring the achievements (Fukuda-Parr, 2019;

MacFeely, 2019; Ordaz, 2019; Kapto, 2019); on the ambiguity of – and the contradictions between – the goals and targets (Adelman 2017; Fletcher and Rammelt, 2016; Koehler, 2016; Kedir et al., 2017; Soederberg, 2017; Giannetti et al., 2020); and on the problems that the coordination proposed by the agenda generates (Scheyvens, R. et al. 2016; Pinget 2016; Novitz and Pieraccini, 2020; Saner et al., 2017). The research analysing the implementation of the agenda and the achievement of the goals and targets in specific contexts (e.g., Kroll et al., 2019; Miola and Schlitz, 2019; Boto-Álvarez and García-Fernandez, 2020; Firoiu et al., 2019) also focuses on the what and how.

However, the first part of the agenda – *why* – received less academic attention. Many scholars analysed the negotiations for the elaboration of the 2030 Agenda: for example, Chasek et al. (2016) analyse the different negotiating tracks that resulted in the 2030 Agenda; Briant Carant (2017) analyses the influence of dominant economic discourses in the construction of some important concepts in the agenda; Macharia et al. (2018) explain how the process of negotiating the SDGs changed the way the UN conducts multilateral diplomacy; and Fukuda-Parr and McNeil (2019) edited a special issue of *Global Policy* entitled ‘Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring the SDGs’ where the political nature of allegedly technical decisions is exposed. These analyses focus on the negotiations, conflicts, political tensions and technical debates for the definition of the *what* and the *how* of the agenda. However, they disregard any reflection about the *why*. Systematically, the attention focuses on the specific content of the agenda because its legitimacy is uncritically assumed and taken for granted. Only critical feminist reflections about the agenda raise questions about its legitimacy, explore new narratives and aim to construct alternative agendas (e.g., Tallis and Mathonsi, 2018; Haysom, 2018; Esquivel, 2016; Stuart and Woodroffe, 2016). However, these analyses also focus on the specific content of the agenda and on the potential effects of the goals and targets, not on the legitimacy of the plan of action as such. Hence, the critical literature about the 2030 Agenda lacks a thorough analysis of the content of the first 12 pages of the document, where the legitimacy of the action plan is constructed.

To fill this lack, and to complement the feminist critique, the analysis in this article focuses on the first part of the document and, as explained in the introduction, shows how the ontological assumptions by the UN agenda present a specific and particular plan of action as a legitimate and universal endeavour that benefits all. The article deconstructs the

implicit, subtle assumptions by the agenda in part one, which make the *what* and the *how* of the agenda sound cohesive, solid and legitimate. To do so, I critically analyse the articulation of diversity and universality in the agenda, and expose its Westerncentric character. There are previous analyses of the role that culture and cultural diversity play in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (e.g., UNEP, 2016; Yildirim, 2019; Wiktor-Mach, 2020; Zheng et al., 2021). However, these approaches assume the non-cultural nature of the 2030 Agenda and explore its relation with specific cultures, whereas the approach in this article shows that the UN's plan of action is cultural itself.

ONTOLOGY AND DECONSTRUCTION

As I explain below, the ontological foundations of the 2030 Agenda have a long history: they are rooted in the most basic philosophical assumptions of the pioneers of Western thought in ancient Greece. The deconstruction of the discourse of the 2030 Agenda therefore requires a philosophical apparatus that problematises and rethinks the most basic assumptions of Western thought. The work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida provides such a philosophical approach. For that reason, the analysis in this article relies on two consecutive philosophical moves motivated by these authors: (1) moving from the ontic to the ontological dimension (Heidegger) and (2) transiting from the metaphysics of presence to deconstruction (Derrida). Before proceeding with the analysis, I will first explain these theoretical and methodological aspects.

Heidegger begins his most important work – *Being and Time* (1927) – by analysing the inherent complexity of the simple question that has guided Western philosophical reflection since its inception in ancient Greece: 'What is Being?'. Heidegger explains that the question itself is problematic: once we ask 'What *is*...?', we are implicitly assuming a vague understanding of the concept we want to define – being. According to Heidegger, Western philosophers did not fully appreciate the complexity of this question, and answered it in a way that turned being into another describable and classifiable thing in the world. That is to say, they answered it in an *ontical* rather than an *ontological* way (Heidegger, 1962: 28-31).

For Heidegger, ontic knowledge describes the distinctive nature of particular types of entities. All branches of science – e.g., physics, chemistry, biology and sociology – build their theories assuming that the objects that form their field of knowledge *are* (exist) and have a distinctive nature. For example, markets, individuals, rationality and exchange are entities

that form the ontic knowledge of economics, which are different in nature from the entities that form, for example, chemistry.

However, such theory-building itself depends upon taking for granted certain basic ways in which the given discipline demarcates and structures its own area of study; and those foundations tend to remain unthematized by the discipline itself, until it finds itself in a state of crisis (Mulhall, 2013: 4).

That is why, for example, new concepts such as Darwinian theories or the theory of relativity precipitated crises in biology and physics, respectively: they did not conform to the traditional standards of these disciplines. Rather, they problematised and disrupted *the a priori conditions associated with the possibility* of such scientific theorising. In Heideggerian language, they revealed ‘the ontological presuppositions of ontic enquiry’ (Mulhall, 2013: 4). Following this insight by Heidegger, this article goes beyond the ontic dimension of the 2030 Agenda to analyse its ontological assumptions – i.e., the conditions of possibility of the entities that form the agenda’s description of the world.

As mentioned above, for the critical analysis and deconstruction of the ontological assumptions of the 2030 Agenda, I draw on Derrida, whose work follows Heidegger’s critique of Western metaphysics – what the former calls the Metaphysics of Presence (Richardson, 2012: 366-367). According to Derrida, at least since ancient Greece, Western thought has always been structured by the creation of binary oppositions – e.g., day/night, big/small, right/wrong, culture/nature, soul/body. These oppositions were supposed to reproduce reality *as it is*; they became the basis of scientific and philosophical knowledge. On the contrary, Derrida defends that these dichotomies are discursive constructions that produce a contingent – not natural, not objective, not necessary – representation of the world. According to Derrida, we do not have an objective and unmediated relationship with reality; on the contrary, we understand and relate to reality through the web of interconnected concepts and binary oppositions called discourse.

Derrida stresses that binary oppositions systematically privilege one of the terms over the other – day over night, big over small, and so on – based on the assumption that a key characteristic – e.g., unity, truth, clarity, identity, immediacy – is *more present* in the privileged one. This is the central characteristic of traditional Western metaphysics – the metaphysics of presence. According to Derrida, although Western metaphysics is focused on the search for the truth about being and reality, in practice it constructed a contingent

explanation of existence and being based on the alleged *presence* of transcendental and metaphysical ideas. Derrida does not reverse these polarities to demonstrate that they are not correct, and to unearth a hidden truth. Rather, he shows the implicit assumptions that sustain these dichotomies. Deconstruction does not propose an alternative truth; it shows the constructed and contingent nature of a specific understanding of reality. In this sense, the deconstruction of a discourse is not the examination of the flaws and imperfections of a theoretical system intended to make it better. On the contrary,

It is an analysis that focuses on the grounds of that system's possibility. The critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal, in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being the way they are, their effects on what follows from them, and that the starting point is not a (natural) given but a (cultural) construct, usually blind to itself (Johnson, in Derrida, 1981: xv).

Deconstruction shows that any discursive construction is created on the basis of the assumed presence of an alleged essential characteristic that sustains and unites it. Deconstruction exposes such a discursive structure and, by doing so, opens up the possibility of understanding and explaining reality in many different ways.

This article fathoms the binary oppositions of the 2030 Agenda at the ontological level – universal/particular and unity/diversity – and reveals their contingent and constructed nature. As I explain below, my analysis parallels the work of Ernesto Laclau in *Emancipation(s)* (1996), in which he analyses and deconstructs the role of the opposition universal/particular in Western thought generally, and in modern political philosophy specifically.

THE ONTIC DIMENSION OF THE 2030 AGENDA

The 2030 Agenda is a political document that describes the world and its global issues, and proposes a set of goals that, if achieved, would end (or reduce) these problems. In this sense, the agenda's narration remains at the ontic dimension of the analysis of reality: it assumes the existence of certain objects, practices and their interrelationships, but does not question their conditions of possibility. In order to assess the ontological basis of the 2030 Agenda, in this section I first describe the most important elements of the ontic narration of the 2030 Agenda and their link with the concept of 'universal'. I structure the description around two questions.

1.- How does the 2030 Agenda describe the situation of the world?

In general terms, the 2030 Agenda explains that humanity is at a crucial moment of history because it faces a list of challenges that, if not properly tackled soon, could result in the extinction of many societies and even humanity as such. The agenda is very explicit in this sense: 'the survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk' (Par. 14). Accordingly, the document describes two different ontic scenarios. First, the actual world in *the present*. Paragraph 14 describes the current situation of the world in very negative terms: the agenda highlights the rising inequalities within and among countries; the disparities of opportunity, wealth and power; the global health threats, natural disasters, spiralling conflict, violent extremism and terrorism that impede peaceful coexistence; and the environmental degradation, desertification, drought, land degradation, freshwater scarcity and loss of biodiversity that humanity faces. The agenda's second ontic scenario depicts *the future* in a very positive and hopeful light. In paragraphs 7, 8 and 9, the agenda envisages a world free of poverty, hunger, disease, want, fear and violence; a world with equitable and universal access to quality education, to health care and social protection; a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; and a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all.

Overall, the 2030 Agenda clearly differentiates between a negative and dangerous present and a hopeful and bright future, when all global problems will disappear and the full human potential will be realised.

2.- How does the 2030 Agenda present itself and its remit?

The 2030 Agenda explains that in order to transit from the negative present to the positive potential future, humanity must work together in a global and coordinated way. It explains that the UN is the global institution that can coordinate and guide the work of the manifold actors involved in this endeavour – e.g., international institutions, national and local governments, civil society, non-governmental organisations, private business, universities and the media. On the basis of this institutional setting, the 2030 Agenda presents itself as a global agreement 'of the people, by the people and for the people' (Par. 52) that creates an action plan to transform the world. From this perspective, the agenda will enable the transition from the undesirable and negative present to the hopeful and positive potential

future in a way that will *benefit all* (UN, 2015: par. 18) and will *leave no one behind* (UN, 2015: Preamble). The agenda's preamble affirms:

This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. (...) All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan. (...) We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path. (...) The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets (...) will stimulate action over the next 15 years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet (UN, 2015: Preamble).

Overall, the ontic narration in the 2030 Agenda *assumes the existence of* four key elements: (1) a group of human beings that can work together in a coordinated way – humankind, (2) an undesirable actual scenario in which specific practices and relations are implemented, (3) a virtual future scenario in which these negative dynamics are turned into positive practices and relations and (4) specific instruments and institutions – the agenda and the UN – that enable the transition from the actual (current) scenario to the virtual (future) one. Before discussing universalist discourses in the next section, it is important to highlight that the privileged concept of the binary opposition we are to deconstruct – the universal – has a central role in this ontic narration. The preamble of the 2030 Agenda explains that it is 'a new universal Agenda' that encourages 'the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people,' that it will leave no one behind, and that, if it is properly implemented, 'the lives of all will be profoundly improved and our world will be transformed for the better.' That is to say, the most important aspects of the 2030 Agenda are positively linked with universality: the group of people working together to implement the agenda is *universal*, the plan of action that will transform the undesirable actual situation is *universal*, and the benefits of the virtual future scenario are *universal*.

ESSENTIALIST ONTOLOGY AND UNIVERSALIST DISCOURSES

Before focusing on the ontological dimensions of the 2030 Agenda, in this section I explain Laclau's analysis of universalist discourses in *Emancipation(s)*. In this work, he analyses and deconstructs the essentialist ontological assumptions of the universality/particularity relationship as understood in contemporary political thought. Laclau explains that discourses that privilege universalism (over particularism) and link it to emancipation –

fulfilment, salvation, progress, etc. – traditionally rely on three ontological essentialist assumptions (Laclau, 1996: 1-13; 20-28; 60-65; 97-104):

1. *A universal human essence* exists, which creates a homogeneous and universal basis for political action. This essence – and the common ground it creates – enables the constitution of universal identities and the construction of universal political projects. In other words, universalist discourses assume that, regardless of the differences between subjects, at the most essential level they all share a specific aspect – e.g., rational abilities, basic needs, will to freedom, natural desires – that could make all of them agree on the foundations of social coexistence and on the political project that could be constructed based on such foundations. According to Laclau, the assumption of this ‘original and essential equality between men’ is central to the work of Thomas Hobbes, and strongly conditioned modern political thought (Laclau, 1996: 43).
2. A virtual future exists in which the *conflicts and antagonisms* between different groups of people *disappear*. This assumption builds on the first one: universalist discourses assume that the proper unfolding of the universal human essence results in the elimination of the particular and contingent confrontations that divide humankind. Therefore, universalist discourses rely on a teleological interpretation of history that understands emancipation as the evolution from an unsatisfactory present – mired in conflicts, antagonisms and the problems resulting from them – to a desired virtual future in which the human essence is fully realised and conflict disappears (Laclau, 1996: 55).
3. *A privileged historical agent* exists that can facilitate the full and universal realisation of the human essence. Laclau explains that the teleological understanding of history according to universalist discourses relies on the existence of a chasm – a rupture, a discontinuity – that temporarily impedes the full unfolding of human potential and the universal realisation of the human essence. For that reason, universalist political positions assume the existence of a privileged subject that has the ability to close such a chasm. This actor is granted an ontological privilege: it is assumed that it is ‘beyond the contradictions between particularity and universality [and] expresses in a direct way (...) pure and universal human essence’ (Laclau, 1996: 11).

According to Laclau, these three ontological assumptions together created the conditions of possibility for universalist political discourses such as Christianity, where the

incarnation, the Bible and the Christian church played the role of the privileged agents of history; Marxism, with a privileged role played by the workers and the class struggle; and liberalism, with the bourgeoisie and its institutions leading the way towards progress, wellbeing and stability.

THE ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE 2030 AGENDA

A thorough read of the 2030 Agenda – more specifically, of the first 12 pages, where the *why* of the plan is presented – shows that its content was based on the three ontological essentialist assumptions listed above. Regarding the first assumption, the agenda acknowledges that there is a universal human essence that makes every human being equal at a certain level, in an explicit but indirect way. It is indirect because the agenda explains that it is ‘grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ (UN, 2015: Par. 10), the first and second articles of which state that, regardless of any difference based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, opinion, or national and social origin, every human being *is born equal*. In other words, the 2030 Agenda is constructed on the belief that beyond our differences, there is some essential characteristic that makes all of us equal. The agenda does not recognise any essential contradiction that would impede the elaboration and universal adoption of a global consensus. It assumes the existence of a common ground that enables the constitution of an essential and universal identity and the design of a global plan of action. This is a key aspect, for the ontic narration of the 2030 Agenda would make no sense without the assumption that a universal human essence and a common ground for action exist. For example, this ontological assumption makes possible the affirmation that the agenda’s plan of action is global in nature and universally applicable (UN, 2015: Preamble and Par. 55), and that its 17 goals and 169 targets are universal and enable win-win cooperation ‘for the full benefit of all’ (UN, 2015: Par. 5 and 18).

As explained above, the second assumption – that a virtual future exists in which conflicts and antagonisms disappear – builds on the first, and generates a teleological understanding of social change and history. In this case, this assumption remains implicit – but very present – in the way the agenda describes the world and the plan of action. The virtual future scenario described at the ontic level – in paragraphs 7, 8 and 9 of the agenda, for example – assumes that the conflicts and antagonisms that contribute to the undesirable present can be tackled and overcome. On the basis of this assumption, the 2030 Agenda understands the process of achieving such a harmonious and stable historical stage as the

proper unfolding of the aforementioned human essence. That is why the agenda describes the process as the acceleration of human progress (UN, 2015: Par. 15) and the removal of obstacles and constraints (UN, 2015: Par. 23), which helps ensure that all human beings achieve their ‘full human potential’ (UN, 2015: Par. 20). Through this teleological conceptualization of social change and history, universal history is understood as the process of properly unfolding the universal human essence, and the future virtual scenario described in the agenda – the telos or aim of history – is depicted as the ideal society in which human essence is fully unfolded.

Finally, the 2030 Agenda names the UN as the privileged agent of history. This assumption is inherited from the Millennium Declaration – of which the 2030 Agenda is a continuation, as affirmed in the Preamble. The Millennium Declaration explicitly granted the UN such a privileged position: it stated that it is ‘the most universal and most representative organization in the world’ and that is why it had to play a central role in ‘managing worldwide economic and social development, as well as threats to international peace and security’ (UN, 2000: Par. 6). A few paragraphs later, the Millennium Declaration consolidated the UN’s privileged position by stating that it is ‘the indispensable *common* house of the entire human family, *through which we will seek to realize our universal aspirations*’ (UN, 2000: Par. 32, emphasis added). That is to say, the UN is assumed to be the materialisation of the common and universal political ground that makes the proper unfolding of the human essence possible. The 2030 Agenda reproduces this assumption and stresses that the UN is the only global actor capable of mobilising the people ‘to channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world’ (UN, 2015: Par. 51). The fact that the UN is described as ‘the most universal organization in the world’ and, at the same time, the ‘most representative’ one, illustrates the ontological privilege explained by Laclau. According to the Millennium Declaration, the UN is beyond the universality/particularity contradiction: it is universal *and* represents every particularity without generating any conflict or contradiction. Such an ontological privilege is present in the 2030 Agenda too, since, as explained above, the UN’s plan of action is assumed to be ‘global in nature and universally applicable’ *and, at the same time*, respects different national realities, policies and priorities (UN, 2015: Par. 55). The 2030 Agenda constructs its ontologically privileged position through an implicit hierarchical binary structure. On the one hand, the agenda systematically uses the ‘we’ – the UN and the world leaders signing the

plan of action – to refer to the universal and global dimension. On the other hand, the agenda uses ‘the people’ to describe the problems that the agenda aims to overcome – poverty, migration, discrimination, health issues, etc. – at the local and particular level. The agenda hides this binary structure by discursively merging both dimensions, for example when it affirms that ‘it is “*we the peoples*” who are embarking today on the road to 2030’ (UN, 2015: Par. 52, emphasis added), and when it explains that ‘*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’ (UN, 2015: Par. 2, emphasis added). In this way, the agenda aims to represent both the universal (we) and the particular (the people) *at the same time*. I further analyse this ontological privilege in the next section.

UNITY, LEGITIMACY AND HEGEMONY

The analysis of the ontological assumptions in the 2030 Agenda explains why diversity plays such a marginal role in it. The agenda assumes that there is a single and universal human essence, which enables the constitution of a single and universal identity – we the people. On the basis of this common and homogeneous universal ground, the agenda proposes a single and universal plan of action that, allegedly, will benefit all and ‘leave no one behind’. Moreover, the agenda assumes that a single international actor – the UN – has the ability and legitimacy to universally represent the totality and to lead the historical endeavour towards the single virtual future in which everyone’s most basic needs, desires, interests and objectives are universally realised. One universal essence, one global plan of action, one universal actor and one common future: in the 2030 Agenda, *universality is directly linked to unity* – which is the opposite of diversity. As explained above, Derrida defends that all binary oppositions – that allegedly represents reality as it is – systematically privileges one of the binary terms over the other *based on the assumption that* a positive value is more present in one than the other. In the 2030 Agenda, the first terms of the universality/particularity and unity/diversity binary oppositions are privileged because it is assumed that the human essence – and its proper unfolding – are more present in them. However, Derrida continues, a deconstructive analysis of this assumption exposes its contingent and constructed nature, and opens the door to alternative conceptualisations of reality. The deconstruction of the ontological structure of the 2030 Agenda relies on three questions.

1) The first question relates to the articulation of time in the agenda's discourse. The assumption that history is the unfolding of the human essence implies a linear understanding of time: human history evolves from the past to the present and the future towards the full realisation of the human essence. The first question is thus: *how does the agenda articulate time in its discourse?* An analysis of the agenda shows that it focuses on describing the undesirable present and the desirable virtual future. However, it does not speak about the past. As many scholars have pointed out (e.g., Koehler, 2016; Telleria 2018, 2020 & 2021, Weber, 2017), the agenda rarely mentions the past, and systematically glosses over the historical roots of the problems it aims to tackle. However, the past takes centre stage in a single paragraph of the 2030 Agenda.

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 (UN, 2015: Par. 49).

This single reference to the past is critically important to properly understanding and deconstructing the structure of the agenda's discourse, and takes the analysis to the second question, which focuses on the privileged agent of history in the 2030 Agenda.

2) The document grants the UN – the universal 'we' – an ontological/historical privilege as well as the legitimacy to design and lead a universal plan of action. However, *what is the source of such legitimacy?* The only paragraph where the agenda mentions the past (quoted above) pinpoints the agenda's source of legitimacy. The paragraphs following the quote above explicitly state that the agenda takes notice of the past only in terms of its own legitimacy:

Today *we* are *also* taking a decision of great historic significance (UN, 2015: Par. 50, emphasis added).

“We the peoples” are the celebrated opening words of the Charter of the United Nations. It is “we the peoples” who are embarking today on the road to 2030 (UN, 2015: Par. 52).

The agenda uses this single reference to the past to substantiate its own legitimacy: the actual world leaders – the subject of the agenda (the 'we'), who acts 'on behalf of the people' – inherited the legitimacy to lead the transformation of the world from an earlier

generation of world leaders who did the same seven decades ago. In this sense, the initial work of these world leaders created the foundation for the action plan in the agenda:

We reaffirm the outcomes of all major United Nations conferences and summits which have laid a solid foundation for sustainable development and have helped to shape the new Agenda (UN, 2015: Par. 11).

This is a tautological discursive move: the UN and its actions are the source of legitimacy – and the conditions of possibility – of the UN and its actions. This ontological and normative privilege makes the UN both an international actor *and* the source of legitimacy of its own actions. This tautological rationale raises the third question.

3) The last question explores the possibility of implementing a universal agreement in a world that, as the document describes, is mired in conflicts and global problems: *how is it possible to build a universal agreement based on such an antagonistic and conflictual context?* The search for the answer to this question takes us to the origin of this tautological circle – i.e., the creation of the organisation that the 2030 Agenda presents as the privileged agent of history.

The UN Charter, the organisation's founding document from 1945, presents the UN as an international organisation designed to maintain and strengthen universal peace and security; to promote justice and international law; to achieve international cooperation and respect for the principles of equal rights and self-determination of peoples; to encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction based on race, sex, language, or religion; and to be the centre for harmonising the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends (Article 1). As was the case of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, the UN was presented in 1945 as a universal plan that would respect and promote equality, peace, cooperation, freedom and justice for all. However, the UN Charter imposes a condition. Article 2.6 states that 'the Organization shall ensure that states *which are not Members of the United Nations* act in accordance with these Principles so far as may be necessary for the maintenance of international peace and security' (emphasis added), and Article 2.7 adds that, if necessary, the UN will apply enforcement measures to this end. In other words, the UN was a plan of action for everyone, *like it or not*. It was not a global agreement, but a political decision by a few. This aspect is a key element of deconstructing the discourse of the UN, and the role of the universal/particular binary opposition in the 2030 Agenda.

The UN was not a *universal* project; on the contrary, it was a *particular* project by several powerful countries – led by the USA, the UK and the USSR – that presented it as universal and beneficial for everyone. This is what Laclau calls ‘hegemony’: the political moment when ‘a *particular* social force assumes the representation of a *totality*’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: x). The creation and legitimation of the UN – and the activation of the tautological circle presented above – required a hegemonic moment in which a particularity presented itself as universal.

According to this analysis, the answer to the third question is that the UN was not created by a global agreement, but via a political decision by a particular group. The legitimacy of the UN Charter, the Millennium Declaration and the 2030 Agenda is based on an ontological privilege that the UN grants itself. In this way, the 2030 Agenda and its most fundamental assumptions are deconstructed: what the agenda calls ‘universal’ is actually a particular discourse with very specific political and historical roots, based on very specific essentialist assumptions. In this way, the hierarchical structure of the analysed binary oppositions – universal/particular, unity/diversity – is deconstructed. This shift casts a different – and strongly political – light on the UN’s rhetoric. The analysis shows that its (particular) discourse is powerful enough to hegemonise the international realm and to present itself as a universal agreement that benefits all. It is a contingent discursive construction intended to consolidate – not transform – the status quo created in 1945. From this perspective, the 2030 Agenda is not a global agreement that benefits all, but a hegemonic project intended to perpetuate, rather than transform, the status quo.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this analysis generate three concluding remarks. The first remark is political. The analysis above insinuates that the only common ground on which global political projects could be constructed is not the alleged existence of a universal human essence, but *the acceptance of diversity as the most basic characteristic of humankind*. The world we aim to transform is plural and diverse as a result of the historical coexistence of different particularities. The fact that the UN’s implicit essentialist and universalist ontological assumptions disregard this reality may explain why the project of development and peace started in 1945 did not succeed.

The second remark is cultural and builds on the first one. It regards the status of diversity in mainstream development thinking. Since its inception, in the first half of the 20th century, the concept of development has been understood as a-cultural: a universal process of progress that transcends diversity. Regardless of cultural diversity, development was conceptualised as the process of social change, the results of which are universally beneficial. Moreover, it was assumed to be an objective process; accordingly, it was associated with quantifiable and measurable variables, as opposed to the subjective and qualitative nature of cultural issues. In other words, development was constructed in an ethnocentric way, which systematically granted diversity an accessory and, at best, subsidiary role. Development became an identity discourse that constructed a self, as opposed to otherness, difference and diversity. That is why an inquiry about the articulation of diversity in the 2030 Agenda deconstructs the discourse of sustainable development and exposes its underlying ethnocentric and political assumptions.

The final remark is historical and relates to the ethnocentric nature of the UN's discourse on development. The analysis above shows that this ethnocentrism not only occurs at the ontic level – at the level of the description of the world: the very ontological implicit assumptions that sustain the 2030 Agenda are ethnocentric themselves. These ethnocentric bearings are not an exclusive characteristic of the 2030 Agenda, of mainstream development discourses, or of the UN. They are the result of 25 centuries of metaphysical assumptions – what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence. According to Heidegger, Derrida and Laclau, this ethnocentric metaphysical basis was present in the work of Plato and Aristotle, in the Christian theology of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas, in the works that shaped modern political thought (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, etc.), in the emancipatory project by Marxist authors, and in the liberal political project of recent centuries. Development discourses are simply the latest instalment of a long Western philosophical tradition that is inherently ethnocentric, which is why it is difficult to find alternatives to development thinking. That is why thinking development otherwise is a paramount endeavour. It is not only a matter of proposing changes at the ontic level – how to articulate markets, the state, participation, human rights, democracy, etc. It is also a matter of challenging the essentialist ontological assumptions that, for more than 25 centuries, shaped the most important beliefs that nowadays legitimise the status quo and limit the way we conceptualise social issues.

How to construct a global political project that does not rely on universalist and essentialist ontological assumptions? The answer to this question could lead the way to the construction of a truly transformative plan of action.

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