Chapter 4
Development, Sustainability and International Politics

Jamel Napolitano

Abstract The chapter argues for a lecture of the notion of development as strongly linked to the uneven distribution of material and non-material sources of power among groups. It thus analyses the rise of a public environmentalist awareness in the late twentieth century as a challenge to the capitalist pattern of production and consumption. Finally, the chapter aims to shed some light on the process of mainstreaming these claims by subsuming them within the western model of societal transformation, under the new, catchy label of sustainable development.

Pressing for institutional solutions to environmental depletion has meant to further spread the sustainability goal worldwide. On the other hand, it has also implied a kind of betrayal of the truly transformative instances of many social movements and local communities, which were seeking for a revolutionary, rather than reformative, path to societal change.

4.1 Introduction

This chapters deals with the history of sustainable development by going back to the very notion of development.

As development has mostly been dealt with through international lenses, in spite of the particular local issues raised by processes of societal change, the international structure stands back as a framework able to co-explain the main processes which will be discussed. Once we are aware of the profound power and geopolitical inequalities among states and – more correctly – social groups worldwide, this framework in turn proves to lead to a critical understanding of the rise of the development notion, as well as of its continuous reviews and improvements.

J. Napolitano (✉)
Fondazione Istituto Carlo Cattaneo, Bologna, Italy
e-mail: jamel.napolitano@gmail.com

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Beginning from point four of the inaugural address by President Truman, the first section critically addresses the so-called *developmentalist* era. Since then there have been many culturally specific interpretations of social change and transformation. However, our deep conviction is that, at the apogee of American and – broader speaking – western pre-eminence, the scientific and cultural mainstream was scarcely pluralist. Rather, developmentalism *modernization-style* tended to overlook the history of colonial exploitation of most of the countries invited to replicate the western road to well-being. This storyline, in other words, took for granted a level playing field, thus missing the relational point and looking at any single unit in the 1950s as if it started from the same departing point as western countries in the nineteenth century.

Since the 1960s, however, and thanks to the ideological opposition between the first and the second world, third world countries have expressed their unavailability to be absorbed into one of the two geopolitical blocs. The rise of the non-alignment movement coincided with the rise of, and was in turn analytically fuelled by, lines of thought such as the *dependency school*. Against the modernization school – whose main points are mentioned in the first section – many Latin-American scholars have queried the atomistic understanding of development, outlining the mutual relationship between development and underdevelopment and coming to propose a *delinking* strategy for less wealthy countries. To be sure, dependency as well as other counter-theories had its own internal fallacies. However, it concurred to stimulate debates and initiatives focused on a fairer economic structure on international grounds.

Criticisms also paved the way for a new attention to non-material dimensions such as the cultural one. That cultural turn represented a first, highly valuable breach into the economicist wall of many developmentalist accounts. However, accounting for cultural particularisms has too often meant keeping the binary opposition between modern and backward societies, under the label of modern and backward cultures – with the inevitable and implicit assumption of the superiority of the formers which were, not by chance, the devisors of these asymmetric and mutually exclusive counter-concepts. Cultural intervening variables' misuse has thus led to the attempt to universalise a particular culture, exactly the western one, as the most appropriate to the goal of economic growth.

As all these competing scientific trends were built, the international hierarchy of power has experienced its own changes, the most dramatic one being the fall of the socialist bloc. Thus, after a couple of decades of unquestioned unipolarism, the most common description of the current distribution of power among nations is multipolarism. As shown by Sect. 4.3, economic figures confirm the rise of new economic giants on the international scene. However, outlining the new role of national powers such as China or India – and thus speculating on a new national leadership according to a strict hegemonic reasoning – does not seem enough if we are interested in picking out the new cultural and scientific trends underpinning the current structure of global governance.

Emphasising the soft sources of international power requires paying attention to the ideational grip of a set of ideas, beliefs, institutions and so on and their ability to not only gain the general consensus, but stimulate emulation. In spite of the longstanding appeal of many dimensions of American scientific and popular

culture, the main promoters of the new ideational trends are far from representing a single nation's worldview. Accordingly, taking for granted the weight of political collective actors belonging to government levels different from the national one, one of the core goals of the chapter is to underline the influential role of a broader group of actors. Epistemic communities, entrepreneurs, media, lobbyists, civil servants and executives from multilateral organisations, activists from social movements, volunteers and practitioners from NGOs: they all participate in the process of shaping the changing rules of the game thanks to a faster scientific and lay knowledge production and dissemination. When their grip on processes of submission and selection of social problems, agenda building, decision-making, policy implementation and evaluation has a worldwide outcome – eventually in spite of the local feature of the issues addressed – we can talk about them as transnational elites.

With respect to the development discourse, the role of these elites over the last decades has been twofold. First of all, they have been able to save developmentalism from the impasse it precipitated because of the many theoretical criticisms and empirical failures (exemplified by the lost decade of development), by adjusting it consistently with sensitivities such as the environmental one. On the other hand, they have contributed to mitigating the most drastic demands expressed by niches, incorporating the topic of environmentalism without taking seriously into account the problems connected to the very topic of development.

This is where sustainable development comes from. It was born thanks to the popularisation of instances and claims originally disregarded by agencies and institutions in the development sector during the apogee of western cultural and scientific power. Actually, environmentalism could be looked at as a part of the broader anti-systemic movement, aiming at a radical change of the capitalist lifestyle. Then, it has been legitimised and, as usual, the institutionalisation of conflict has led to a noticeable reduction of its revolutionary contents. Sustainable development, as pursued by most of the institutions in charge of global governance, represents today a reformist strategy, in spite of a long-standing, radical view of it diffused especially at the base.

This is why, among the most genuine sustainable development promoters, its development element, with its intrinsic reference to economic growth, still represents the tricky ingredient of the recipe. The new wine appears to have a good potential for being a very good one, provided that we are wise enough to throw away the old bottle.

4.2 Setting the Development Goal

Since the nineteenth century, a divide was established between natural sciences and the humanities, especially within the English educational and research system, as synthesised by the title of Snow's 1959 lecture, *the two cultures* (Snow 1990). Between those two poles, a third autonomous field of research, social sciences, had emerged by the middle of the twentieth century. According to Weber, social

sciences represent a kind of via *media* between the search for general laws of nomothetic sciences on the one hand, and the idiographic accounts of humanities, on the other. In the aftermath of the Second World War, within social sciences themselves, the line between sociology (tackling the issues of how people live and relate to each other), economics (focusing on wealth production and distribution), and politics (the art of governing the *res publica*), has been further fixed. Meanwhile, new fields of research had been institutionalised: anthropology, furnishing usable knowledge on 'others' traditions once the decolonisation had been launched; and psychology, addressing individual behaviour, emotions, shocks and so on.

Thus, different bodies of knowledge have tackled their own issues, mainly relying either on the nation-state or the individual agent as their basic units of analysis. 'The division of labor among the social sciences has been a practical necessity, but it has had the unfortunate side effect of overspecialization' (Hofstede 1995: 213). For instance, typical anthropological concerns such as cultural diversity were paid scarce attention by non-anthropologists during the post-war period.

The developmentalist discourse has risen exactly in the framework of that general scientific environment (McCarthy 2007). Since the 1950s, the goal of development became institutionalised on international grounds, put forward by the United States as a kind of promise of improved living-conditions (So 1990; Rist 1996; Di Meglio 1997; McMichael 2004).

Before that era, development – as well as the broader issues of change, transformation and transition – had been a controversial analytical dimension for the social sciences, be it for the feared, often unspoken link with societal and political revolutions, be it for the trend to rely on static analytical categories. Thenceforth, however, development has been understood as a desirable, cumulative and linear process that every country was supposed to experience in order to replicate the western path of economic growth grounded on English industrialisation and then on the mass production and consumption goal reached by the United States. In fact,

> Few realize that Americans in 1776 had the same income level as the average African today. Yet, like all the present-day developed nations, the United States was lucky enough to escape poverty before there were Developmentalists. [. . .] George Washington did not have to deal with aid partners, getting structurally adjusted by them, or preparing poverty-reductions strategy papers for them. (Easterly 2007: 35)

To be sure, the idea of a one-style-fits-all model for the enhancement of living conditions had been envisaged in the western political, social and economic agenda well before the 1949 inaugural address by President Truman. However, 'it is only from that moment on that development policy became a truly global endeavor in which the world was divided into two groups of countries or regions, the developed and the underdeveloped' (Lepenies 2008: 205), with the formers devoted to provide the latters with development assistance.

Once that the pre-modern constrains preventing the full deployment of the economic and political revolutionary processes – respectively led by the UK and France (Touraine 1994) and epitomised by the rise of a working class employed in the industrial sector and of national democracies led by elected officials – were overcome, the goal of western countries had become the accomplishment of

economic growth, and then the building of representative democracies. Truman's speech, and especially its *point IV*, has thus only contributed to the universalisation of such aspirations on a world-wide scale, launching the development era and introducing the notion of underdevelopment and the unit of measurement of Gross National Product (Rist 1996). In spite of the fact that 'one can expect definitions of the quality of life concept to be culturally dependent' (Hofstede 1984: 389), the recipe for national development was tailored on the western path of economic, political and social change, and on western peoples' experiences and desires in terms of labour market structure, gender and family roles, religious beliefs and so on. Drawing upon older analytical oppositions such as those proposed by Maine, Tönnies, and Durkheim, the gap between modernity and backwardness became the catching all dichotomy of the post war political, scientific and economic jargons.

4.2.1 Western Social Sciences and Third World's Claims

During the Cold War, approximately two million people, many barely freed by the colonial subjugation, discovered their status of underdeveloped or, in the best case, developing countries: countries and peoples, namely, *to-be-developed*. Against the western and Socialist[1] worlds, the collective label for the to-be-developed peoples was Third World.[2] Developmentalism found a warm welcome in those target countries, which enabled the US to pursue its liberal order on an international basis. In fact,

> Rather than involving whole nations, this acceptance came from small indigenous groups who had been educated in Europe or had in some other ways come into contact with European ideas. (Tenbruck 1994: 199)

[1] The Soviet Union also tried to offer a socialist version of the formula towards the moral and material progress of backward societies, pointing, alike the US, to gain the loyalty of peoples and countries against the antagonist geopolitical bloc, consistently with the bipolar geopolitical frame (So 1990; Di Meglio 1997; McMichael 2004). However, according to some strands of literature, those two narratives shared many prescriptions for the developmental nation-state – first of all, industrialization – and aimed at the same goal: bridging the standard of living divide between rich and poor. For instance: 'the particular recommendations of the United States and the Soviet Union were not substantially different: strengthen the urban sector, expand education, engage in judicious protectionism, mechanize production, and coping the pattern of the leading state' (Wallerstein 2007: 56). That regimes as different as western liberal democracies and socialist states came up with a quite similar understanding of development, in spite of the competing visions of social, political and economic organizations they displayed, is hardly surprising. Indeed, at least since the eighteenth century, scholars as different in their own political and ideological persuasions such as 'Comte, Hegel, Marx, Spencer and others [had] described the inexorable, irreversible, stage by stage and unstoppable advance of humankind through successive stages towards a golden age on Earth' (Du Pisani 2006: 84).

[2] In 1952, Alfred Sauvy, paraphrasing the 1789 title by Sieyès (*Qu'est-ce que le tiers-état?*), introduced in an article called *Trois Mondes, Une Planète* the notion of Third World, thereafter become quite common to indicate both less developed countries and non-aligned ones.

Regardless, this was enough to guarantee the success of developmentalism on the side of target countries as well.

Thereafter, the process of knowledge production and dissemination in the just established scientific field of development studies endeavoured to flourish worldwide, consistently with the model agreed upon by studies of the history of science, which 'have shown that science is a cultural, social activity permeated with values and preferences' (Turnhout 2010: 26). Social sciences reconciled with the 'dangerous' topic of change and commenced to understand development through a normative approach. In other words, the transformation issue gained full legitimacy within theoretical and practical debates. Drawing upon the former idea of progress – and legitimising it definitively after centuries of diatribes between conservatives and progressives – development came to be known as a linear, cumulative and ameliorative trajectory towards modernity, consistently with the older functionalist and evolutionist approaches. This scientific, political and institutional view of the so-called *modernization* school implied the reference to a metaphor, projecting the main features of the development of natural organism – *directionality*, *continuity*, *cumulativeness*, *irreversibility* – onto the social world: this analytical artifice led to the naturalisation and universalisation of a particular history, the western one (Rist 1996).[3] Consistently with an ascending vision of the history which has seldom recognised other approaches to the temporal dimension as equally legitimate (Pomian 1979; Du Pisani 2006; Featherstone and Venn 2006; Ribeiro 2007), developing countries were supposed to pass through a number of historical steps until the full accomplishment of modernisation. 'The new assumption was that, if the countries of the South would only adopt the proper policies, they would 1 day, some time in the future, become as technologically modern as wealthy as the countries of the North' (Wallerstein 2005: 1264).

Of course, modernity referred to the widespread diffusion of the capitalist mode of production and consumption. It also implied the downplaying of those unequal power relations (Pieterse 1994) underpinning western economic path of development both with regard to the social imbalances inside the northern states themselves and the exploitative relationship between richer states and their peripheral colonies. This is why, among the many criticisms the development discourse has triggered, it has been defined as a *project* (McMichael 2004) or a *colonial discourse* (Escobar 1995). It has also been considered an *ideology* the same way as communism, for it favoured the attainment of collective outcomes and presented itself as a scientific theory framed by technicians, scientists, experts, planners and the like: 'it shares the

[3] 'This identification of modernity with the process of modernization, this absolute confidence in the 'progress of the human spirit', to quote the title of one of Condorcet's works, and in the necessity of destroying the old world was so total, so obvious to the majority of Westerners, that still today, at the end of a century defined by a great diversity of modes of modernization and resource development [. . .] the Western countries resist any analysis of their own specific mode of modernization, so convinced of their own incarnation of universal modernity itself' (Touraine 1994: 121).

common ideological characteristic of suggesting there is only one correct answer, and it tolerates little dissent' (Easterly 2007: 31).

Thus, during the golden age of developmentalism, the modernization view informed, first of all, the economicistic approach, epitomised by the evolutionistic work of Walt Rostow, who equated the stage of *mass consumption*, following the phases of *take-off* and *maturity*, with the final stage of the path nation-states follow to become developed. *The Stages of Economic Growth. A Non-Communist Manifesto*, was published in the early 1960s, at the very end of a more than 10-year leadership of the MIT Center for International Studies. Rostow's involvement in US foreign policy is not astounding; rather, it provides us with a clearer idea of the link between American geopolitical concerns during the Cold War and the zenith of the developmentalist discourse. American-style modernisation had to be realised even at the cost of an externally driven, bloody revolution (So 1990). This was the view taken within one of the most authoritative schools of economics and international politics of the time; a school which has traditionally been 'more loosely oriented to democratic values than that by sociologists of modernization or by comparative political scientists' (McCarthy 2007: 12).

Indeed, mirroring the disciplinary specialisation of that period, there was also a strong research line on political modernisation. Under the aegis of the Social Science Research Council's Committee on Comparative Politics, and the leadership of Gabriel Almond previously, and of Lucien Pye later, scholars such as Coleman carried out their inquiry in the field of political development 'pervaded by the dominant ethos of scientificity, with its emphasis on behavioralism, value-free inquiry, quantitative measurement, the discovery and testing of empirical laws [. . .]. And it generally underwrote the need for strong postcolonial states to direct the modernization process through central planning guided by scientifically trained experts' (ibid.: 11).

Finally, there was a stricter sociological approach to modernisation, too. Its main research centre was the Harvard Department of Social Relations, under the leadership of Talcott Parsons. Strongly relying on Darwinian naturalistic explanations and Weberian culturalistic legacies, Harvard University scholars such as Levy and Smelser focused on the gap between modern and backyard societies and, with David McClelland's works on the *achieving society*, were also able to propose a psychological reading of the process of modernisation. Briefly, the general thesis was that

> The development process [postcolonial societies] had already begun under colonial regimes could best be completing by their adopting Western attitudes, values, practices, and institutions – including market mechanisms and state bureaucracies, industrialisation and urbanization, secularization and rationalization, the rule of law and democratization, social mobility and mass education, and so forth. And all this could best be accomplished with the assistance of already developed societies and under the management of strong national states. (ibid.: 10)

On the domestic ground, the main agencies of these developmentalist strategies were the nation-states, the main unit of analysis in the field of social sciences. Besides the emphasis on economic growth – to be pursued through industrialisation – the

second *universal ingredient* of the development project was thus the nation-state (McMichael 2004).[4] Nation-states were developmental states, strongly involved in the goal of economic growth – that is to say, of obtaining an increased per capita GNP, the traditional development measure (Easterly 2007) – and, to a lesser or to a greater extent, also concerned with citizens' wellbeing – consistently with the apogee of Keynesian welfare state (McCarthy 2007) and its implementation within national frameworks differing with regard to their own specific administrative, social, economic and religious traditions.

The geopolitical context of the golden age of development was also relatively stable:

> Cold war rivalry governed much of the political geography of the development project. (McMichael 2004: 48)

Among its main political, military and socio-economic effects, Cold War with its corollary of the balance of power between the US and the URSS and in the more general framework of decolonisation influenced first of all the developmentalist discourse. Moreover, it had a dramatic impact on the international relations between developed and developing countries as well as among the non-aligned countries themselves.

For instance, the bipolar context both stimulated and somehow frustrated political ventures such as the 1955 Bandung Conference hosted by President Sukarno and joined by many Asian and African countries – against the neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism of the two major superpowers; as well as the formal establishment of the non-aligned movement led by Indonesia, India, Egypt and Yugoslavia, and inspired by the principle of non-interference in international affairs. Since the 1960s, 'the Non-Aligned Movement shifted from primarily political preoccupations, such as the liberation of the remaining colonies, towards a focus upon economic underdevelopment as the root cause of their political impotence' (Worsley 1994: 85). From the economic point of view, at stake was the economic model of development pointed out by the existing multilateral institutional order and epitomised by the Bretton Woods system.

One of the first collective challenges against the international economic structure underpinning developmentalism was the establishment of the Group of 77, joined by Third World countries and attempting to obtain the reform of the international trade especially through the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. If nothing, these claims had an institutional impact on the way development was understood by core international agencies: since the late 1960s, for instance, a new focus on equity was introduced within the developmental discourse, as demonstrated by the growing attention towards the matter of basic needs – a topic whose roots were definitely non-institutional. After a strong emphasis on economic growth as the way to improve material wellbeing, the traditionally economicistic analyses of development institutions were widened by a new

[4] 'A discipline which emerged in the early post-World War II period, [...] development studies always took for granted the context of national economies and nation-states' (Rapley 2008: 180).

attention to social, cultural and political dimensions. It was pursued, for instance, through the incorporation of the Human Development Index and the Human Freedom Index, whose establishment and diffusion owed quite a lot to the activities of the United Nations Development Program (McCarthy 2007). Unfortunately, the institutionalisation of the basic needs approach led to its adoption as a theoretical as well as a practical paradigm by many international aid agencies without triggering any serious reassessment of development projects.

A further expression of the issues collectively raised by many to-be-developed took the form of the 1974 proposal to the United Nations for a New Economic International Order. The initiative of the G-77 was strongly influenced by Third World representatives struggling for a united South and stressing in particular the aims of economic growth, the expansion of international trade and the increasing of aid – notions, according to Rist, even too consistent with the old order dominated by principles of capitalism and thus advantaging, at the best, national bourgeoisies of the Third World, rather than local populations and communities (Rist 1996).

4.2.2 The Humanistic Turn

As mentioned, criticisms raised against the old fashion approach to development, with its technocratic and economicistic bias, have brought back into the development discourse an increasing attention towards non-material dimensions of processes of societal transformation. Among the most important achievements for development studies addressing wicked problems such as the material gap between different areas of the globe and the more sustainable paths to transform this state of affairs, we should mention the introduction of an increased sensitivity towards cultural differences.

At the apogee of the development era, the concept of culture experienced many reformulations, criticisms and rethinks within the anthropological community itself (Wolf 1984), while other scientific fields have overlooked it completely. The result was that cultural diversity 'was neglected for a long time because it did not fit in the dominant paradigm of the post-war period: rational choice theory' (Meuleman and in 't Veld 2010: 276). As for the development field, the acknowledgement that, besides formal laws and institutions, market economies also need 'norms or social values that promote exchange, savings, and investment' – that is, a correlate set of cultural, non-written patterns of thinking and believing fitting with the *economic behavior* (Fukuyama 2001: 3130) – has been too often neglected. In the aftermath of the Second World War, development programmes aiming at the export of capitalist modes of production and consumption towards regions whose economies were rather regulated through different mechanisms had not paid attention to the *embeddedment* of economics within the social whole (Polanyi 2001).

Quite the opposite, nowadays cultural diversity[5] can be defined as a *global discourse* (Ribeiro 2007), informing a number of social sciences accounts but still treated with scepticism by many anthropologists, especially those concerned with cultural (Shweder 2001) and post-colonial studies (Fougère and Moulettes 2006).

Currently, there is a widespread awareness that 'different cultures have different need hierarchies' (Hofstede 1984: 396). For example, while tackling the issue of closing the material gap between rich and poor, we should be aware of how our developers approach might fail to fit needs and aspirations of to-be-developed. As far as quality of life is concerned, 'researchers approaching the issue in Third World countries have relied too much on definition of 'quality' derived from North American and, to a lesser extent, West European countries' (ibid.: 397). This top-down decision-making concerning both the identification of the goals and the one-style-fits-all model to accomplish them, is often condemned and viewed as hierarchical and unfair by the very people who are supposed both to cooperate in and to benefit by processes of development.

Moreover, if we adapt Hofstede's statements on the issue of the humanisation of work to that of development, we come up with further fruitful insights into the risks experienced by developers attempting to offer a high quality lifestyle in accordance with their own, particular value-standards (ibid.). This risk is still high when development projects involve local practitioners: even developers originally coming from non-western countries are often socialised to the same set of beliefs and principles as their colleagues and peers from North America or Europe, at least with regard to their own business.

> Many Third World social scientists have been educated in North America or Western Europe. It is difficult for them to free themselves from the ethnocentricity of the Western approaches. This ethnocentricity is never explicit but is hidden behind 'scientific' verbiage. (ibid.: 397)

In fact, since the end of nineteenth century, scientific and political paradigms inspired by the civilising project or the idea of a white man burden, were condemned due to their *developmental* or *evolutionary* approach to culture. However, as we have briefly mentioned, these criticisms are still being raised specifically against the use and the meaning of culture often relied upon within fields such as development studies. This happens because misuses of the notion of culture are common among many development specialists who still rely on the dichotomy between modern and backward society, blaming the latter for its cultural inability to fill the gap with the former. Thus, 'in development economics [. . .], the view that 'culture counts' or that 'culture matters' is now popular in part because it is a discrete way of telling 'underdeveloped' nations (either rightly or wrongly) that the 'Westernization' of their cultures is a necessary condition for economic growth' (Shweder 2001: 3155).

[5] For an extensive treatment of cultural diversity, see Meuleman, Chap. 3 of this volume.

For instance, since the 1980s and especially the 1990s, cultural factors have been evoked by agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF 'as key variables explaining successful transition strategies' towards the building of market economies (Fukuyama 2001: 3132). As mentioned, the introduction of the Human Development Index to measure standard of life improvements from a non-economic point of view 'was one of the most radical paradigm shifts in development policy ever' (Lepenies 2008: 207). This innovation, however, lost some of its revolutionary meaning once it was appropriated by the most powerful western development agencies and thus institutionalised from the theoretical as well as the practical point of view. Referring to intervening variables such as human and cultural ones might imply a kind of *blaming the victim* logic which does not take into account, for example, the possibility that development strategies might be useless or even harmful when pursued in some contexts. The risk, thus, is that of a paternalistic account along the lines of: we provided you with the right knowledge, institutions, resources, but you have not been able to take advantage of them due to your own cultural constraints which prevent you from appreciating the good quality of this external help.

The point is that cultural variables as evoked by some developmentalist narratives are often associated with the implicit universalisation of a particular culture. Indeed, there have been scholars such as Geertz, addressing relativism by establishing a connection between it and the value system. Furthermore, as for the anthropological community, the joint influence of history and materialism has led Wolf to claim that culture is 'ideology-in-the-making' (Wolf 1984: 399). The *uni*disciplinary world-systems approach, in turn, asserts that 'the very construction of cultures becomes a battleground' as it is a value- and interest-driven process, rather than a neutral one (Wallerstein 1994: 39). In Europe, Bourdieu has stated that the classical humanistic notion of culture refers to 'the beliefs and behavior of the 'dominant class''. According to him, this 'culture' is just a 'culture' amongst many others, but it is imposed as the only legitimate one by school, universities, and other cultural institutions' (Harouel 2001: 3182–3).[6]

As we are about to see, the universalisation of a particularism reflects existent power relationships at the international level. The ideal of material progress, a typical trait of western culture, has been 'exported' specifically under the scientific and practical umbrella of development thanks to the hierarchical distribution of power among developed and underdeveloped states. Developmentalism modernization-style has indeed been sold as a good recipe for every single country, consistently with American capability to project its own way of life and to stimulate consensual emulation processes at least until the end of the twentieth century.

[6] Situating culture in the frame of power (and economic) relations, however, is not a specific feature of Marxist analyses of processes of culture production. Rather, in the 1950 and 1960s, it also characterised functionalist approaches such as the well-known works by Talcott Parsons (Paterson 2001).

4.3 A New National Hegemony?

By the end of the 1980s, state-led developmentalism was dismissed due to market-driven criticisms aimed at the failure of previous Keynesian recipes and the corruption they had fostered among most ruling groups. Furthermore, theoretical and empirical claims concerned with the worldwide diffusion of western liberal values and practices as both the most desirable and realist scenario for the twenty-first century experienced a further dissemination since the disappearance of the Soviet Union, which brought an additional flow of Western economic and political principles and left the United States as the *lonely superpower* (Huntington 1999).[7]

Thus, at the apogee of the *Washington Consensus*, structural adjustment was at the core of most development programmes. However, development, understood as *participation in the world market* and based on comparative advantage (McMichael 2004), could not represent the suitable catching-up strategy to improve the destiny of postcolonial states

> For the global economic playing field is by no means level. Its general contours were laid out by the modern history of colonialism. [. . .] Moreover, the rules of the 'free market' game are, as usual, heavily skewed in favor of the most powerful players, who dominate international associations, agencies, and agreements, from the IMF and World Bank to the G-7 and World Trade Organization. (McCarthy 2007: 16)

Meanwhile, in spite of triumphalist western accounts of the years following the end of the Cold War, the indisputability of American leadership over the rest of the world proved to be quite brief. Rather, current years are marked by the decline of unipolarism and the rise of other state and non-state actors powerful enough to impact many areas of global governance. While, with regard to new powerful nation-states, traditional power measures such as GDP still make some sense, the increased involvement of non-state actors in the current process of reshaping the rules for global governance requires a new attention to non-material sources of power.

It is true that, after the fall of the Soviet bloc, western liberal values, whose bishop was obviously the United States, seemed to be finally free to spread across the world. However, after the initial enthusiasm, it is becoming even clearer that the US is losing its primacy over the rest of the world from an economic and political point of view.

Among OECD countries, the growth of Gross Domestic Product is currently slackening (World Bank 2010). The estimated US GDP growth was −2.4% in 2009, while, according to the World Bank, the Euro area is performing even worse. We should notice that, around this time, several Asian countries were experiencing a steady economic growth before September 2008 and were still weathering the financial and economic crisis better than other economies. For instance, China and India were growing at rates of 9.5% and 8.2%, respectively. Similarly, while European recovery appeared the slowest (with an estimated GDP growth of 0.7%

[7] See also Fukuyama (1992).

in 2010 and 1.3% in 2011), and while the US is expected to grow approximately by 3% during the period 2010–2012, both China and India are expected to achieve a GDP growth higher than 8.0% in 2011 (ibid.).

These figures are hardly surprising. Rather, they perfectly mirror longstanding Western concerns regarding the economic boom of Asian countries: Japan first, the Asian tigers next, and finally China or even India.

Among International Politics analysts, these arguments date back to the 1970s, when several scholars stressed the relative decline in the overwhelming primacy once enjoyed by the United States, and anticipated that the days of American leadership were over. Indeed, the latest debates have focused on the supposed hegemonic decline of the United States (due to its loss of economic pre-eminence and/or ideological attraction), the identification of rising competitors (e.g. Japan, Russia, China, India and even the EU), and the projections of upcoming international scenarios – a new hegemony, a balance of power or a condominium of great powers (Kupchan 2002; Sur 2002; Foot 2006; Hurrel 2006).

Hence, global leadership appears today much fragmented with regard to both the material and the non-material dimensions of power. Indeed, beyond the traditional measures of power, it is even more noticeable that the shift towards multipolarism is well felt also within extra-material dimensions. Accordingly, besides the relative distribution of economic and military power in the international structure, there is a further point to make about the purported decline of the American ability to lead the rest of the world. It concerns the so called *soft power*, the broad cultural appeal that a powerful actor exercises over the others and through which it either gains a hegemonic position within the international structure or, at least, strongly impacts the rules of global governance.

> A country may achieve the outcomes it prefers in world politics because other countries want to follow it or have agreed to a system that produces such effects. In this sense, it is just as important to set the agenda and structure the situations in world politics as it is to get others to change in particular situations. This aspect of power – that is, getting others to want what you want – might be called indirect or co-optive power behavior. It [. . .] can rest on *the attraction of one's ideas or on the ability to set the political agenda* in a way that shapes the preferences that others express. (Nye 1990: 31, emphasis added)

Nye's now classical notion of soft power resembles, somehow, the notion of world hegemony. The latter, indeed, when unconstrained by a positivist operationalisation of power admitting only material, measurable dimensions such as economic and military strength, is made up by qualitative elements, too.[8] Hegemony, then, 'refers to the attainment of 'common sense' status by some set of ideas and institutions'. Furthermore, it implies the 'rule of a class or class alliance through a combination of consent and coercion, the capacity for a ruling bloc to set the agenda

[8] Among the many works making the point of the qualitative dimension of power from an IR point of view, (see: Cox 1983; Keohane 1984; Rapkin 1990; Wallerstein 1991; The Forum 1994; Rupert 1995; Robinson 1996; Taylor 1996; Modelski 1999; Brzezinski 2004; Fontana 2006; Lentner 2006).

for various institutions and actors without constantly resorting to force' (Sherman 1999: 87).

That the US has relied upon immaterial sources of power until now, is a matter of fact. What is less obvious is whether it will preserve its soft power in the near future. In recent years, American international behaviour has led to strongly criticised foreign policy decisions and to a reduced multilateral commitment in many issue areas,[9] such as the environment. Consistently, several analyses – some more, some less normative – have proliferated, concerning the weight of soft power and the need for multilateralism and eventually for a policy of burden sharing.[10] Even a former National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, has called for a more universalistic model of American leadership, for

> To be viewed as legitimate, that leadership has to reflect comprehensive global interests; to be effective, it must be backed by allies with similar popular convictions and societal values. (Brzezinski 2004: 87)

To sum up, the appeal of the American dream today appears quite doubtful, as well as its ability to be considered the best model to emulate and thus to gain the consensual loyalty of the so-called *followers*. However, even more controversial is the issue of the purported challengers' capability to not become hegemons themselves but, at least, to take the lead of global governance by means of the universalisation of their own pattern for action and thought.

China does not seem able to wield a widespread cultural and ideological attraction. First of all, it is not a democracy, which strongly invalidates its chances of being welcomed as a leading power by other countries and to project its domestic structure internationally as an appealing one. China, moreover, lacks any of the welfare measures which represent the foundations of citizenship within Western political cultures. Although social protections are more and more under attack even in European countries, a rearrangement of liberal social democracies consistent with Chinese political and economic architecture does not seem plausible. Finally, with regards to the material sources of international influence, we should mention that China's economic growth is strongly dependent on exports, as it still lacks a secure domestic consumption market (IMF 2009) until the full consolidation of its own middle-class and in spite of its demographic weight; and that its military capabilities, growing as they may be, still remain weak with respect to US military primacy (Weber 2005).

[9] The traditional anti-Americanism of a few European elites has thus turned into overt popular anti-Americanism (Markovits 2007) – especially during the Bush administrations (Parsi 2006) – with both a European and an extra-Western, and much bloodier, declination (Martinelli 2004). Public disappointment is echoed in academic literature, too: in most recent years, a number of scholars have expressed their concern about an imperial turn in US foreign policy (Jervis 2003; Golub 2004).

[10] Among others, (Calleo 1987; Kennedy 1987; Mastanduno 1997; Posen 2003).

India, for its part, has passed from the discouraging prospect of the *Hindu rate of growth*, to the 1980s *Hindu rate of reform*, which has driven the country to its current status of rising economic power (Boillot 2006). Unlike China, India does not have to face international legitimacy dilemmas such as a very reproachful, traditional neglect for addressing human rights issues; nor must it demonstrate to other democracies that its economic development has been matched by a consistent political development, since it is already a democracy. However, besides noting its limited military capabilities, it is also questionable whether India will take the lead for global governance because of its scant achievements with regard to the fight against poverty and its progress towards human development.

On the contrary, Europe might succeed in inheriting US strength, and in matching it with a greater concern for matters such as social justice and environment. However, aside from the issue of their material sources of power, Europeans seem unable to mount a cultural and moral leadership whose influence might supersede weakened US soft power. Quite the opposite, the EU has too often demonstrated its receptiveness of the American market discipline, as with respect to the debate about US-style labour flexibility as well as European rigidities and high unemployment rates. Currently, the EU risks missing the opportunity to fill the intellectual and scientific vacuum which would pave the way for the diffusion of fresh policy beliefs for the purpose of economic recovery and the establishment of a new framework for governance. This happens in spite of the link between the economic crisis and the mainstream approaches towards managing of economic and financial matters – approaches which were inspired by the US, before becoming a shared set of formal models and policy orientations with universal scope. Finally, the EU suffers because of the well-known problem of democratic deficit; it lacks a unitary political dimension, as well as a common defence policy; furthermore, as we have seen, prospects for economic recovery of the Euro area are not very bright.

Therefore, we are left with the puzzle that while the centre of economic power is moving away from Washington, it does not allow us to expect the advent of a new hegemonic nation-state able to lead the international system by means of a cultural and normative framework. Rather, the analysis should now shift towards the rise of *non-state actors* as agents able to impact the system of ideas, beliefs and biases in many areas of global governance – and thus to impact, even indirectly – decision-making processes with global reach. In many issue areas, theoretical accounts as well as practical exercises of global governance are further fuelling a longstanding dissatisfaction with methodological nationalism (Long Martello and Jasanoff 2004). Global governance, indeed, increasingly claims for the acknowledgement of the many different actors involved, often informally, in a policy making process which has worldwide impact (Cerny 2001). There are, first of all, non-state actors representing either the sub- or the supra-national level to account for. Secondly, and

especially when wicked problems are on the table, policy making involves actors from sectors other than politics – such as scientists, entrepreneurs, stakeholders, activists and so on.

4.3.1 Epistemic Communities and Global Knowledge

Post-war American scientific prominence in the social sciences had stunted a genuine interest towards non-positivist analysis among IR scholars, and topics such as non-state actors and discursive power were regularly overlooked. However, since the 1970s, this trend is reversing with respect to both methodological nationalism and utilitarianism (Ruggie 1998).

Nowadays, a growing number of global politics specialists assert that methodological nationalism provides an inadequate analytical framework for examining the contemporary reshufflings of power among national and transnational actors. In fact, they argue that current power relations encompass more territorial levels, as demonstrated by the flourishing debate on multilevel governance (Pattberg 2006; Risse 2007).[11] Furthermore, the dissatisfaction with the rational assumptions underlying the once preeminent approaches to the study of IR, has produced an increasing interest towards ideas and beliefs (Yee 1996).

These new scientific sensitivities reveal an interesting feature of contemporary research: the trend to overcome disciplinary boundaries of the past. Thus, after the overspecialisation of the two more autonomous subfields of political studies, policy analysis and international relations, we can now notice a fruitful mutual exchange due to some interesting overlaps between their objects of research. Most important, current scientific trends mirror the unsuitability of analyses of global governance as exercised only within formal settings and by national actors. They, quite the opposite, pave the way for a genuine reconsideration of who are the main actors impacting the related processes of knowledge production and decision-making.

Hence, current political studies show an increasing interest in the role of non-state actors such as *policy networks* working from outside formal political structures (Capano and Giuliani 2005). Aside from the great differences among the possible operationalisation of the network, there seems to be the opportunity to identify a 'minimal or lowest common denominator definition' of it. Indeed, Tanja Börzel suggests that policy networks refer to 'a set of relatively stable relationships which are of non-hierarchical and interdependent nature linking a variety of actors,

[11] Recently, and with special regard to the topic of environmental politics, a number of research themes can be identified, as pointed out by Zürn. They all admit that 'international institutions do matter, world politics is much more than intergovernmental politics and includes a wider range of actors than states, and world politics is not only about power and material interests but is also about nonmaterial interests, ideas, knowledge, and discourses' (Zürn 1998: 619).

who share common interests acknowledging that co-operation is the best way to achieve common goals' (Börzel 1997: 1).[12]

Policy analysis and international relations share a great concern for a specific kind of network: epistemic communities. These networks are made up of experts and technicians relying on scientific approaches and often referring to similar interpretative and causal framework. They represent 'a principal channel through which consensual knowledge about causal connections is applied to policy formation and policy coordination. [. . .] As a consequence collective patterns of behavior reflect the dominant ideas' circulating, often supra-nationally, among epistemic communities (Haas 2001: 11579).

Epistemic communities, thus, hold a relevant quota of soft power, for they are able to shape the political agenda through the scientific knowledge produced in many issue areas. Knowledge-based networks of scholars are directly involved in the production and dissemination of scientific trends ranging from dominant economic doctrines to legitimised knowledge and narratives concerning, for instance, human rights, social justice and the environment. In turn, and especially when wicked problems are on the table, politicians may draw upon these scientific findings, provided that they are consistent with their own systems of ideas and the available policy choices.

> Members of transnational epistemic communities can influence state interests [. . .]. The decision makers in one state may, in turn, influence the interests and behavior of other states, [. . .] informed by the causal beliefs and policy preferences of the epistemic community. Similarly, epistemic communities may contribute to the creation and maintenance of social institutions that guide *international* behavior. (Haas 1992: 4, emphasis added)

Among the most evident feature of that knowledge production and dissemination process, there is its clear supra-national reach. Current literature on transnational networks 'concerns the weight of ideas, the significance of communication along transnational lines, and the capacity of nongovernmental groups to influence outcomes in international politics' (Zürn 1998: 620). Today, working on the impact exercised on policy making by *transnational networks of knowledge-based experts* in fields such as the environment represents one of the most important contributions made by the constructivist approach to the IR research community (Ruggie 1998).

Hence, scientific knowledge production can be described as an interactive process, based on continuative exchanges between scientific communities dispersed worldwide and yet linked together by similar research interests. The way knowledge is produced, the actors participating in this process, and the geographical

[12] Building upon the former concepts of *subsystem*, *subgovernment*, *iron triangle*, Anglo-American literature has been developing the notion of network since mid twentieth century (Jordan 1990) to better take into account how actors other than parliaments, governments, bureaucracies and political parties participate into the process of policy making. 'With the state no longer being the sole entity capable of organizing society, there is a dispersion of expertise and competence, a multiplication of channels for mediation and agreement, and the involvement of different levels of decision-making from the local to the supranational' (Coleman 2001: 11608).

spaces they come from and represent, are all changing from a specialised, hierarchical approach to a more transdisciplinary one – which is among the most pressuring concern of those scholars addressing the topic of knowledge democracy and societal transformations (in 't Veld 2010). Most innovative, non-mainstream approaches are thus making the case for the important role played today by values- and interests- driven actors, linked together transnationally, often socialised to a scientific approach that, if it is not the same, is nonetheless based on the same scientific criteria and able to influence policy making at many government levels.

This does not mean, however, that scientific research, be it produced or not in the attempt to furnish politics with usable knowledge, is free from value biases and pressures exercised by core power groups. Featherstone and Venn, for instance, consider *debilitating* 'the hold that western knowledge has on experts internationally, globalized in the form of the social engineering advocated by international NGOs like the World Bank and WTO and disseminated through countless courses in universities across the world, where the knowledge is taught as authoritative and universally valid' (Featherstone and Venn 2006: 3).

Actually, we should be aware of the mutual influence between epistemic communities and economic and political vested interests. We should also treasure classical insights from the sociology of science by Merton, who has underlined how, 'even in those countries in which the principle of 'freedom of science' is accepted, states and political decision makers clearly have an influence on the formation of epistemic communities' (Zürn 1998: 645). Indeed, as claimed by Turnhout,

> Science and policy are not separate domains but continuously influence and shape each other in dialectical processes of coproduction. [. . .] Difficulties in the relationship between production and use of knowledge are not due to a lack of information and communication. [. . .] Scientific controversies are often characterised by competing knowledge coalitions that use and reject knowledge based on vested interests. (Turnhout 2010: 26)

Thus, the innovative character of studies on transnational epistemic communities notwithstanding, this strand of literature is under attack due to 'its uncritical, almost blind confidence in the role of science, which is furthermore detached from the social context and relations of power in which it is embedded' (Epstein 2004: 49). For instance,

> Policy-making on complex issue like sustainable development is [. . .] usually a relatively fuzzy process in which many actors in the 'policy arena' are involved and influence each other. The production of knowledge to support policy-making is also not a neutral process, but is value-laden and influenced by actors in 'knowledge arenas'. Therefore, a strict separation between science ('the world of measuring') and the policy arena ('the world of weighing') is not possible. (Meuleman and in 't Veld 2010: 267)

Not by chance, the role played by politicians, businessmen and scientists within such a mainstream temple of knowledge as the MIT has been extensively underlined by Taylor in his critical review of the global discourse on environmental

problems.[13] The scholar also states that too often these storylines neglect the issue of how social, political and economic inequalities impact negatively on the way that a truly sustainable transformation is pursued (Taylor 1997). Addressing the topic of societal transformation then requires the acknowledgement that the content of legitimate discourses and worldviews, as well as the process of knowledge production itself, are strongly influenced by geopolitical and power inequalities, as demonstrated by the contents, the methods and the prescriptions elaborated in many western think tanks, research centres and institutions.

While analysing the *globalization of culture and knowledge*, for instance, Featherstone and Venn suggest 'to give greater consideration to our participation in the globalization of western-centric knowledge' (Featherstone and Venn 2006: 1). Odora Hoppers, in turn, draws our attention 'to the non-neutrality of knowledge, especially given the unequal power to pre-empt the construction of meanings and to determine and control the rules governing speech and practise'. In her analysis of the validity of the centre-periphery dichotomical opposition, she claims for the 'acknowledgement of the continuing impact of global geo-politics and power relations on the legitimation of science' (Odora Hoppers 2000: 285).

Thus, in analysing the process of knowledge production and dissemination, we cannot overlook the point that even the most informal and avant-garde scientific, political and media agencies focusing on the ways sustainable transformation can be pursued, are affected by specific power relations and must always receive a validation feedback from the outside – usually from authoritative sources holding the power to decide what kind of knowledge is legitimate enough to circulate and which is not.

Moreover, since scientists 'interact closely in a global context' (Bunders et al. 2010: 126) and tend to adopt the same set of principles and the same approach to scientific research worldwide, especially when transdisciplinary research is concerned, the point of a *globalised knowledge* has been raised (Hulme 2010). According to Hulme, globalised knowledge 'erases geographical and cultural differences [. . .]. Rather than the view from nowhere, global kinds of knowledge claim to offer the view from everywhere' (ibid.: 559). Taylor, for example, strongly criticises the technocratic and moral approach of global environmentalism for it seldom recognises local differences due to peculiar historical paths. Furthermore, he states that a globalised understanding of sustainability tends to ignore trans-local dynamics accounting for how each local community derives its specificities from the continuous interaction between its own social, economic, political and cultural features, on the one hand, and external constrains and opportunities originating from other territorial scales worldwide (Taylor 1997).

These simplifications turn into a very critical issue while we aim to build a fairer governance structure supporting the transformation towards a more sustainable society. On a practical ground, it has been emphasised that sustainable development

[13] (See also Long Martello and Jasanoff 2004).

'as practised in the developing world is largely informed by Western notions and is often funded in accordance with the agenda of multilateral, bilateral, non-governmental and philanthropic donor agencies from the developed countries. This is viewed as problematic because it creates new dependencies for the developing world and raises concerns about whose agenda is being served' (Nurse 2006: 36). Accordingly, we agree on the advisability of questioning the assumption of networks' neutrality with respect to vested interests – thus standing back from Haas' claim regarding the *neutrality* of epistemic communities (Haas 2001). Consistently with the suggestion that knowledge is *situated*, it has indeed been argued that 'which issues are defined as meriting the world's attention has everything to do with who has the power and resources, including scientific ones, to press for them' (Long Martello and Jasanoff 2004: 5). Then it seems fruitful to enlarge the analysis of the most influential actors able to reshape the rules for global governance by taking into account, besides scientists and decision-makers, a larger group of people informally able to co-lead decision-making and policy implementation processes with a worldwide impact.

Actors currently involved in the interlinked processes of knowledge production and policy making come from political parties, lobbies, giant corporations, multilateral organisations, rating agencies, media, NGOs, universities, research centres and think tanks – as suggested by scholars focusing on many different social sciences topics (Haas 1992; Sklair 2000; Campbell 2002; Friedrichs 2002; van Elteren 2003; Brzezinski 2004; Buchanan and Keohane 2006). They tend to share similar higher education patterns and have an outward-oriented approach; in other words, they usually belong to the same, particular cultural framework. For instance, in spite of their legal citizenship and of their own business, we can expect most of them to have higher education levels – often from well rated, Anglo-American style colleges attracting a cosmopolitan attendance – and a good record of work experiences in many parts of the world. Besides the consistency among their formal CVs, they also tend to rely on a high, shared social capital even from a more informal point of view.[14]

Hence, consistently with the transdisciplinarity through which multilevel governance of wicked problems is exercised, there is, beyond politicians and experts, a wider range of actors to look at in order to investigate who are the most powerful figures reshaping the rules of the game in fields such as development and sustainability in this current era of power reshuffling. For instance, when we look at a specific working environment such as international development, we are not

[14] For example, it has interestingly been noted how scientists, politicians, lobbyists participating in the British great season of policy change at the beginning of the twentieth century joined 'the same clubs, associations and other social venues' (Campbell 2002: 31). Informal social links also play a role in the reproduction of a working environment. For instance, 'within the development field, personal relations are critical in such relevant moments as recruitment of new staff members and promotion of like-minded political allies. [...] Networks usually congeal into cliques' (Ribeiro 2002: 173). Grant Jordan (1990), too, recalls the image of *revolving door* with reference to human resource exchanges within stable networks.

surprised by the many, powerful profiles involved. The development sector, defined by Ribeiro as a *power field* because of the different power positions occupied by insiders and outsiders, is said to be made up of

> Local elites and leaders of social movements [. . .]; officials and politicians at all levels of government; personnel of national, international and transnational corporations [. . .]; and staff of international development organizations [. . .]. Institutions are also important members of this field: they include various types of government organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), churches, unions, multilateral agencies, industrial entities and financial corporations. (Ribeiro 2002: 169–170)

Focusing on the broad spectrum of actors involved either in knowledge production, decision-making or policy implementation – and stating that those processes are intimately related – we could conceive them collectively as a kind of elite which, well beyond scientists and politicians, also includes, for example, influential members of the media and business sectors.

In broad terms, elites have been sociologically understood as

> Small groups of people who exert substantial power and influence over the public and over political outcomes. This power is based on the possession and control of various resources, including economic ones [. . .], control of organizations, political supports, symbolic means [. . .], and personal resources. (Etzioni-Halevy 2001: 4420)

Growing globalisation has paved the way for the advent of *transnational* elites, because of the increased weight of multilateral organisations; the legitimacy progressively gained by several NGOs with a global range; and the proliferation of many other political, economic and scientific *fora*. Transnational elites embody the ideational and practical stances of public and private institutions, usually having their physical headquarters in the *global cities* (Sassen 1991).[15] They are involved in governance processes whose reach is a multilevel one.

Most of these institutions and organisations date back to the period of unquestioned American leadership over Western political and economic systems and still maintain the ideational and practical orientation of that epoch. However, they have also been experiencing a visible de-territorialisation, which means greater reception of non-US concerns and autonomy from their former, single mentor. This change mirrors, first of all, the reduced international clout of the US, which justifies a multipolar description of the current international structure of power. Secondly, the increasing visibility of global actors tabling the needs and wills from local levels confirms the urgency to revisit the analytical assumption of methodological nationalism.

Studies on the superseding of nation-states as the unique and most appropriate level of analysis are all but new. After the introduction of the notion of *transnational society* by Raymond Aron (Aron 2003) in the 1960s, scholars such as Nye and Keohane have pointed out *transnational relations*, whose key feature is the involvement of non-governmental actors. They stated that ‘any unit of action that

[15] (See also Martinelli 2005).

attempts to exercise influence across state boundaries and possess significant resources in a given issue area is an actor in world politics' (Nye and Keohane 1971b: 733). The analysis of transnational relations raises, among other things, the *attitude* issue. Attitudes are beliefs, norms, 'opinions and perceptions of reality of elites and nonelites within national societies' (Nye and Keohane 1971a: 337). According to Nye and Keohane, attitudes are also shaped by non-state actors, and the process of new attitudes fostering is an asymmetrical one because only the most affluent and powerful segments of world population 'are able to take full advantage of [this] network of intersocietal linkages' (ibid.: 345).

Then, transnational elites are, even indirectly, involved in many processes connected to global governance thanks to their participation in the stages of agenda setting, decision-making and policy implementation and evaluation. As we are about to see, they are also the main agents able to legitimise and disseminate *world culture*.

4.3.2 Transnational Elites and World Culture

Actors such as experts and scientists specialised in the same field of knowledge and collectively understood as an epistemic community with a supranational reach, 'are often responsible for generating the very ideas that constitute the *world culture*' (Campbell 2002: 30, emphasis added).

Transcending specific scientific fields, this world culture impacts the systems of ideas and beliefs of many people, thus showing both its popular declinations – for instance, McDonaldisation – and higher expressions, as we are about to see.

> World culture refers to the cultural complex of foundational assumptions, forms of knowledge, and prescriptions for action that underlie globalized flows, organizations and institutions. It encompasses webs of significance that span the globe, conceptions of world society and world order, and models and methods of organizing social life. (Boli and Lechner 2001: 6261)

Recently, the idea of a world culture has been circulating insistently among social scientists. For instance, since the last decades of the twentieth century, and consistently with the weakening of both rational choice theory and hierarchical-bureaucratic approaches, political scientists have devoted much attention to 'how ideas, that is, theories, conceptual models, norms, world views, frames, principled beliefs, and the like, affect policy making' (Campbell 2002: 21). Surel has adopted an encompassing label, *cognitive and normative frameworks*, in order to address 'coherent systems of normative and cognitive elements which define, in a given field, 'world views', mechanisms of identity formation, principles of action, as well as methodological prescriptions and practices of actors subscribing the same frame' (Surel 2000: 496). Thus, one of the outcomes of belonging to the same frame is that individuals share a *collective consciousness*, a subjective sense of belonging, producing a specific identity' (ibid.: 500).

The broader definition of culture, as well as its understanding in terms of dynamic learning processes, leads scholars such as Featherstone (1994, 2006) to make the case for the *globalization of culture*. Pieterse, in turn, has outlined how this global culture must be looked at with reference to a process of *hybridization* and *creolization*. Outlining the continuous, relational process of mutual cultural exchange and learning would allow us to overcome the bias concerning the uniformity of culture. He also points out how even western culture has been made up during the centuries trough the interaction with, and the absorption of, other cultural forms and practices with no regard for formal political and geographical boundaries (Pieterse 1994).[16]

The consolidation of a global culture, moreover, should not be conceived as referring to a simple dichotomic framework – an either-or logic between diversity and homogeneity (Featherstone 1994) or local and global.[17] In addition, it should not refer to simple Americanisation and Westernisation. Rather, one of the main features differentiating today's global culture from ancient and modern processes of cultural colonisation lies in the current lack of one or more centres from which cultural elements irradiate (Appadurai 1994) – a validation of our hypothesis regarding the transnational combination of elements from many different geographical scales. Hannerz, for instance, places the origins of world culture in the 'increased interconnectedness of varied local cultures, as well as [in] the development of cultures without a clear anchorage in any one territory' (Hannerz 1994: 236). Smith, in turn, claims that 'global culture would operate at several levels simultaneously: as a cornucopia of standardized commodities, as a patchwork of denationalized ethnic or folk motifs, as a series of generalized 'human value and interests', as a uniform 'scientific' discourse of meaning and, finally as the interdependent system of communications which forms the material base for all the other components and levels' (Smith 1994, 176).[18]

The points to be made here refer, firstly, to the cultural homogeneity of groups cross-cutting formal national, regional or continental borders; and, secondly, to the power differentials allowing for the primacy of a few cultural traits over others.

As pointed out by Hannerz, we might recognise cultures transcending arbitrary territorial boundaries such as nations and regions and carried, rather, 'as collective structures of meaning by networks more extended in space, transnational or even global' (Hannerz 1994: 239). These systems of beliefs, as this scholar goes on to say, 'tend to be more or less clearcut occupational cultures (and are often tied to transnational job market)' (ibid.: 243). Hence, we can imagine most liberal professionals involved in different fields such as politics, media, business, academy

[16] On the same topic of cultural contamination, (see Gruzinski 1988).

[17] See Chap. 2 by in 't Veld, this volume.

[18] Appadurai, too, goes on the difference between the globalization and the homogenization of culture stating that 'globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies, clothing styles and the like), which are absorbed into local political and cultural economies' (Appadurai 1994: 307).

but all employed in the development sector, as belonging to a common cultural and scientific framework. These transnational networks encompassing the realms of politics, media and science, as well as the private business sector (Graz 2003), share the same world culture in its highest declinations.

Then, we should stress the ideational dimension of power dynamics, which has been too often underestimated by structural approaches (Golub 2004; Nabers 2008). In fact, leverage on knowledge and information is a major source for the exercise of power (Risse 2002) and, not by chance, the *high* world culture shared by most of the actors forming the transnational elite is strongly influenced by initially Western values and beliefs, and its grounding lies in a positive bias towards market economy. Supporting the capitalist organisation of economic relations, however, also involves a consistent vision of socio-political arrangements (Ikenberry 1992), allowing broad grounds for social, human and environmental concerns. Indeed, 'western-like aspirations include the desire for liberal democracy, free enterprise, private property, autonomy, individualism, equality, and the protection of 'natural' or universal 'rights'' (Shweder 2001: 3156). As Blyth points out, 'economic ideas can create the basis of a mutual identity between differently located economic and political agents' (Blyth 1997: 246).

As mentioned, looking at world culture as a simple by-product of American grip over the rest of the world would seem quite naïve. Instead, with the current multilayered distribution of power, transnational elites project their influence at all the levels of governance because of their grasp on a number of national and subnational politicians, policy advisers, lobbyists and intellectuals. Indeed, as Overbeek states, domestic regimes and 'internal structures of states are adjusted so that each can best transform the global consensus into national policy and practise' (Overbeek 2004: 11). From their seats within public and private institutions, transnational elites work as 'progenitor[s] of ideas, which they successfully spread through bringing together senior civil servants, business executives, and technical specialists in working groups that give real substance to the concept of epistemic community' (ibid.: 14). Local populations, in turn, are socialised to a set of values, beliefs and practices delivered as universalistic in spite of their particularistic origins.[19] They range from consumerism to individualism; from faith in democratic regimes to implementation of neoliberal recipes; from a notion of globalisation as a self-generating process to the idea of multilevel governance as a regime enhancing local populations' self-reliance while addressing the most alarming global issues such as environment depletion, global warming and energy shortage.

It can be said with certainty that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with these values and prescriptions. However, we have previously urged giving greater attention to intangible sources of power and to non-state actors as agents of power; similarly, we shall now stress how systems of formal and informal rules are all but

[19] (See Späth 2002; Dingwerth and Pattberg 2007).

neutral. Quite the opposite, they constitute hegemonic discourses framed and delivered by the most powerful actors.

Summing up, the notion of culture is, firstly, becoming even broader to include knowledge, beliefs, ideas, biases. In this regard, it is flowing into research areas traditionally less sensitive to the findings of the anthropological scientific community – as proved by the constructivist turn leading many post-positivist research programmes. Secondly, the notion of world culture enables us to escape the fixed borders of nation-states, by explicitly referring to many coexisting and overlapping scales, consistently with the transnational character of both the *cognitive paradigms* and the *normative frameworks* constraining the options perceived as either useful or legitimate by ruling groups and other elites (Campbell 2002). Finally, as we will see within the specific field of development, a prominent trait of this world culture is represented by a wider inclusion of different narratives within the main story line. Nowadays, 'the voices and the views of the Third World are increasingly prominent in world-cultural development' (Boli and Lechner 2001: 6262), thus provoking increased conflicts and fragmentation between the competing and concurrent processes of *cultural homogenization* and *cultural differentiation* (Appadurai 1994).

Developmentalism was one of the cultural and scientific product of American and – more generally – Western soft power, as shown by its broad application in domains such as international power politics, national policy making, scientific research, campaigns of NGOs, individual humanitarian concerns and the like. Since addressing the changing nature and scope of hegemonic discourses and agents responsible for their formulation is one of the major challenges for social sciences, we will describe how – among the non-economic claims underpinning the current world culture – we can recognise wicked problems such as environmentalism.

4.4 Whither Governance for Sustainable Transformation?

Since the 1970s, a vitriolic discontent with developmentalism has been circulating among most Third Word populations.

> The development process itself had displaced them from traditional lands and ways of life, but without corresponding opportunities for absorption into the modern cash economy. Dispossession, marginalization, hyper-urbanization, and the explosion of precarious settlements and informal economies became symbols of a development enterprise that had gone tragically wrong, betraying its most fundamental promises. (Carruthers 2001: 96)

While the days of developmentalism seemed to be over, today the development machine is alive and well. How was its survival possible?

Today, the topic of international development goes hand in hand, on the theoretical as well as on the empirical ground, with the notion of global governance. The latter is said to be 'based on shared expectations, as well as on intentionally designed institutions and mechanisms' (Benedict 2001: 6237). Global governance has a Western or, better, Anglo-American root (Friedrichs 2002; Martinelli 2005),

is strictly connected to the process of globalisation (Friedrichs 2002; Pattberg 2006) and is carried out according to the assumption that 'human rights, monetary affairs or security are to be governed by a global elite, because otherwise the realm of chaos and violence [...] takes place' (Späth 2002: 1–2). Global governance includes many levels for governmental functions, consistent with the current pre-eminence of actors belonging to agencies which cut across state boundaries, with the changing role of nation-states, and with the increasing regionalisation connected to a multipolar structure (Pattberg 2006).[20]

Global governance can be understood as a common framework of principles, rules and laws necessary to tackle decision-making in several issue areas which are upheld by a diverse set of institutions at the sub-national, national and supra-national levels (Benedict 2001). In spite of the claims for truly multilevel processes of decision-making empowering local communities as depositaries of lay knowledge and practices, this set of guidelines is mostly set by transnational elites. To be sure, this is not always a unidirectional, top-down process. However, the concrete opportunity for common people to effectively lobby top managers, chief executives, leading politicians and intellectuals of the OECD countries remains scarce (Risse 2002), the connections between several NGOs and grass-roots movements notwithstanding. This is why the global character of governance has been questioned (Dingwerth and Pattberg 2007) or why it is said to create 'new borders of inside/outside' (Späth 2002: 1). Nevertheless, similar to developmentalism, global governance needs and actually has an ideological appeal for many people. It entails a vertical process of interiorisation of the transnational elites' policy beliefs by local officials and intellectuals, thus representing a consensual tool for the management of global affairs.

Accordingly, the current rules for management of matters perceived as having a worldwide impact are mostly set by restricted inner circles whose membership is far from mirroring old binary differentiations such as developed and developing/underdeveloped states or western and non-western countries. This means that the view understanding global governance as a subtle synonymous for an enduring American leadership or, even worse, a new empire, is a very naïve one.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the US deployed its hegemonic project by establishing organisations and agencies with a considerable supra-national reach – such as the Bretton Woods and the UN institutions, as well as the original nuclei of the OECD and WTO. At the zenith of the *Pax Americana*, these institutions acted consistently with their major mentor. However, in the course of time, they gradually started losing their territorial connotation and attracted agents and goals from other emerging powerful players in the global

[20] On the functionalist research program, pointing to neutral or, in the worst case, technocratic expertise replacing several political tasks and responsibilities, (see Dingwerth and Pattberg 2007). For an evaluative notion of global governance as a favourable instrument for the empowerment of global civil society by the means of a multilevel, non-hierarchical and democratic exercise of governmental functions, (see Scheuerman 2007).

arena, thus incorporating competing demands and claims as the US economic pre-eminence was declining in relative terms. For instance, the older IMF and World Bank experienced an enhancement of their commitment towards and compliance with economic and political concerns of transnational elites: there was a normative turn towards neo-liberal programmes in the economic dimension (Harvey 2005) and democracy promotion in the political one (Robinson 1996). At the same time, new institutions for the management of world politics and economy – such as the G7 and the Trilateral Commission, later replaced by the World Economic Forum – were established. Finally, interventions of and prescriptions by NGOs gained greater legitimacy, thus concurring with the present awareness for social, political or environmental needs of several non-OECD populations.

To be sure, the Washington Consensus is not being seriously undermined, even in the context of US economic decline relative to other powers. However, shared goals, values and beliefs establishing common standards have evolved over the last decades. Formal and informal rules have been adapted to one of the most important structural changes, the end of the Cold War, as well as to the advent of new great powers with their own international ambitions. Moreover, non-state actors such as multinational corporations, financial agencies and international organisations have consolidated their own roles in the process: while they had been mostly set since late 1940s, we should actually appreciate that they have evolved through the course of time. One of the core changes we notice with regard to leverage positions in the context of globalisation concerns the increased assimilation of non-US officials, purposes and values within global governance institutions. Currently, transnational elites seem to be involved in a wide range of issue areas and frequently pursue their own agenda through international organisations, independently from and sometimes even contrary to the declared policies of national governments. Indeed, their American trademark notwithstanding, global governance institutions are increasingly straying beyond US control because of both the institutionalisation processes and the rise of new agents of power, be they state or non-state actors.

This dramatic political and economic turmoil challenging the international structure of power is allowing an increased space for new criticisms within the social sciences themselves. This is not a peculiar feature of the end of the twentieth century. Rather, the literature linking previous hegemonic transitions and cultural change suggests that a critical review of 'the foundations of knowledge has characterized each transition' (Sherman 1999: 110).

As for development studies, we experienced the birth and the consolidation of the modernization theory – with its assumption of a step-by-step transformation of backward/underdeveloped societies until the goal of reproducing the western pattern – in the 1950s. Not by chance, it was precisely during the post-war era that the western pre-eminence and especially American primacy over the rest of the world reached its zenith. The dissolution of the Soviet bloc, leaving former socialist states with no developing model, enabled the diffusion of post-Keynesian doctrines based on economic liberalisation and shrunk government. The modernization school meanwhile had been by and large questioned by other schools of thought – such as the *dependencia*, the *école de la régulation*, and the *world-systems analysis* – since

the 1970s. Following this, *post* theories cast many doubts on the notion of modernity as one of the most catching all metaphors underpinning developmentalist theoretical as well as empirical narratives.

Current diffusion of post-positivism and post-modernism signals that 'a new battle of the books has been engaged' (Sherman 1999: 111). This dispute on tools and methodologies is consistent with the weakening of the old positivist monopoly related to the Western, hegemonic worldview. Among the many outcomes of the current intellectual and scientific turmoil – named by Cerny (2001) as a *small kuhnian revolution* – we should notice an increased consideration of ideological and cultural factors underpinning scientific knowledge production and dissemination, as well as the most popular systems of ideas and beliefs. A growing number of social analysts are paying greater attention to how cultural elements might mediate or even influence trends and phenomena into the social, political, economic as well as scientific arena. Since the 1990s, the post-development approach, for example, has made a strong case for the interaction between power and knowledge within the development field, claiming that 'the knowledge deployed in development is a product of epistemic perspectives of the 'West" (Jakimow 2008: 312).

Furthermore, growing criticisms against modernization and developmentalism, have led to greater attention being paid not only to the human dimensions of development but to the environmental ones as well. Sustainable development

> . . . became part of the critique of neo-liberal development models [. . .]. In this sense the sustainable development paradigm should be viewed as [. . .] part of the growth of new social movements and the rising wave of discontent with conventional development theory and practice. (Nurse 2006: 35)

As pointed out by Du Pisani, environmental damage, natural resources exploitation and population growth were concerns already raised in many classical books. However, they have become truly popular issues only in the second half of the twentieth century, when 'the Enlightenment promise of the linear and continuous improvement of the human condition had proved to be a Myth of Progress, because it was based on human hopes and aspirations rather than human potentialities and limitations' (Du Pisani 2006: 89).

Hence, since the beginning of the 1960s, western people's consciences were shocked by the publication of *Silent Spring*, which cast a shadow on that phase of economic boom. In 1968, Garret Hardin tabled the Malthusian issue of the exponential growth of the population size. The *tragedy of the commons*, the paper said, is related to the inevitable destruction of those common-pool resources by the users: 'a finite world can support only a finite population; therefore, population growth must eventually equal zero' (Hardin 1968: 1243).

During this initial phase, the United States took the lead of the rising green politics. Consistently with its international primacy, it demonstrated its potential for innovation in that new field of policy, thus stimulating, in turn, the distinguishing emulative effect that great powers are able to set in motion with regard to their own innovations. The US:

> . . . was one of the first leading industrialized nations to develop comprehensive environmental legislation and regulatory institutions. [. . .] Much of this state activity was underpinned by the world's most dynamic environmental movement, which came into existence in the mid-1960s. US environmental groups ranging from the more traditional bodies [. . .] to modern environmental nongovernmental organizations [. . .] worked to create broadly based domestic support for a more ambitious environmental policy at home and abroad. US scientists and activists came to play a leading role in the global environmental movement that began to emerge in the 1970s. (Falkner 2005: 590)

Over time, however, the US shifted towards a reduced commitment in the environmentalist field, acting sometimes even as a veto power. In spite of that, green initiatives were in the meantime being emulated by other countries. Many cultural meanings of development, questioning the often unsustainable western equation between it and economic growth, had begun to circulate outside few, narrow and heterodox strands of literature and social movements. Green sensibilities flowed into the official discourse proposed via science, media, politics and business; at the same time, an environmentalist awareness grew among middle and especially upper classes all over the world. Among the core agents of change – whose common trait is the global reach – a critical role for the aim of a *new sustainability paradigm* might be assigned to the 'wide public awareness of the need for change and the spread of values that underscore quality of life, human solidarity and environmental sustainability' (Global Scenario Group 2002: X)

At the end of the day, in spite of many dramatic changes experienced by the global structure of power and of the rise of new intellectual trends, the development discourse had found a way to keep afloat by co-opting in its rhetoric pre-existing environmental concerns: 'Green thinking about sustainability, a radical position 15 or so years ago, has long been institutionalized as 'sustainable development'' (Pieterse 1998: 350). Public environmental awareness, defined by Levy (1997) as a *challenge to hegemony*, has thus been co-opted into the hegemonic discourse itself.

4.4.1 The Institutional Discovery of Environmentalism

In 1968, the UN General Assembly launched the project of the Human Environment Conference. Under the leadership of Maurice Strong, it was held 4 years later, representing the first international acknowledgement of the need to address environmental problems – mainly, pollution and acid rains. Kanie and Haas, thus, link the date of the Stockholm conference to the beginning of the 'institutionalization of international environmental policy-making', whose narrow focus was, at that time, 'on the conservation and management of natural resources' (Kanie and Haas 2004: 1).

The same year, the newly established Group of Rome was laying the foundations of a holistic understanding of the links between phenomena such as industrial activities, natural resources deterioration and environmental exploitation. One of

the core findings of their work regards the clear acknowledgement of earth's limitedness. Thereafter, 'their 'limits to growth' arguments were successfully used, on occasions, to challenge the dominant Enlightenment ideal of progress, which could only ultimately be sustained by pursuing industrial and technological growth wherever and whenever, at all costs' (Doyle 1998: 772).[21]

However, the political and economic international shocks of the 1970s opened a window of opportunity for once isolated environmental warnings to reach the general public, the broader scientific community as well as the more open-minded figures of politics and business. It was during this hard decade that 'proto-sustainability gained real social momentum via populist Green movements in America and Europe when global catastrophe seemed to be imminent' (Petrucci 2002: 104).

The 1975 *Dag Hammarskjöld Report on Development and International Cooperation* seems to represent one of the more challenging documents of the decade. Perhaps this is the reason why it has been left mainly unmentioned; on the contrary, it deserves more than a brief mention here.

What now was prepared for a Special Session of the UN General Assembly and wishes for *another development* – a need-oriented, endogenous, self-reliant and environment-friendly development, that is, a qualitative one – to overcome the crisis of contemporary development, whose little successes had been achieved only with regard to 'the privileged minorities who remain in most parts of the Third World [. . .]. For them the 'gap' has been bridged' (*Dag* Hammarskjöld *Report* 1975*:* 37).

The report, thus, takes its cue from the recognition of a critical situation, to be looked at as a whole made up of 'a few dominating countries and the majority of dominated countries', tied up by unfair, exploitative economic links (ibid.*:* 5).[22] Analysing the potential for structural transformation, it clearly states that the most critical point does not relate to resources' limits, but to their asymmetrical and unjust distribution, an obvious but too often downplayed outcome of economic, political and cultural power differences at the international level.[23] Given the 'diversity of starting points' (ibid.*:* 35) among the nations, the idea of a one-style-fits-all model is rejected; rather, 'the plurality of roads to development answers to

[21] For an extensive treatment of the debate raised by The Limits to Growth (and then by Our Common Future), see Chap. 4 by Perez-Carmona, this volume.

[22] 'The crises are the result of a system of exploitation which profits a power structure based largely in the industrialized world, although not without annexes in the Third World: ruling 'élites' of most countries are both accomplices and rivals at the same time' (*Dag* Hammarskjöld *Report* 1975*:* 5).

[23] 'Sometimes, transgression of the limits results directly from a system of un equal economic relations: peasants deprived of accessed to fertile soils monopolized by large land-owners or by foreign companies have no other resource but the cultivation of marginal zones, contributing to erosion, deforestation and soil exhaustion, while consumption by the rich, modelled on that of the industrialized societies, adds the pollution of wealth to that of misery. An unequal distribution of wealth threatens the outer limits from both sides at once' (*Dag* Hammarskjöld *Report* 1975*:* 37).

the specificity of cultural or natural situations' (ibid.: 7), which should be opportunely enhanced through processes of multilevel democratisation and decentralisation.

Arguing for 'radical changes in development policies and in international relations' (ibid.: 105), this report came up with policy proposals that would have produced, besides a number of green side-effects, an increased government involvement in the production and management of goods. As for the most affluent regions of the world, the pillars of the sustainable transformation envisioned by the authors refer to ceilings on, and price control of, meat and oil consumption; rationalisation of living units to be built as greenhouses; a less consumerist approach to consumer goods and the selling, on a non-profit basis, of high quality basic commodities; the abolition of private cars, to be replaced with public transportation in city centres and motor-cars rented by public owned companies for long drives. With regard to Third World countries,

> At the socio-economic level the reform implies ownership or control by the producers [. . .] of the means of production [. . .]. Commercial and financial structures must equally be changed in such a manner as to prevent the appropriation of the economic surplus by a minority. At the political level, the reform of structures means the democratization of power. [. . .] This is only possible through a thoroughgoing decentralization [. . .]. In other words, each local community should be able, on the basis of self-reliance and eco-development, to manage its own affairs and to enter into relations on equal footing with others. (ibid.: 38–39)

Quite the opposite, a first glance at 1980s economic theories prevailing among the main international institutions traditionally in charge of the delivering and administration of magic recipes to developing countries, would let to conclude that that was the decade of structural adjustment.

However, going beyond that still economistic understanding of development drawn upon by agencies such as the World Bank and especially the IMF, we notice that something was changing in the consciences of the more enlightened sections of science, politics, media and business.

In 1986, after the Chernobyl disaster had shocked the world, *Our Common Future* was published, stemming from the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland. The report focused on the link between social and economic development, on the one hand, and human environment and natural resources, on the other – thus building on the suggestions and findings of the 1972 Stockholm Conference. The Brundtland Commission questioned the old assumption that 'economic objectives, such as poverty alleviation and economic growth, should take precedence over environmental concerns', thus paving the way for current 'integrative and holistic management approaches' (Jabareen 2008: 185).

The Brundtland Report admitted the existence of natural limits; nonetheless, it also envisioned the chance to overcome them thanks to technical improvements and economic growth. Overall, northern lifestyle was not disputed: those affluent countries should pursue the target of a 3–4% economic growth, thus helping both the general economic activities worldwide and the recovery of poorer countries.

According to Rist, the Commission succeeded in outlining the imbalances menacing human beings. However, it missed topics such as mutual exchanges between societies and environment, and the cultural and historical dimensions of growth. This meant that the Brundtland Report was unable to come up with serious proposals for the solutions of said dilemmas (Rist 1996).

Almost 20-years on, an evaluation of the impact of Our Common Future states that critics were right in raising the problems of uneven power relations and, especially, of the 'fundamental contradictions between the renewed call for economic growth in developing countries and enhanced levels of ecological conservation' (Sneddon et al. 2006: 254). However, the non-mutual exclusion between economic growth and nature respect and preservation had been definitively legitimised at the international level thanks to one of the most mediatised event of the 1990s, the Earth Summit (Carruthers 2001; Bernstein 2002).

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development welcomed almost 30,000 people, coming from national governments, NGOs, and the business sector.[24] On the UN side, besides the third generation rights and principles enumerated in the Rio *Declaration on Environment and Development*, the endorsement of the programme contained in the final text of *Agenda 21* must be mentioned. Instead of the strict separation between environmental, social and economic dimensions, 'it proposed integrated systems of management to ensure that environmental, social and economic factors are considered together in a framework for SD' (Jabareen 2008: 186). At the local, national and international level, the implementation of the programme for the century to come was supposed to strongly rely on initiatives and ameliorations achieved by science, technology, education and economy. Accordingly, Agenda 21 launched an innovative vision of transdisciplinary, multilevel governance for sustainable development, referred to as the *procedural* component of sustainable development by Kanie (2007).[25]

Summing up, by the end of the century, green concerns experienced a broadening of scale, from the local level to the global one (Levy 1997; Carruthers 2001). Sustainability 'has become the central adage of environmental policies around the

[24] Among the documents produced by representatives of the civil society gathering around the Global Forum at Rio de Janeiro, there was *Changing Course*: *A Global Business Perspective on Development*, a report written by the Business Council on Sustainability. It exemplifies, with its technocratic and mainstream understanding of sustainable development as a combination of economic growth and environmental preservation, the new interest towards environmentalism among multinational corporations. For a network analysis of the *corporate/policy interlocks* with regard to the WBCSD as one of the most influent transnational policy groups, (see Carrol and Carson 2003). From a more general point of view, an increased involvement of private firms as sustainability partners has been wished for in Daily and Walker (2000) and critically analysed in Levy (1997).

[25] Kanie notices the request for a 'broader participation in decision making. Sustainable development is no longer the pure domain of national sovereignty. Agenda 21 calls for multiple stakeholder participation, or 'major groups', at multiple levels of international discussions, including NGOs, scientists, business/industry, farmers, workers/trade unions, local authorities, as well as indigenous people, women, and youth and children' (Kanie 2007: 70).

globe, and the environmental discourse has been globalized and transcended national boundaries' (Jabareen 2008: 187), thus being subsumed by the exercise of global governance. Moreover, the echo of *Our Common Future* has gone down well with the specialised inner circles of development, and started reaching western middle and especially upper classes consciences, thus affecting their sensitivities and belief systems. Indeed,

> Since the UN Summit 1992 in Rio de Janeiro the agenda of sustainable development is programmatically linked to the inclusive and consensus-orientated decision-making that gets people involved as actors rather than only as voters, and that gets sustainability thinking *mainstreamed* in parliaments, the private sector, and science and humanities. (Töpfer and Bachmann 2010: 58–9, emphasis added)

4.4.2 Mainstreaming Sustainability

> Accompanied by liberal democracy and free markets, sustainable development is now a pillar of contemporary universalism, embraced from industrialized north, to the less-developed south, to the post-communist east. (Carruthers 2001: 93)

The new century approach to development, with its joint interest in the material well-being of the poorer, the 'traditional' cultural systems of non-western people and the preservation of natural environment and resources, strongly requires a change of perspective. After the rigid disciplinary specialisation dominating exactly when the developmentalist story-line was set, today coping with development studies requires genuine but challenging exchanges and comparisons between as many fields of knowledge as possible. Besides this interdisciplinary enhancement on the scientific side, we can also notice a trandisciplinary shift with reference to the increasing institutionalisation of partnerships between science, politics, business and so on (Bunders et al. 2010). Furthermore, scholars and practitioners have begun to enrich their analysis with factors and variables once neglected such as non-material dimensions and non-state actors. Sustainable development is certainly one of these wicked problems requiring the empowerment of actors belonging to different circles and geographical levels as well as the promotion of different cultural settings and belief structures. A genuine governance towards sustainable transformation requires that local contexts have always to be allowed for, since any specific place has its own characteristics and 'what is thought of as 'sustainable' is often dependent on assumptions and values' (Töpfer and Bachmann 2010: 60).[26]

[26] Indeed, for example, during a 1996 conference joined by the Environment and Developing Areas Research Groups of the IBG 'speakers analysed how far researchers can collect information about environmental change and physical processes in a manner which allows researchers to be aware also of their own social and cultural settings'. Moreover, they underlined the need to reform the knowledge production processes in the environmental field in order to 'enable new agendas to emerge, that might support previously unrepresented groups' (Batterbury et al. 1997: 126).

As mentioned, Western developers have discovered a new interest in local traditions and cultures underpinning lifestyles whose environmental impact seems less dangerous than the western one. Besides the realms of politics and science, media too have engaged in the processes of knowledge production for sustainable development within knowledge democracies, thus affecting the following process of decision making. Finally, environmental concerns are being incorporated into the vision and the strategy of many private, profit seeking firms, too. To sum up, as noticed by Du Pisani, even before the 1970s economic downturn,

> Ecological disasters received much media publicity. Films, TV programmes and pop music popularized the idea of an imminent ecological crisis. Earth Day was celebrated for the first time in 1970. The Green Movement took off, the first environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs), Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, were established, environmental groups became more outspoken, ecologism became an ideology of some importance and green political parties started making an impact. (Du Pisani 2006: 89)

Hence, our thesis is that the acceptance of the environmental issue among decision-makers has followed the outside initiative model diffused, according to Cobb, Ross and Ross (1976), into egalitarian contexts. Strongly felt, at the beginning, among a few sectors of the civil society – such as activists and grass-roots movements – collectively referred to as anti-systemic movement, environmentalism has entered the public and, finally, the formal agenda. 'The language of sustainability was once a discourse of resistance, fusing radical environmental consciousness with a critical rethinking of a failed development enterprise. It provoked challenging questions about scarcity and limits, affluence and poverty, global inequality, and the environmental viability of westernization'. It has passed, however, from opposition to orthodoxy, argues Carruthers (2001: 93).

Of course, the rise of the environmentalist issue at the top of the policy agenda mirrored the difficult circumstances of the times and the absence of good alternatives: 'there were few ideational competitors. Resource management bodies had traditionally been staffed by neoclassical economists and resource managers, who had been discredited by broadly publicized environmental disasters and the energy crisis of the 1970s as well as the limits to growth debate, [. . .] and attendant popular fears of widespread resource depletion' (Haas 2001: 11584).

Anyhow, as far as our knowledge democracies are concerned, we might maybe see the glass at least as half full compared to the post II World War times. It is true that 'poorer and more peripheral societies are less able to bring their cultural models to the world-cultural table, but many participants in the global arena from richer societies have become strong advocates of the poor and peripheral' (Boli and Lechner 2001: 6264). Indeed, transnational elites involved into the development business are more aware than before of the need to take into account different development paths and to discard the previous dominating focus on material and economic factors. 'New formulations – grassroots development, pro-peasant development, eco-development, bottom-up development, people-centered development, and so forth – opened up myriad paths in the quest to conceive an alternative, ecologically sustainable, socially-just development trajectory for the South' (Carruthers 2001: 96). Development discourses have also incorporated a noticeable

concern for matters of inter-generational equity and justice. As synthesised within the three Ps strategy, calling for economic, social and environmental responsibilities, development processes and transformations must pursue the joint goals of Profit, People and Planet, with a careful evaluation of long-term outcomes produced by policy implementation. Consistently, 1990s scientific literature 'presented evidence to show how environmental problems in developing countries are not the result of short-term impacts of rising population or economic growth, but instead the result of complex long-term human-environment interactions' (Batterbury et al. 1997: 127).

Global governance for a more environmentally friendly management of the twentieth century changes at the economic, political and social levels seems to have more chance of success than in the previous epochs of great transformations. The broad goal of sustainability has been adopted worldwide, thus facilitating the embracing of green policy alternatives that would have found many vetoes only a couple of decades ago. Haas can thus evoke a 'consensual wisdom within the international community of environmental policy analysts'. They share, indeed, a simultaneous concern for environmental degradation, economic growth and the material gap between the richest and the poorest segments of world population. The *new policy doctrine* associated to sustainability 'argues that most social ills are nondecomposable, and that environmental degradation cannot be addressed without confronting the human activities that give rise to it. Thus sustainable development dramatically expanded the international agenda by arguing that these issues needed to be simultaneously addressed, and that policies should seek to focus on the interactive effects between them' (Haas 2004: 570). This picture, however, also has a negative side.

> There is also the view that mainstream notions of sustainable development co-opt rather than challenge, for example, neo-liberal economic hegemony because it shares a similar foundational premise as hegemonic development approaches in that it still prioritizes capital accumulation, for example, concepts like growth and efficiency remain part of the sustainable development discourse. [. . .] Mainstream notions of sustainable development fall within the narrow confines of modernization theories of development which prioritizes an image and vision of development scripted in the tenets of Western technological civilization that is often promoted as the 'universal' and the 'obvious'. What it does is to legitimize so-called modern Western values and to delegitimize alternative value systems thereby constructing a global cultural asymmetry between the 'West' and the 'Rest.' (Nurse 2006: 35)[27]

And what is more, even after sustainability gained its current status of buzzword in the 1990s, 'the Northern way of life – with all its internal contradictions and stresses – remained on a non-negotiable track' (Petrucci 2002: 105). On the other hand, most of the local roads to sustainability sometimes compete with western theoretical and empirical understanding of (sustainable) development itself. For instance, local communities whose lifestyles are at odds with the tenets of individualism, hierarchy and commodification are often the real inhabitants of

[27] For a radicalisation of the opposition between the *West* and the *Rest*, (see Huntington 1997).

geographical areas representing a strategic environmental resource for the entire globe; they know how to take care of these environments and landscapes in a way which is consistent with their own beliefs and values systems.

Quite the opposite, common use of the notion of sustainable development involves, implicitly or explicitly, an enduring reference to notions of industrialisation and modernisation which are, in turn, linked to the idea of economic progress (Nurse 2006). Consistently, 'quality of human life is routinely measured in terms of access to, and possession of, tangible objects, particularly manufactured goods' (Frazier 1997: 184).

Thus, it seems correct to conclude that the developmentalist worldview has been gradually reformed, rather than revolutionised. Decades of dramatic challenges have produced many adjustments, but have not succeeded in eradicating the developmentalist *forma mentis* from the cultural and scientific systems of beliefs shared by the most important actors in charge of global governance and thus assimilated by a vast majority of global citizens. These reformative changes affecting the developmentalist *weltanschauung* might be understood by referring to the Gramscian notion of *transformism*, 'the cooptation of potential leaders of subaltern groups and the assimilation in a more innocuous form of their most subversive discourse. Transformism is an integral part of a managerial understanding of power seeking to rebalance the deep social tensions arising out of global capitalism' (Graz 2003: 327).

Environmentalism had been downplayed by mainstream knowledge, science, politics, business and media as a critical counter-discourse carried out by grass root groups in the non-western world and by social movements in western(ised) countries. Actually, it has now been assimilated as a legitimate aim within the development discourse. The latter, however, is not fully consistent with the original needs and wills of many local communities:

> Southern grassroots movements, in particular, regard global environmental managers and their powerful state allies as focused on managing the global environment to ensure the profitability of global economic activity. (McMichael 2004: 253–254)

The point to make here is that the co-optation of the more radical understandings of environmentalism would have meant a critical review of the capitalist mode of production, which is based on material growth. In fact, as claimed more than 20 years ago, potential public problems win the race for societal attention due to 'a complex organizational and cultural competition' (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988: 58) and the selection of social problems is strongly influenced by their fitness with 'shared cultural preoccupations and political biases' (ibid.: 64). In addition, current analyses also stress that

> New ideas must find some 'fitness' with the existing international social structure – or broader sets of institutionalized norms already accepted as legitimate bases of governance in the international system. (Bernstein 2002: 8)

Thus, the incorporation of sustainability into the mainstream storyline has been made by establishing the feasibility of two different goals, regarded by many as strongly conflicting: economic growth and nature preservation. 'For the Northern governments and multinationals, this form of sustainability has the allure of

requiring very little actually to change, particularly in terms of key values that continue to be expressed, in spite of some policy concessions, throughout the global political economy' (Petrucci 2002: 105). Bernstein, thus, makes the case for the *compromise of liberal environmentalism*, built upon the findings of the 1992 Rio Summit, which 'has enabled environmental concerns to rise to a much more prominent place on the international agenda that would otherwise have been possible, even if the original goals and transformative hopes of global environmentalism have been altered in the process' (Bernstein 2002: 2).

The progressive overlap among mainstream, on the one hand, and human and social concerns, on the other, can be tracked in the past decades, as implicitly suggested by Rist (1996). Since the 1970s, an interesting alliance was reached among NGOs and the development establishment represented mainly by the World Bank through the diffusion of the *basic needs* approach – as already mentioned. Following this, in the 1980s, the antagonism between UN style programmes, on the one hand, and the economic and policy recipes originating from agencies such as the World Bank and especially the IMF, on the other, could be overcome as structural adjustment began to be understood in both the institutional settings as *structural adjustment with human face*. Finally, 'sustainable development ideas found support within other UN institutions previously reluctant to incorporate environmental concerns, such as the World Bank, which could now formulate environmental policies that it viewed as consistent with its broader goals of promoting economic growth and liberalization' (Bernstein 2002: 10). Currently, the general notion of *human development* – capturing many non-economic dimensions such as sustainability – has reached a general acknowledgement, which leaves, at least in rhetoric, almost in a marginalised position the tougher stances of the IMF and more in general Northern radical liberalist views stemming from the Washington Consensus.[28]

> Because the new sustainability no longer threatens other priorities, First World governments are just as pleased as their southern counterparts to grant it a high institutional and policy profile. So too have supranational bodies, including the United Nations, the OECD, the World Bank, the European Union, and the North American Free Trade Area. Because it emphasizes technology, private initiative, and enhanced market competition, business leaders have also responded, eager to shake off the image of rapaciousness and be refashioned as defenders of nature. Finally, sustainable development is most concretely a reality in the transnational universe of NGOs, from the smallest local grassroots organizations in the shantytowns of the Third World, through the middle terrain of

[28] The human development trend, however, does not fail in rising criticisms, at least within the scientific community. It has been labeled, for example, as a *final insult* by Doyle, for its insisting that 'poor training and lack of 'human development' have led to these inequities; not maldistribution or exploitation by transnational corporations and elites existing both in the North and the South'. This kind of blaming the victim approach mostly circulating among elitarian groups, Doyle goes on, claims for a learning process enabling people to endorse the sustainability discourse everywhere: 'this is Northern imperialism, using the language of ecology as its vessel' (Doyle 1998: 782).

> supportive intermediary organizations, up to the gleaming offices of the wealthy international organizations of the north. (Carruthers 2001: 102)

Currently, a distinction between two environmentalist lines is quite common in scientific debates. For example, Gilbert Rist's analysis of the legitimation of the environmentalist trend followed the publication of Our Common Future and the Earth Summit outlines a contradiction between two main environmentalist houses. The first group seems willing to accept production increases as long as they respect the ecosystem, and thus to recognise the need to respect external limits to human (and economic) activities (Rist 1996). This approach resembles the *doctrine of deep ecology* which, according to Jabareen (2008), valorises the *intrinsic right of nature*. It is also very close to environmental sensitivities of some grass-roots movements, focusing on 'the growing conflict on the margins between local cultures and the global market' (McMichael 2004: 249) and strongly criticizing attempts by both states and firms 'to 'monetize' and harvest natural resources on which human communities depend' (ibid.: 247). According to Goodin, often this 'environmentalist action takes the form of protest politics', thus resembling other contemporary social movements with which environmentalists 'share the same broad concern [. . .] with the socioeconomic institutions of contemporary capitalism and the acquisitive, materialist values underlying them' (Goodin 2001: 4686).

On the other side, the mainstream understanding of sustainable development remains focused on the universalisation of a faster pattern of economic growth (Rist 1996), consistent with Jabareen's *doctrines of light ecology*, which tend to the *domination of nature* (Jabareen 2008). Here, environmentalists' key claims refer to a better regulation of natural damages triggered by economic growth, and 'challenge the assumptions and practices of unbridled economic growth, arguing for scaling back to a renewable economic system of resource use' (McMichael 2004: 246).

Generally speaking, that latter strand of environmentalism does not seem seriously interested in negotiating the life patterns of the richest segment of the world population. Rather,

> Since attaining *intra*generational equity requires immediate adjustments in power and wealth within the present generation [. . .], the sacrifices contemporary individuals would have to make can be avoided by deferring the equity issue to the future, when members of coming generations will have to make even greater sacrifices. (Frazier 1997: 187)

Thus, this approach is almost forced to rely, at least rhetorically, on the goal of the universalisation of a lifestyle currently enjoyed by a small minority of the world population. This aim, however, encounters some strong limitations from both the environmental and the distributional points of view. First of all, it seems doubtful that the current models of production and consumption – beneficiating a small segment of the world population – are sustainable in the long run. Then, there is of course the point of *intra*-generational equity, whose urgency had been already

outlined by the *Dag Hammarskjöld Report*.[29] This argument is often disregarded in favour of the *inter*-generational one. However, if we are unable to set a fairer agenda for the present, the respect of the rights and the needs of future generations become a lot harder to achieve.

Thus, while addressing the issue of the current unjust distribution of resources, we are left with the auspice to universalise as soon as possible the wellbeing of the smallest fraction of the world population. This wishful thinking seems to have been fully absorbed within the current global culture. Unluckily, this goal is an unsustainable one!

> Current rates of growth in the consumption and transformation of environmental resources are threatening the sustainability of this life support system and of our security. (Töpfer 2004: 1)

Herman Daly, for instance, considers sustainable development as a 'synonym for the oxymoronic 'sustainable growth'', which represents, in turn, an *impossibility theorem* (Daly 2010: 12) since, as pointed out by Carruthers,

> The planet could not handle, ecologically, the universalization of a European or North American mass-consumption lifestyle. [. . .] Global sustainability would ultimately require facing up to the formidable political challenge of a significant redistribution of wealth and resource use. (Carruthers 2001: 95)

Again:

> Our way of life is unglobalizable; 'levelling up' all national economies to approach the production and consumption patterns of the most developed would make the planet uninhabitable. In particular, the levels of resource depletion and environmental degradation they entail are physically unsustainable. (McCarthy 2007: 26)

Finally:

> Any increase in [the poor's] share of resource implies a colossal change in accessibility as well as in processes of distribution and allocation. However, material reserves are finite; consequently, a major change in allocation will mean increasing resources in some places while *limiting* or *decreasing* them in others. (Frazier 1997: 185)

Put simply, alleviating poverty (development) without destroying natural environments (sustainability) would require, by and large, a reversal of the current patterns of consumption, rather than the globalisation of the high-consumption lifestyle. Taking a longitudinal approach different from the one pointing out the current, simultaneous presence of two environmentalist houses, a 2002 report focusing on *great transition* claims that 'the *first wave* of sustainability activity, in progress since the Earth Summit of 1992, is insufficient to alter alarming global developments. [. . .] A *new sustainability paradigm* would challenge both the viability and the desirability of conventional values, economic structures and social arrangements' (Global Scenario Group 2002: X).

[29] As the redistribution of resources is concerned, 'it will be too late tomorrow to seek new solutions. The future depends on choices made now' (*Dag* Hammarskjöld *Report* 1975*:* 26).

The environmental and distributive dilemma raised by reformist environmentalism willing to green the economy and not the whole societal organisation is not accidental. Quite the opposite, this state of affairs is a direct consequence of the diffusion of environmental awareness of the last decades.

Greening the developmentalist discourse has meant, first of all, a public attention towards environmental damages. However, as we have seen, it has done so by incorporating into that approach concerns, originally expressed by anti-systemic movements, that do not go as far as to challenge the common view of the growth imperative. Jabareen, using a conceptual analysis methodology, finds that linking the notion of sustainability to that of development has meant a change of focus from environment to capitalist economy. This *ethical paradox* implies that sustainable development 'is accordingly deemed able to cope with the ecological crisis without affecting the existing economic relationships of power. Capitalism and ecology are no longer contradictory when brought together under the banner of SD' (Jabareen 2008: 181–2).

The so-called *alternative soul* of the post development approach to global inequalities has thus lost its more critical features while being incorporated within a unique, mainstream approach to development. The old opposition between alternative and mainstream development has been replaced by a weaker opposition within the mainstream itself. Since the 1990s, 'several features of alternative development – the commitment to participation, sustainability, equity – are being shared (and unevenly practiced), not merely in the world of NGOs but from UN agencies all the way to the World Bank' (Pieterse 1998: 370). The continuum within current development discourse, then, runs from the human and social approach to the recipe of structural adjustment. 'Institutionally this rift runs between the UN agencies and the IMF, with the World Bank – precariously – straddled somewhere in the middle' (ibid.: 360).

In order to tackle the environmental degradation, our current approach to policy-making requires, instead, a more radical 'approach to governance – a paradigm shift in the way that governance is carried out and decisions are made and implemented' (Töpfer 2004: 2). In other words, there is still a long way to go if we want to adjust current cultural understanding and technical practice of governance to the goal of sustainable transformation.

4.5 Summary

In the aftermath of the Second World War, within the international framework of bipolarism, the goal of development as the main strategy to be pursued by new independent states was set. In fact, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this aim has definitively been transformed into the ambition of Sustainable Development, a more encompassing process of societal transformation to be experienced by every human community in the new framework of a multipolar and chaotic international setting.

What has happened over the past half century? This chapter has attempted to explore the process of mainstreaming sustainable development, critically examining its roots and thus looking at its progenitor, the developmentalist approach. Situating that discourse in the broader picture of power changes at the international level, we appreciate how we have moved from a very restricted understanding of development to a multidimensional, qualitative concept.

The original developmentalist programme has been analysed with special regard to the modernization school, a twentieth century American version of evolutionism, which has underpinned this discourse both in academic theories and empirical practices in a specific international environment, the Cold War.

Currently, we tend to describe, in spite of the post 1989 claims of enduring unipolarity, the current structure of power as a multipolar one, especially from the economic point of view. However, this does not mean that we are about to see the rise of a new hegemonic country able to produce an agreed scientific worldview and to shape popular sets of ideas and beliefs about how the world should work and actually works. In other words, economic multipolarism is not matched by the rise of a powerful nation-state whose scientific mainstream in the development sector has been universalised as the dominant paradigm and whose lifestyle, broadly understood, has stimulated consensual emulation abroad. Soft power, quite the opposite, appears much more fragmented than in the past.

Today, recognising the main decision-makers is a hard task, consistently with the increasing overlapping of both institutional and informal power *loci* at the international level. In many issue areas, such as those related to environment, theoretical works on, and practical exercise of, global governance are stimulating a review of the old assumption of methodological nationalism. Besides the flourishing of sub- and supra-national government levels, many other actors from any geographical scale are engaged in the current process of laying the foundations for the governance of issues perceived as global, even in spite of their possible local origins. The increasing role of organisations, agencies and institutions, far from embodying a simple American worldview, reflects both the multipolar character of the international structure and the opportunity to replace a hegemonic understanding of social change with a new attention to non-state actors.

This chapter has thus stressed specifically the role of non-state actors, able to participate in processes such as selection of social problems and agenda-building, decision-making, policy implementation and evaluation. They belong to sectors such as politics, scientific research, media, and private business. They also impact the system of knowledge, ideas and beliefs in many issue areas of global governance thanks to the peculiar features of knowledge democracies. As the fall of a dominant mainstream has stimulated the rise of smaller, less powerful and yet influential storylines, it is our conviction that the analysis of governance towards processes of societal transformations must be enriched by paying greater attention to those non-state actors.

Specifically, we have worked on the role of epistemic communities, stressing their increasingly trans-national reach, their ability to influence decision-making as well as their non-neutrality with regard to topics such as power and geopolitical

inequalities. This has led us to look at a wider group of actors impacting global governance, and so with this we moved to the more encompassing notion of transnational elites. We can now conclude that these variegated groups of actors actively participate into the current reshaping of global agenda by means of either knowledge production in many scientific sectors or global culture – the latter indirectly impacting policy making through its hold on the public's sensitivities.

In this setting, development is pursued, at least theoretically, through a greater awareness of cultural diversity, for instance. Human dimensions are always accounted for, even within development projects funded by promoters of economic growth. Furthermore, which is our key concern, development has taken a green colour, and since we have tried to underline how people directly or indirectly involved in the process of policy making are socialised into similar patterns of world culture and globalised knowledge, we finally moved to current environmentalism. It has here been understood as both a by-product of the increased pluralism and a further stimulus towards the inclusion and the enhancement of smaller, local scales within the global picture worked at by transnational elites.

The aim of sustainability is today an agreed one, and demonstrates the potential for reception of arguments originally articulated by small groups outside formal governmental structures. The genuine advantage over the old developmentalist approach mainly carried out by Western developers, lies in the broader intellectual horizon of the actors involved in the process of knowledge production and policy making: community centred approaches, basic needs and sustainability represent now important cornerstones of the mainstream development discourse, at least on a theoretical ground. Global recognition of environmental issues mirrors the still weak but increasing empowerment of small communities, sub-national policy levels, anti-systemic and grassroots movements, as well as scientific vanguards. From the scientific point of view, greening the development concept appears to be the right strategy in order to keep the developmentalist machine working on; it also represents a small paradigm shift whose accomplishment mirrors, among other things, the increased pluralism at the international level.

At the same time, sustainability is still a controversial goal, as shown by the very definition of sustainable development proposed by the Brundtland Report and then agreed upon by most accounts specifically thanks to its open-ended and vagueness features. In other words, the broad goal of sustainability has been adopted worldwide, thus stimulating a multilateral policy-making that would have found many vetoes only a couple of decades ago. Unluckily, this process shows also a negative side, as sustainability has been absorbed within the same ideational framework as old developmentalism, so that it is today pursued conjunctly with the goal of economic growth. The dominant discourse of sustainable development does not go as far as to question the inequalities among countries and groups, which remains at the base of the longstanding, unsustainable pattern of production and consumption enjoyed by a small minority of the world population.

This happens because the transformation of radical environmentalist claims into a mainstream discourse that enabled development to survive the long list of criticisms it had attracted was mostly realised without a serious review of the

capitalist mode of societal organisation. Rather, environmentalism had to be made consistent with the pre-existing worldviews in the economic field. Among the many constrains current governance towards sustainability encounters, there is thus the longstanding imperative of economic growth, recognised by many analysts and practitioners as hardly consistent with an enhanced care for environmental (as well as social and human) matters.

Moreover, the very fact that environmental issues are addressed at the global level makes the concrete opportunity for common people to lobby transnational elites very hard. We are familiar with claims for truly multilevel processes of decision-making that would finally empower local communities as depositaries of lay knowledge and practices. However, in spite of the attempts to overcome top-down and hierarchical approaches to local problems, the framework of guidelines represented by global governance is mostly set by transnational elites socialised into a particular system of beliefs involving, among other things, the unquestioned primacy of the capitalist mode of production and consumption.

The impasse of sustainable development is thus explained, at least in part, by the fact that the reception of green concerns within the formal agenda has meant the institutionalisation of a reformist view, in spite of the bottom-up path that the selection of this social problem had followed from grass-roots movements to the top of the agenda of the most important global institutions. Today, this fitness between green claims, on the one hand, and economic liberalism, on the other, stands thus as both the reason for the success of environmentalism and the constraints which it encounters.

This is where we stand today. Where do we want to go tomorrow? Currently, we are still laying the foundations for more sustainable organisations of social life, and environmental issues are at the top of the international agenda, under the name of sustainable development. Accordingly, we are left with the hard tasks to eradicate the imperative of economic growth from sustainability and strengthen the multi-level dimension of governance, instead of the global one – the final goal being the full inclusion of, and the acknowledgement of dignity to, social systems far from assimilating all the western features connected to a capitalist understanding of well-being.

This is not just utopistics. This is a challenging scientific, political and cultural programme which requires a consistent effort on scientific, political and cultural grounds. As we have already experienced the change from a hierarchical and economicistic understanding of development to a view stressing its human and environmental dimensions, we should still try hard to further ameliorate the governance structure in a sustainable way. Taking advantage of the turbulence of our times, scientists first of all, but also politicians, activists, and media, should not be afraid of making attempts to revolutionise, in a kuhnian mean, the current paradigms whenever they suspect it is essential in order to make both the present and the future world a better one. As the story we have proposed teaches us, continuing to table even the most drastic of claims – for example, those involving a change in current path of production and consumption – is the only available

strategy to see them, sooner or later, finally taken into account by the public as well as by decision-makers.

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