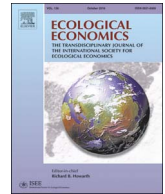




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Analysis

## Discursive Synergies for a ‘Great Transformation’ Towards Sustainability: Pragmatic Contributions to a Necessary Dialogue Between Human Development, Degrowth, and *Buen Vivir*

Adrián E. Beling<sup>a,\*</sup>, Julien Vanhulst<sup>b,\*</sup>, Federico Demaria<sup>c</sup>, Violeta Rabi<sup>d</sup>, Ana E. Carballo<sup>e</sup>, Jérôme Pelenc<sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup> FLACSO Argentina, Global Studies Programme, Tucumán 1966, C1050AAC Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina

<sup>b</sup> Universidad Católica del Maule, Sociology School - CEUT (Centro de Estudios Urbano-Territoriales) – FACSE, Campus San Miguel, Av. San Miguel 3605, Casilla 617, Talca, Chile

<sup>c</sup> Universitat Àutoma de Barcelona, Research & Degrowth, Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals, Campus de la UAB, 08193 Cerdanyola del Vallès, Barcelona, Spain

<sup>d</sup> Espacio Público Foundation, Sta. Lucía 188, Santiago, Región Metropolitana, Chile

<sup>e</sup> University of Melbourne, School of Social and Political Sciences, 420 John Medley Building, Parkville, VIC 3010, Australia

<sup>f</sup> Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique (F.R.S.-F.N.R.S.), Université Libre de Bruxelles, IGEAT-CEDD, Av. F. D. Roosevelt, 50, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium

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## ABSTRACT

There is a growing awareness that a whole-societal “Great Transformation” of Polanyian scale is needed to bring global developmental trajectories in line with ecological imperatives. The mainstream Sustainable Development discourse, however, insists in upholding the myth of compatibility of current growth-based trajectories with biophysical planetary boundaries. This article explores potentially fertile complementarities among trendy discourses challenging conventional notions of (un)sustainable development – Human Development, Degrowth, and *Buen Vivir* – and outlines pathways for their realization. Human Development presents relative transformative strengths in political terms, while Degrowth holds keys to unlocking unsustainable material-structural entrenchments of contemporary socio-economic arrangements, and *Buen Vivir* offers a space of cultural alterity and critique of the Euro-Atlantic cultural constellation. The weaknesses or blind spots (‘Achilles heels’) of each discourse can be compensated through the strengths of the other ones, creating a dialogical virtuous circle that would open pathways towards a global new “Great Transformation”. As one of the main existing platforms for pluralist and strong-sustainability discussions, Ecological Economics is in a privileged position to deliberately foster such strategic discursive dialogue. A pathway towards such dialogue is illuminated through a model identifying and articulating key discursive docking points.

### 1. Introduction: Ecological Economics and Development

Ecological Economics (hereinafter EE) has been broadly called the “science of sustainability” (Costanza, 1991). Since the mid-1980s when a society and a journal were founded, EE scholars have been advocating a necessary dialogue between natural sciences and social sciences, more precisely, between economics and ecology. Following this multi-disciplinary perspective, the EE community hesitantly engaged the

debate on sustainable development (hereinafter SD)<sup>1</sup> that unfolded since the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987. After much discussion, the precise meaning of “sustainability” remains contested; however, there is consensus that EE stands for strong sustainability (as opposed to environmental economics, which would admit ‘weak sustainability’ standards) and for the weak comparability of values (Martinez-Alier et al., 1998). In this regard, representatives of EE positioned themselves critically vis-à-vis the Brundtland Commission (see

\* Corresponding authors.

E-mail addresses: [abeling@flacso.org.ar](mailto:abeling@flacso.org.ar) (A.E. Beling), [julien@ucm.cl](mailto:julien@ucm.cl) (J. Vanhulst).

<sup>1</sup> Instead of marking-out a clear concept, the idea of SD has forged a discursive field shaped by different appropriations, each with their own hypotheses about the nature and causes of the socio-environmental crisis and deriving proposals to address the latter (Dryzek, 2005; Hopwood et al., 2005; Lélé, 2013; Lélé, 1991; Sachs, 1997; Sneddon et al., 2006). In the numerous analyses of the discourse surrounding SD we find different ways of making sense of conflicting interpretations (Vanhulst and Zaccai, 2016). In line with Hopwood et al. (2005), we draw a distinction between (a) mainstream SD discourses (which understand sustainability as achievable within existing social structures, with incremental, evolutionary reforms, as is the case for the Brundtland proposal or, more recently, the UN Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs); and (b) transformative trends demanding foundational changes in social power structures along with radically different forms of interrelation between humans and their natural environment. (see Section 4 Transformation Discourses).

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specially Goodland et al., 1992; and Lélé, 1991). Yet, while reflections within EE regarding sustainability have been abundant, the notion of ‘development’ (often taken a synonym of economic growth) remains largely unproblematic, both within the EE community and beyond.

A singular exception was the rise of post-development as an intellectual critical current of development in the early 1990s (Escobar, 1995; Rahnama and Bawtree, 1997; Rist, 2002; Sachs, 2010). Post-development scholars were the first to fundamentally question the idea of global convergence towards the socio-economic model of the global North. In their understanding, such model is a mental, cultural and historical construct that has colonized the rest of the world and needs to be deconstructed, opening up, instead, a matrix of alternatives (Latouche, 2009).

This critique eventually became one of the intellectual sources of EE, yet it never gained paradigmatic status within the EE scholarly community, let alone in wider political debates. In light of sustained (if not intensifying and/or accelerating) trends in global ecological degradation, coupled with mounting socio-political and socio-economic tensions, there is a growing awareness<sup>2</sup> that a “new Great Transformation” of contemporary societies and their development patterns on a Polanyian scale<sup>3</sup> in the coming decades is likely inevitable, be it “by design or by disaster” (Reiðig, 2011).

It becomes increasingly clear that the mainstream techno-managerial SD discourse, with its insistence in upholding the compatibility of current, growth-based trajectories with biophysical planetary boundaries, has exhausted much of its credibility after three decades of nearly undisputed worldwide dominance with meagre results, at best (Bäckstrand, 2011; Dryzek, 2005; Hannigan, 2006; Pelfini, 2005). Therefore, we argue that the post-developmental critique needs to be mainstreamed if EE is to become a veritable force in promoting a socio-ecological transformation and rising as a powerful alternative to environmental economics. We will further argue that such mainstreaming is indeed possible through the synergic articulation of existing discursive forces<sup>4</sup> within the EE community which challenge conventional notions of (un)sustainable development, on the one hand, and development-revisionist approaches, on the other. The aim of this article is to illuminate pathways towards such synergic articulation, by focusing analytically on three purposively sampled discourses from within a

<sup>2</sup> In this vein, studies of Social Metabolism (often published in EE) have offered detailed and influential analyses on the current trajectories that make necessary a global socioecological transition – for an overview, see Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl (2007). This work has led to a recent UNEP report (2016) questioning alleged global trends towards “dematerialization”.

<sup>3</sup> The work of Karl Polanyi has experienced a revival in recent years (Somers and Block, 2014), whereby his *opus magnum* “The Great Transformation” (1944) is widely regarded as the most compelling analytical and metaphorical account of the *scale* of changes lying ahead for modern societies in the 21st century. Moreover, Polanyi’s work emphasizes a further unfamiliar aspect of modern capitalism in contemporary thought, namely: capitalism as a relatively new system of accumulation that was introduced via a great violent transformation. Susan Paulson comments: “[Growth] is perceived as apolitical and impartial; modern markets, in particular, appear as timeless mechanisms through which all humans freely organize livelihoods and establish value. Polanyi (1944) showed they are anything but. The commodification of labor and nature, together with the colonization of human habits and worldviews by market-relations and money-value, are historical exceptions brutally imposed in 18th and 19th century England by efforts to ‘mold human nature’ for industrial growth” (Paulson, 2017, p. 440). The historically unique challenge regarding the upcoming transformation into an ecologically viable society, however, as opposed to unintended and unplanned ‘great transformations’ of the past (i.e. the Neolithic and the industrial revolutions), is advancing a comprehensive re-structuration “for reasons of insight, prudence, and foresight”. The “long breaking-distance” – i.e. the time gap between the moment of generation of causes and the moment of observability of effects – of many global environmental problems (e.g. climate change) requires avoiding the standard historic reaction of changing direction in response to crises and disasters. In order to succeed, the transformation must be anticipated (WBGU, 2011, p. 5).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Discourse’ is to be understood here as a structured way of symbolically ordering the world. We shall distinguish two dimensions: “discourse as representation” describes ideational contents of a discourse in an abstract manner; while “discourse as practice” looks at the context and material situatedness of discourses. Both dimensions contribute to the understanding of the potential and limits of identified complementarities between the three iconic discourses dealt with in this article.

much broader discursive universe within EE: Human Development (hereafter HD), Degrowth (hereafter DG), and *Buen Vivir* (hereafter BV). These three discourses were chosen as objects of analysis by virtue of their current visibility and their catalytic character in broader development-critical debates and networks in the political, academic, and/or activist spheres in the global North (HD and DG) and in the global South (BV) that have sparked global debates.

The article begins by critically assessing the mainstream concept of development and the capacity of the HD discourse – arguably the most serious attempt at self-criticism coming from within mainstream the development worldview – to effectively facilitate a socio-ecological transformation matching the scale dictated by global ecological imperatives. It then goes on to introduce two emblematic ‘transformation discourses’<sup>5</sup> springing-off the post-developmental critique in the Global North and South, respectively: DG and BV. Each one is assessed in their transformative potential and weaknesses, to finally propose an integrative framework for a fertile mutual engagement among the three discourses and outline pathways for their realization towards a “Great Transformation”. As one of the main existing platforms for pluralist, strong-sustainability discussions, EE would arguable be in a unique position to host such inter-discursive dialogue, building on earlier contributions to the journal of Ecological Economics (Kothari et al., 2014; Sneddon et al., 2006).

## 2. Setting the Scene: a Critical Analysis of Development

The notion of development did long enjoy a virtually unquestioned legitimacy since its debut in the political jargon (attributed to US President Truman’s inaugural speech in 1949): from Rostow’s ‘stages of economic growth’, through Dependency Theory and Endogenous Development, up to ‘sustainable development’, all have hailed the idea of development as the promised land of all historical trajectories.

Decades after the notion of ‘development’ spread around the globe, the vast majority of the world keeps struggling to emulate the ‘developed countries’, while both ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ ones keep operating at an enormous ecological and social cost. The problem does not lie, as it may, in any given implementation-flaws of essentially adequate development strategies; but rather lies in the concept of development itself. The world experiences widespread “maldevelopment” (Amin, 1990; Tortosa, 2001). This includes those countries regarded as industrialized, i.e. countries whose lifestyle has served as a beacon for ‘backward countries’, concealing the fact that these are “imperial modes of living” which are inherently non-generalizable (Brand and Wissen, 2011), as became apparent, at the very latest, with the global ecological crisis of resource overconsumption and biosphere degradation. As Susan Paulson argues: “If climate crisis has a silver lining, it may be the power to provoke residents of high-GDP high-emission countries to question the portrayal of their own societies as ‘developed’” (Paulson, 2017, p. 432).

In light of these issues, it seems urgent to decouple the idea of ‘development’ (or whatever we chose to call some kind of positive human evolution) from unidirectional, mechanistic, and reductionist view of economic growth. Ultimately, the conception of ‘progress’ itself, which underpins the development-ideology, needs to be re-politicized (Chakrabarty, 2009). However, the question is not only about dissolving entrenched misleading narratives: thinking outside the development-fence requires new narratives.

Some EE scholars have indeed opened the debate and included new perspectives, but have done so in a somewhat ambiguous and inconsequential way, avoiding to take a clear-cut position on fundamental debates like the one on the relation between environment and growth.

<sup>5</sup> Following Arturo Escobar’s (2011) concept of ‘Discourses of Transition’ or ‘Transformation Discourses’ is used here as a shortcut for discourses generally promoting a Great Transformation.

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