



Working Papers

Development & Postcolonial Studies

**(How) can public policies enable transformation? - Theory and
practice of Post-Development in relation to the state**

Ana Agostino and Julia Schöneberg

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DPS Working Paper Series No.12

Department for Development and Postcolonial Studies

University Kassel

April 2023

ISSN: 2509-6362

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The Development and Postcolonial Studies (DPS) Working Paper Series is published by the Chair of Development and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Kassel. It provides a forum for innovative research and current debates that provide critical interventions on development studies, postcolonial studies, and their intersection. It cooperates with the Exceed Centre "Global Partnership Network".

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Many thanks to Lena Milsch
for the editorial work.

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(How) can public policies enable transformation? - Theory and practice of Post-Development in relation to the state

Ana Agostino and Julia Schöneberg¹

Abstract

The Post-Development critique of 'development' has been around for more than 30 years now. While it is far from a homogenous school of thought, let alone practice, critical interventions of Post-Development proponents have been widely acknowledged and have punctuated mainstream debates. What is missing, however, is some closer engagement with how ideas and propositions can be translated to practice, and even more specifically, if and how they are reconcilable with logics, structures and institutions of states. In exploring the possibilities of practical applications we are departing from the assumption that any imagination of 'good life' cannot be connected to the logics of coloniality and capitalism. As a possible frame of action we are therefore departing from the 'sustainability of life' as opposed to 'sustainable development' in order to explore public policies in the context of social and ecological transformations.

Keywords: public policy, alternatives, hegemony, transformation, good life, Uruguay

¹ We thank Wendy Harcourt and Aram Ziai for their critical and constructive comments on earlier drafts. Of course, all remaining shortcomings are our own.

This research was supported by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) through the project "On the reinvention of development theory". Ana Agostino joined the project as Mercator Fellow for a month and was able to stay longer through the support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

1 Introduction

Capitalism is untenable and incapable in guaranteeing a good life for all (Brand and Acosta 2018, 15). This is undeniable in the face of growing global inequalities. Narratives of mainstream ‘development’ perpetuate a hyper-capitalist, extractivist and extremely destructive lifestyle that is benefiting few and is unsustainable for all. What remains central is the idea of eternal economic growth and consumption subordinated to a neoliberal logic. At the same time, global capitalism is experiencing a crisis that cuts across all areas of life: “politics, ethics, the social, in questions of ecology and energy, food production” (Brand and Acosta 2018, 15) and fundamentally questions the belief that the markets will create the conditions for a good life without much intervention of state(s). While the definition of a ‘good life’ is subjective, what is clear is that transformation is needed if we, the collective of human and non-human beings on this planet, want to continue living together and want to ensure sustainability of life. The climate crisis is only one field of urgency that requires a fundamental “progressive, emancipatory, social-ecological transformation” (Brand and Acosta 2018, 17). While the UN Agenda 2030 has mobilised the notion of sustainability, it continues to formulate economic indicators that are in fundamental conflict with any sense of protecting the planet. Rather than protecting the sustainability of life, a distinction we will discuss below, the notion of ‘sustainability’ has become a fit-all concept co-opted to justify a green-washing of an extractivist lifestyle.

We are writing this paper in the context of the DFG-funded project, “Towards a Reinvention of Development Theory - Theorizing Post-Development”² at the University of Kassel, Germany. The project departs from the diagnosis of a paradigmatic crisis in development theory, which is linked to the legacy of Eurocentric evolutionism. This evolutionism leads to a narrow conception of what a good, “developed” society should look like. Among other aims, the project sets out to analyse Post-Development approaches, with their critique of Eurocentrism and power relations, and especially through the focus on non-hegemonic models of politics, economics, knowledge and culture. The Post-Development (PD) critique is not new. In fact, the diagnosis that ‘development’ has failed, or at least has reached a critical impasse, was made in the 1980s. Since then, it is widely

² <https://www.uni-kassel.de/fb05/en/fachgruppen-und-institute/politikwissenschaft/fachgebiete/departement-for-development-and-postcolonial-studies/research/towards-a-reinvention-of-development-theory-theorizing-post-development>

recognized that alternatives to the mainstream model of ‘development’³ need to be conceived and practiced. However, much of what is discussed as possible PD practice is focussed on the level of the grassroots and social movements. What seems to be missing is a theorization of how, if at all, these envisaged transformations could come into being at the level of (nation) states, policy-making and government action. Building on our own experience as academics who have done research on practices of PD linked to other critical approaches to development, as well as on our activisms outside academia, we want to contribute to this project by concentrating on three interrelated questions: First, how do theories of Post-Development and the sustainability of life offer practical toe-holds for transformation towards a ‘good life’ for all? Second, while PD texts and propositions mainly focus on the activities of the grassroots and communities, is there a role for the state, and if so, which? Third, is it possible to imagine government action and policies that enable the implementation of a practiced PD, beyond experiences on the margins and within social movements?

To answer these questions we will start by framing our understanding of Post-Development, which by no means is a homogenous school of thought, let alone practice. We will focus on what we see as the three most vital points of critique, at the same time being well aware that not everything that goes under this label might match what we seek to convey, as well as that many visions and practices that are existing in different parts of the world refuse to bear this or any label. We will highlight how these criticisms are relevant in terms of imagining a ‘good life’ that is not solely framed by the logics of coloniality and capitalism. For this reason, we are bringing PD into conversation with arguments of Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) and Ecofeminism. This will also provide the theoretical basis of departure for what we understand as the ‘sustainability of life’ in contrast to the narratives of ‘sustainable development’ as a frame of action. In order to counter the critique that PD does not offer practical alternatives and takes a too naïve and ignorant stance on the factual role of state(s), we will discuss how ideas and propositions of PD can inform policy-making and consider the role of the state in PD and the (un-)making of public policies. Finally, providing practical examples, we will draw on the analyses of the functions and work of the Defensoría de Vecinas y Vecinos de Montevideo, Uruguay.⁴

³ Gustavo Esteva (1992, p. 10) has poignantly called ‘development’ an amoeba term, one that constantly changes its meaning and has no real tangible shape. While carrying the promise of a ‘good life’ over past decades ‘development’ has been filled with different meanings, policies, strategies. In order to point out the arbitrariness of the term that continues to be shaped by dominant (capitalist) discourse, we are using it in inverted commas.

⁴ One of the authors of this article, Ana Agostino, was the head of the Defensoría from 2014 to 2019. During her tenure, she purposively introduced a PD and FPE perspective to her work.

2 Theoretical points of departure: Post-Development criticisms and (promises of) the ‘good life’

Our motivation for drawing on Post-Development propositions in relation to policy-making is the promise of a ‘good life’ that ‘development’ discourse has reiterated for decades. The pandemic has highlighted once again that it has failed to deliver on this promise. According to the 2021-2022 UNDP Human Development Report “the global Human Development Index value has declined for two years in a row in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic” (UNDP, 2022, p. iii Forward). This relates to what was already highlighted in the 2020 report in relation to the fact that the original call from the first report in 1990, to put people at the centre, has not materialised, and that “climate change, rupturing inequalities, record numbers of people forced from their homes by conflict and crisis—these are the results of societies that value what they measure instead of measuring what they value” (UNPD, 2020 p.iii, Forward). ‘Development’, rather than fulfilling its promise for universal wellbeing, has widened the gap between Global North and Global South⁵. One of the main contributions of PD has been precisely the formulation of a profound criticism of ‘development’ discourse and practice. It highlights the impossibility of achieving a better life within the hegemonic ‘development’ framework.

In the following paragraphs we point out what we understand as some of PD’s key criticisms of ‘development’ and how they are relevant in terms of imagining a ‘good life’ that is not solely framed by the logics of coloniality and capitalism. We take the publication of “The Development Dictionary. A Guide to Knowledge as Power” (Sachs, 1992) as the starting point of what became known as Post-Development. Over the last 30 years, various publications have shaped this current of thought that in no way can be seen as a homogenous school. In spite of that, we believe that from the onset, some key criticisms were formulated which continue to inform what can be called a PD Perspective. On the basis of these criticisms, Post-Development has come to represent a different sensitivity, an openness to the variety of ways of inhabiting that are part of our diverse world. As stated in the Preface of the PD Dictionary, the shared conviction of the authors of the book is

⁵ In a comparison based on the changes of Human Development Index in 2018 (a time when data was showing improvements in several countries), the UNDP was already concerned with how these improvements were lost when adjusted by inequalities within countries, and with the gap between countries with high and those with low Human Development.

<https://hdr.undp.org/content/wide-inequalities-peoples-well-being-cast-shadow-sustained-human-development-progress>

“that the idea of ‘development as progress’ needs to be deconstructed to open a way for cultural alternatives that nurture and respect life on Earth” (Kothari et al 2019, xvii). These other ways have systematically been denied in their existence, in their validity, by mainstream views.

In the following paragraphs we are focussing on three of these points and criticisms, which in turn helped to open up to those other practices and views denied or ignored by mainstream development discourse: 1) the invention of ‘underdevelopment’, 2) the denialism of diversity, 3) the centrality of economic growth.

2.1 The invention of underdevelopment, and above all, the process by which a great part of humanity incorporated this view and perceived themselves as “underdeveloped”

PD writers argue that the ‘development’ discourse started with President Harry Truman’s inaugural address, Point Four, in January 1949. Truman said:

“We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas”⁶.

There are two vital elements in the invention of ‘underdevelopment’ as formulated by Truman: The setting of Western capitalist consumerism as the standard of a ‘good life’ and the framing of all others as less and inferior, both materially as well as psychologically.

This idea, formulated more than 70 years ago, continues to persist in the self-perception of millions of people over their own lives, knowledge and practices. But it also persists in those who see themselves as having the lives, knowledges and practices which are “the model” and therefore feel entitled to impose on others their way of living. These “hierarchical differences” between human beings have tremendous impact on the psyche, in the identity, and in the material conditions of people’s lives. They are above all an infringement in the dignity of human beings, and therefore in

⁶ Full text of Truman’s inaugural speech: <https://www.bartleby.com/124/pres53.html>

their Human Rights⁷. The philosopher and popular educator from Uruguay, Jose Luis Rebellato, wrote that *“To have dignity is to demand recognition as subjects, to rediscover oneself, trust in our own abilities and potential to live and fight. Dignity is a fundamental value of an ethic of autonomy and liberation...”* (Rebellato 1998).

Colonialism, and ‘development’ - called to finalise its “civilising mission” - (Nandy 2009, 301), represent a systematic denial of the agency inherent to the very concept of dignity. They are both justified in a humanitarian undertaking that would bring opportunities and a better life to all, supposedly uniting all human beings under the values and common interests defined by the colonial powers so as to share the benefits of their civilization. Their intervention is presented as a duty for improving the lives of people who lack the abilities to do so by themselves, and in the process (but not as the main objective) they also benefit. The power of this discourse is summarised by Rist who argued about the impossibility of questioning development: “That would have been to attack the underlying belief of a programme designed for universal happiness” (Rist 1997, 77).

The impact, both materially as well as psychologically and epistemically, of treating millions of human beings as incapable, of denying their agency, in the process taking control of their land and resources, is immense. ‘Development’ discourse has led to a process of minoritization of millions of people (on the basis of a series of intersections around race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, culture) and the conviction of the need of expert knowledge to be the guide *“to be like them”*, because being oneself was being less (Galeano 1991).

2.2 Denialism of diversity

Differences are an expression of our ontological groundings. The PD call for pluriverse requires a transition from the hegemony of the modern ontology of a single world to a pluriverse of socio-natural configurations (Escobar 2017, 66-67). For the right to difference to be achieved, overcoming the modern dualistic view of reality based on hierarchical differences is necessary, as it has

⁷ The classical book by Walt W. Rostow, “The Stages of Economic Growth: A non-communist Manifesto” published in the 1960s and that became a central piece within mainstream development, specifically says so: “Without the affront to human and national dignity caused by the intrusion of more advanced powers, the rate of modernization of traditional societies over the past century-and-a-half would have been much slower than, in fact, it has been”. Taken from Rist, Gilbert: “The History of Development. From Western Origins to Global Faith”, Zed Books, London and New York, 1997, p. 96-97.

been argued within and outside PD analysis, including feminist approaches (Plumwood 1993, 42-43). Barca argues that this dualistic view is based on a hierarchical system of meaning that posits differences as natural and insurmountable separations, naturalizing the oppressions of class, race, gender, nature, capacity, etc. She adds: *“One side is taken as naturally dominant and primary, while the other is defined in relation to it – in terms of lacking those qualities. Domination of one side over the other is thus seen as inherent in the order of things”* (Barca 2020, 3).

Progress and ‘development’ have been about erasing these differences by transforming those in the “lower” end to those in the dominant end, rather than reconstructing differences along non-hierarchical lines. As argued by de Sousa Santos: *“We have the right to be equal when difference makes us inferior and the right to be different when equality endangers our identity”* (Santos 2010, 83). The endangering of identity implies not just the denial of these other forms of being, knowing, producing and relating, but also a loss of opportunity to those in the dominant end to learn and benefit from those particular cosmovisions.

PD has been key in highlighting how ‘development’ as discourse and practice played a role in this process of loss and denialism.

2.3 The centrality of economic growth

In spite of what can be called the “surnames” of development (human-centred, sustainable, local, community, resilient, etc.) economic growth has remained at the centre of different strands of ‘development’ discourse. In mainstream discourse, ‘development’ and economic growth are synonyms. Despite efforts to introduce other variables, in particular through the HDI (Human Development Index) that incorporated indicators for health, education, equality, gender and others in order to overcome the dominance of the GDP, this one has remained at the core of how a ‘good life’ is measured.

By equalising the economy with the market economy, so many dimensions that have to do with the wellbeing of peoples and societies are lost. Karl Polanyi made the distinction between formal and substantive economy, referring to what he called the “economistic fallacy”. This fallacy is defined as “a tendency to equate the human economy with its market form” (Polanyi 1977, 20), ignoring the substantive meaning that relates to people’s dependency for survival upon nature and fellow human beings. In the last years, there have been numerous contributions from feminist economists

introducing the debate around the need to put life and relationality at the centre, and in particular, the role played by care for the reproduction and the wellbeing of life in its diversity. We will return to this point.

3 Some rebuttals to the claims of “sustainable development”

In this section we will engage with what has become the mainstream call to continue implementing ‘development’ by making it “sustainable”. We will argue that (i) the approach to sustainability that dominates the ‘development’ discourse and practice does not address the flaws that have led to the various crises mentioned earlier (and that are even recognised in the Human Development Reports) and that (ii) PD and related frameworks such as FPE and Ecofeminism have an understanding of sustainability that places life in its diversity at the centre and recognises the power dynamics at play.

3.1 False promises of ‘sustainable development’

In the following paragraph we will briefly sketch the genesis of the term sustainability to make clear how it has been co-opted in order to legitimise the discourses of ‘development’ and the fallacy constructed around green growth.

The year 2022 marks half a century since the first UN Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm 1972), and the publication by the Club of Rome on the “The Limits to Growth”. The final declaration of the conference stated clearly the concern around the relationship of human beings with the natural world and how a point had been reached where the harm done was massive and could become irreversible (UNEP, 1972). The report of the Club of Rome, in turn, aimed at gaining “insights into limits of our world system and the constraints it puts on human numbers and activity”. (Meadows et al 1972, 185). One of the consequences of the conference was the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1972, which in 1983 called for the creation of an independent World Commission on Environment and Development. The Commission, headed by Gro Harlem Brundtland, examined a series of issues from the perspective of the year 2000 and beyond, including population and human resources, food, species and ecosystems, energy, industry, the urban challenge, the question of ‘development’ and sustainable development. The concept of ‘sustainable development’ had been coined in the “World Conservation Strategy.

Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development” prepared by the IUCN with the support of the WWF and UNEP (IUCN 1980). The Commission’s report “Our Common Future” built on this concept and included the following definition: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (The World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, 43). The report argues that widespread poverty is no longer inevitable and that limitations imposed by the environment can be overcome, provided policy changes are implemented in all countries. It enumerates the “critical objectives for environment and development policies that follow from the concept of sustainable development”. Some of them are: reviving growth; changing the quality of growth; ensuring a sustainable level of population” (Ibid, 49).

A few years later, in 1992, and to celebrate 20 years from the first conference, the United Nations organised the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, also known as “The Earth Summit”. Again, the main objective was to agree on an international agenda on environment and development considering the ecological challenges together with the need to overcome poverty and secure wellbeing for humanity at large. In the conclusion and in the work plan, growth continues to appear as the condition to both, provided that “economic growth and environmental protection (are) mutually supportive”⁸.

These historical references in relation to the incorporation of sustainability into the UN development documents highlight how the environmental considerations were subordinated from the very beginning to economic growth, to such extent that already in Agenda 21 the talk was about “sustainable growth”⁹. The very problem that 50 years ago motivated research, creation of agencies and the urge to find alternative solutions was resolved by calling for its continuation, providing growth became “sustainable”. But is this possible? When the World Conservation Strategy added the word as an adjective to development, it aimed at “the achievement of sustainable development through the conservation of living resources” (IUCN 1980: IV). ‘Development’, sustainability and conservation were brought together assuming that science and technology would be able to harmonise their implementation. But as argued by J.A. Du Pisani development and conservation had formerly been regarded as conflicting ideas, because conservation referred to the protection of resources and

⁸ Agenda 21, point 2.9.d.

⁹ Point C. 2.24.

development to their exploitation. Furthermore, for many centuries it had been clear that the permanent demand for raw materials generated environmental problems and that the responsible use of natural resources was necessary for the interest of present and future generations (Du Pisani 2006, 85-86)¹⁰.

In spite of this contradiction, ‘sustainable development’ became mainstream, and sustainability turned into a catchword providing the basis for continuing with business as usual. More than 30 years after the Brundtland report the main purpose of the sustainability discourse now seems to be to sustain the resource-intensive imperial way of life of the privileged in the global North (Brand and Wissen 2019). Economic growth remains central in all respects, and to make it ‘sustainable’, hopes are placed in technological innovation (Carrasco-Miró 2017, 90). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹¹ are only the latest manifestation of this contradiction. There is an unquestioned belief that both growth, at current or even accelerated rates, and sustainability will be possible.¹² High hopes are placed in science and technology to provide easy solutions so that those benefitting most from an extractive lifestyle will not face any constraints.

3.2 Post-Development in dialogue with Feminist Political Ecology and Ecofeminism towards the sustainability of life

Having laid out the conflictive relationship between claims of sustainability and the continuing destructiveness of ‘development’ and growth, we will now turn to the demands and possibilities imaginaries of the ‘sustainability of life’ are holding instead. We argue that propositions of Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) and Ecofeminism contribute to imagine a ‘good life’ that is neither

¹⁰ “The term ‘sustainability’ was first used in German forestry circles by Hans Carl von Carlowitz in *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* in 1713. Carlowitz suggested *nachhaltende Nutzung* (sustainable use) of forest resources, which implied maintaining a balance between harvesting old trees and ensuring that there were enough young trees to replace them” (2006 pp. 85-86).

¹¹ The Agenda 2030, approved by all United Nations Member States in 2015, is a framework calling on all countries to reach 17 goals as a means to end poverty, improve health and education, reduce inequality and give a boost to economic growth while tackling climate change.

¹² A closer look at the goals reveals the inherent contradictions between the individual SDGs. If one considers the resource consumption and CO2 emissions that would be necessary to achieve the growth target (Goal 8), it becomes clear that the Sustainable Development Goals (especially Goals 6, 12, 13, 14 and 15) cannot be achieved under these circumstances at all (Hickel 2019). Thus, the aspiration of ‘sustainable development’ becomes mainly one of ‘green growth’ - an oxymoron (Hickel 2018). Despite the lip service paid to sustainability, once again it becomes clear that not both will be possible: infinite growth and sustainability.

subordinated to the promises of endless economic growth and capital, nor to the dichotomous narratives of developed versus underdeveloped and its intrinsic hierarchy.

Feminist contributions to imaginations of a 'good life' argue that what needs to be sustained is life and livelihoods, and not 'development' (Dankelman 2012, 21–41; Dankelman and Davidson 1988; Shiva 1988; Wichterich 2012). FPE and Ecofeminism and related critical approaches (like Political Ecology in general, some approaches of Degrowth, the movement for Climate Justice and Post-Development) put the focus on analysing the power dynamics that have led to the climate crisis causing differentiated impacts on particular populations so as to enable transformations.

There are differences between FPE and Ecofeminism. While Ecofeminism is grounded in the perception that women and nature share a history of oppression at the hands of patriarchal institutions and the dominant Western culture (Rocheleau et al, 1996, 3), FPE emphasises the political processes that intersect with the impacts that the economic, social and environmental crises resulting from the dominant economic model have on people's lives, and how differentiated these impacts are on the basis of gender and other dimensions. The gender power dynamics are analysed by feminists from both approaches, arguing that gender is "a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change, the struggle of men and women to sustain ecologically viable livelihoods, and the prospects of any community for "sustainable development"" (Rocheleau et al. 1996, 4).

Women's and feminist organisations' struggle for climate justice is anchored in the understanding that ecology and sustainability are not gender neutral and that the analysis of gender relations is vital to understand the relations between nature and society and to overcome the environmental crisis. Following this argument, Wichterich argues that, "without gender justice there will be no environmental justice, no sustainability and no good life for all" (Wichterich 2012, 9). Furthermore, even with the participation of women, if the relationship between the dominant economic models and nature is not critically analysed, it will be difficult to advance towards true sustainability.

Ecofeminism (Plumwood 1993, Herrero 2012, Celiberti 2019) and Feminist Political Ecology (Bauhardt and Harcourt 2020) have highlighted mutual dependency among humans and with nature, calling attention to the dominant Western view of humans as separate, outside nature, which is seen merely as provider for human needs and without needs of its own. The extractivist relation towards nature is seen as one of the key factors for the impossibility of reaching sustainable ways of living.

Feminist economists, in turn, have been writing for a long time about the understanding of the economy focussing on how the market has left out the “reproduction of life” which centres on the concept of care. Care has predominantly been seen as belonging to the “private sphere of life, to the home”, and in particular to women. As argued by Cristina Carrasco:

“The analysis of the role of domestic work in the reproduction of the labor force work, the “discovery” of care and the idea of social reproduction allowed feminist economics to coin the concept of sustainability of life. A new perspective of analysis that situates, on the one hand, social reproduction as a fundamental aspect of the socio-economic system and, on the other, care work as a determining aspect of social reproduction and of the living conditions of the population, displacing the social objective from obtaining benefits to the caring for life; which opens new avenues for a possible change of the economic paradigm and, in the applied field, to the elaboration and implementation of new social actions and economic policies” (Carrasco 2012, 37).

These feminist currents are in dialogue with PD, in their call to have the sustainability of life at the centre, articulating the various dimensions of sustainability (social, cultural, environmental and economic), putting life in its diversity before capital and the search for profit. In other words: To put life at the centre means to recognize the knowledge that emerges from day to day experiences of human beings and communities and their caring for each other and their natural surroundings. It means to value and respect culturally anchored livelihoods that provide agency and dignity in the meeting of basic needs and in the projection of sustainable futures based on communal and multi-species relationality.

4 The role of the state in PD and the (un-)making of public policies

Having laid out what we understand as a meaningful conception of sustainability, namely the sustainability of life, we now want to move on to consider how this can be put into practice. Extending the PD focus on the grassroots and social movements that live and practice their alternative visions beyond or outside the state, we want to look more closely at the role of the state, and more specifically state policies. While some claim that PD is inherently anarchist (Neusiedl 2019), we argue that it can be fruitful to more closely scrutinize possibilities of the state in facilitating the imple-

mentation of alternatives. In order to be able to discuss if and how policies can contribute to enabling environments for transformations, it is important to look more closely at our conception of a (nation-)state and at what levels transformative policies need to be thought of. In general, it can be said that the role of the state is mostly marginally addressed in PD, if at all. As many of the classic PD texts propose, alternatives are to emerge from the grassroots, from the communities, in very micro and localised settings and entities (Escobar 1995 p. 215). One of the questions we are asking is whether this implies a status of statelessness, or whether a postdevelopmental state as part of or beyond the nation state is imaginable.

Looking closer at the post-WWII development project, state-led development is the default. While we recognise that the history of ‘development’ reaches far beyond 1950 and is deeply entangled with past and present of colonialism and coloniality, looking at (nation-)states, it can be helpful to take 1949 and US-president Harry Truman’s Point Four speech as the starting point. Truman has termed his agenda as a “bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas”, essentially describing a programme to develop the “underdeveloped”. In his inaugural address, Truman leaves no doubt that the enemy to be fought is communism and that this will have to be done through the spread of democracy, and, more specifically, capitalism. According to Truman, this includes the need to “carry out our plans for reducing the barriers to world trade and increasing its volume”. In point four of his speech he becomes very concrete when he says that the plan is to “foster capital investment in areas needing development”. He goes on to say that “with the cooperation of business, private capital, agriculture, and labor in this country, this program can greatly increase the industrial activity in other nations and can raise substantially their standards of living”. A paper titled “International Economic Policies for Common Security” and dated 12 December 1950 formulates the US strategy even more explicitly as the “expansion of the productive capacity of the underdeveloped countries calls for measures to facilitate private capital investment, for expansion of public investment, for capital development and technical assistance”.¹³ This is just one example highlighting how the nation state as a social construct is deeply entangled with politics and production, i.e. capitalist relations.

¹³ <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/international-economic-policies-common-security?documentid=NA&pagenumber=5>

Nandy (2009) differentiates between the European nation state, which is imbued with coloniality, and the state as a construct to order society (societies) as such. The concept of nation state after the treaty of Westphalia redefined the state as the “harbinger and main instrument of social change, which in the European context meant being the trigger for and protector of modern institutions associated with industrial capitalism” (Nandy 2009, 296). Generally, if we talk of state nowadays, it is this construct that is meant. What is less prominent are conceptions of non-Western states. In that respect talking of “state” in a postdevelopmental/postmodern sense refers to and/or reimagines possibilities of non-capitalist forms of ordering societal relations. What is important to note, and one of the obvious and most justified criticisms of PD, is that the aim cannot be to recover or imagine some pure or untainted version of state. In fact, even before their exposure to coloniality, non-Western states have not been entirely non-violent. Today, every structure ordering societies is inevitably entangled with the order of production, narratives of ‘development’ and capital. Brand pinpoints this in saying that the main function of the “capitalist state - classist, patriarchal, racist, imperial and post-colonial - is to consolidate the dominant societal relations and give them a certain continuity” (Brand 2013, 107). Is it possible in spite of this, to move to a different type of state shaped by post-modern beliefs? What would it look like and how does it go together with the pluriverse? Or is the call of PD statelessness after all? As argued elsewhere, anarchist theorizing relates to PD at two intersections in particular: First, the rejection of the European nation state and an emphasis on autonomy and self-determination and second, in claiming, and demanding, an urgent need for the new conceptualization of radical politics that is fundamental in reconfiguring the economy, politics, and knowledge and thereby explicitly focussing on the nexus of power/knowledge, sovereignty/autonomy, relationality/individualism (Schöneberg 2021).

The question arises of whether there are other options that might not necessarily lead to radical democracy but secure broader people’s participation and influence in the running of the state and are oriented towards the well-being of all living beings. When looking at the constitutional process which took place in Ecuador and the following transformations within the state, for a while it seemed to be the reference for the possibility of such transcendence. Following a period of grass-roots mobilisation and social struggle against neoliberal politics, Buen Vivir was constitutionally

implemented.¹⁴ In the same vein, Ecuador declared itself a plurinational state. On paper, this model would come very close to what Nandy sketched when talking about the non-Western state. However, the excitement was soon followed by disillusionment when it became very clear that state policies were anything but beyond the neoliberal realm and the logics of capitalist extraction, yet mobilised and legitimised by a narrative of common good. Eventually, “far from being a strategic orientation for effective policy making, Buen Vivir serves as a new ideology and is being used to support [...] a quite traditional understanding of the concept of development” (Caria and Dominguez 2016, 18). The problem that this process showcases is clear: how can a state decide to implement policies that pursue and enable the sustainability of life while being, and possibly remaining, part of a system of global capitalism? Here the discrepancy between the levels of argumentation becomes obvious: writers such as Escobar are very much focussed on the local level, whereas governments such as the Ecuadorian are also invested in a global positioning.

Policies are written and enacted in various dimensions, with various models of participation by role-players, and on different levels: local, national, regional and global. The question we want to focus on is whether within an overarching existent nation state structure, policies in support of localisation, municipalism, decentralisation and plurinationalism can be imagined. For a brief definition of what we understand as policies, we are leaning on Brand (2013), who frames public policies not only as instruments for the action of the state, but also and especially in relation to “the heterogeneous structures within the state itself; the heterogeneous structures of society, the functions in reproducing the state itself and society” (Brand 2013, 108). Some of the central questions arising, especially in the context of transformation, are “how the state organises its knowledge of the problems to be addressed” (Brand 2013, 109). In a context of PD, Dinerstein and Deneulin are very explicit in their rejection of the state. They argue that imagining transformation requires keeping a “critical distance from the state and the realm of public policy - which is limited to improving ‘well-being outcomes’ through reforming, rather than replacing existing economic and political practices” (Dinerstein/Deneulin 2012, 602). When looking at perspectives from Latin American (nation) states, Uvalle-Berrones argues that “public policies are an institutional product influenced by assessments, preferences and capacities that originate in the multiplicity of actors that concur in

¹⁴ Buen Vivir represents concepts held among the Ecuadorian population that have in common that they fundamentally question the established model of ‘development’ and seek to bring about a radically different, harmonious, relationship between humans and Nature (Gudynas 2012, 19; Walsh 2010).

its definition, elaboration and implementation” (Uvalle-Berrones 2011, Section: Instituciones y política pública). He further argues that “the dialogical context of public policies is the backbone of the art of governing, especially in conditions in which the pressure of democratic plurality is a set of processes on the rise” (Uvalle-Berrones 2011, Section: Fortalecimiento del arte de gobernar). This clearly opens the possibility of a multi role-player participation in a process that by definition is contested, as the various interests in the functions of the state come (or can come) into conflict when defining, approving and implementing public policies. Not all actors agree that the common good should be the guiding principles of all public policies, or do not share their understanding of the meaning or shape of the common good. But it is clear that a growing number of mechanisms exist that enable direct people’s participation in the process of bringing concerns to the official agenda, generating debates that reach parliamentary spheres, implementing direct democratic processes such as referendums and plebiscites, and the public manifestation in the streets (understanding public space as a privileged arena for participatory politics). The existence and use of these mechanisms show the trust in policies as instruments with the power to transforming people’s lives if the right policies are approved and resources allocated for their implementation.

Whether some of these policies can reflect PD views and perspectives is a question we further want to explore. For that purpose, in the next section we will analyse if and how the Defensoría de Vecinas y Vecinos de Montevideo, an institution aimed at protecting Human Rights and promoting citizens’ participation, has contributed towards the definition of certain policies and to what extent this process reflects views and sensitivities anchored in PD approaches. We are aware that the examples to be presented relate to the second and third tier of government. We believe it is relevant for our argument to bring them in, and in the process question the hierarchical vision of scale relating to policies, where local ones tend to be seen as less important. Going back to Ecofeminism and FPE in their interactions with PD, there is a call to see the political as having various dimensions, starting from the politics of the day-to-day. The concept of scale is important moving beyond the logic of hierarchy that prevails in globalisation, where the global and universal take precedence over all other scales. FPE and Ecofeminism argue that each scale is important, in particular for the understanding of processes that are felt and understood from the body. The embodiment of experiences allows moving from that personal level to the surroundings and from there to the world at large. Feminist movements in Latin America speak about *cuerpo/territorio* (Cruz/ Bayon Gimenez 2020) not as separate, not as differentiated, but as a continuum that allows for knowledge and understanding and furthermore, for advocacy and transformation.

In the PD Dictionary, the political is referred to as “collaboration among dissenting voices over the kind of alternative worlds we want to create” (Kothari et al 2019, p. xxi). The question that arises, and that we will analyse on the basis of the examples, is whether that collaboration takes place – necessarily – outside the state or whether it can inform policies which in turn can enable the implementation of alternatives beyond the groups or communities responsible for them.

5 Defensoria de Vecinas y Vecinos de Montevideo

The role of Ombudsperson institutions is to protect the people against violation of rights, abuse of powers, unfair decisions and maladministration. The origins of the institution go back to 1809 in Sweden but it was not until the second half of the 20th century that several countries started having these institutions as parliamentary elected bodies, with the main functions of improving public administration and making it more accountable to the public¹⁵. They operate by receiving complaints from the public and presenting suggestions and recommendations to governments.

In Latin America, the *Defensorias del Pueblo*, as they are mostly known in Spanish¹⁶, started to be established in the 1980s (a time when there were several authoritarian regimes and armed conflicts in the region). The focus has been on the promotion and defence of Human Rights, more than on the function of monitoring the state.

Most of the problems that affect the lives of human beings are manifested in local policies that are embedded in wider historical, social, economic and political structures. This implies that their well-being largely depends on the departmental and municipal governments properly performing their duties. When this does not happen, the *Defensoria* fulfils the role of protecting and promoting compliance with rights at the level closest to citizenship. The presentation of people’s complaints and proposals to these institutions becomes, in turn, a mechanism of citizen participation. There is a high probability that the issues presented to the institution, once accepted and analysed followed by a recommendation to government, will inform the formulation or modification of public policy.

Following on the analysis of Harcourt and Escobar it is possible to say that the experience that leads to present the complaint encompasses four dimensions: the body, the home, the environment

¹⁵ International Ombudsman Institute, <https://www.theioi.org/the-i-o-i>

¹⁶ In some countries they are called Ombudsman, Comisionados para los Derechos Humanos, Procuradores de Derechos Humanos, among other denominations, depending on the legal frameworks under which they were created.

and the social public space. On a daily basis, the *Defensoria in Montevideo* sees examples of individuals, mostly women and on many occasions women's groups, who “*in their daily lives are qualifying global processes*”(Harcourt and Escobar 2002, 8). From their body experience of what is missing, or what is not functioning properly and impacts on their home, they develop a sense of what should be taking place in that localised sphere which, by definition, will affect others in their surroundings and eventually in the neighbourhood or city at large. They will then first request the local authority to fulfil its duty and when this does not happen they present their case to the *Defensoria*. A series of actions follows to generate knowledge and concrete proposals to present to the local or departmental government. It is not necessarily a conscious path from the home to the social public space, rather, a collective process in which the *Defensoria* plays the role of enabling exchanges and critical engagements which eventually, and as a result of the participation of several role-players, lead to a new reality. Many of the complaints start from the demand of ‘my right’ to a clean sidewalk, to a quiet street, to sanitation and so on. The essence of the institution is to listen and to be attentive to these complaints, concerns and expectations and to act upon them, together with the neighbours and their communities. The policy recommendations are a result of this process (Agostino 2018, 22-23).

5.1 Examples of policy recommendations to the government of Montevideo

The mandate of the *Defensoria* relates to the government of Montevideo (second tier of government) and to the eight municipalities that constitute the department (third tier of government). Although the list of areas in which citizens present their complaints seems to reflect a variety of unconnected topics, all of them fit into the challenges relating to a sustainable view of urban management, including social, cultural, ecological and economic aspects of people's and communities' lives. These complaints reflect the tensions in terms of rights, but also with respect to the understanding of the “common good” which is, or should be, the guiding principle for public policies. Examples of these tensions are job generation vis-à-vis environmental protection, the right to rest vis-à-vis the right to recreation, contestations around public space (for pedestrians, for cars, for open and green space), among many others. These tensions are also an expression of a dualistic view that tends to be resolved within the framework of the centrality of the economy, as part of the mainstream view of development. It is precisely in these contested situations where the *Defensoria*

can play a role, enabling processes for collective thinking of public policies anchored in the participation of citizens and their embodied experiences.

For the purpose of our argument, we will concentrate on two examples that took different directions and reflect several of the aspects analysed around PD contributions:

i. “Fincas abandonadas” (Abandoned houses)

ii. Sanitation services

i. Fincas abandonadas

The complaint around abandoned houses, mainly in the neighbourhood called “The Old City”, was the starting point of a process that ended with the creation of a particular programme by the government of Montevideo and with innovative solutions in terms of housing and other common uses.

The reasons for complaint were:

- Public health concerns as a result of cumulative deterioration of the structure of abandoned houses and their surroundings: humidity and leaks, accumulation of garbage, odours and stagnant water, irregular connections to electricity cables, insects and rodents, etc.
- Security concerns: irregular occupations of these houses sometimes linked to criminal activities, occupation of sidewalks for these activities, situations of violence, etc.
- Relational and organizational problems of the neighbourhood, companies, and families.
- Concern for children from occupying families and their living conditions.

On the basis of these complaints, the *Defensoria* did a research to categorise the understanding of “abandonment” and to identify the number of existing abandoned houses in the central areas of the city¹⁷. Among other aspects, the phenomenon of abandonment relates to the non-assumption by owners of the duties associated to private property stipulated by the Law on Territorial Planning and Sustainable Development: “duty to use, duty to conserve, duty to protect environment and diversity, duty to protect cultural heritage, duty to care, duty to rehabilitate and restore” (Art. 37, Law 18308, 2008)¹⁸.

¹⁷ Further information can be found in the publication of the Defensoria del Vecino on Fincas Abandonadas, 2014.

¹⁸ Complete text of the Law: <https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/18308-2008>

With the data at hand (339 houses were identified), a working group with other public institutions was formed with the following objectives:

- Contribute towards public projects and programmes to find integral solutions to the precarious occupation of abandoned houses.
- Transform irregular occupied public space into space recovered for the city, prioritising programmes that favour social inclusion, and the improvement of the quality of life of citizens from Montevideo.
- The group worked hand in hand with parliamentarians promoting at the same time the passing of a law on “Judicial declaration of empty and degraded urban property”, prioritising the social use and the right to the city.

The government of Montevideo, in line with this process, created an “Abandoned houses programme” within its own structures oriented towards “recovering abandoned and deteriorated properties with debts located in central areas of the city of Montevideo, with the aim of restoring their social function”. As part of the programme, buildings are recovered for housing, social and cultural uses, in coordination with other State agencies and civil society organisations. Up to now, and always in articulation with neighbourhood groups and civil society organisations, the uses that have been given to some of the recovered houses are¹⁹:

- **Halfway house**

Provides transitory stay spaces for a population that face different forms of Human Rights violations: domestic violence, homelessness, long institutionalisation due to protection measures or deprivation of liberty, among others. It seeks to transcend the idea of providing refuge as the only response to persons in vulnerable situations. In these centres, the target persons or families reside in independent homes and share some spaces and services. There are interdisciplinary teams that accompany the transition towards a definitive housing solution.

¹⁹ Information taken from the website of the Intendencia de Montevideo as well as from “Urbanismo feminista en Montevideo, Las Pioneras y Mujeres con Calle”, Intendencia de Montevideo 2020.

- **Trans House**

This is a recreational and cultural community space for people in the process of gender change and for their families. Currently under construction, it is going to be managed by civil society groups that promote the exercise of rights by the transgender population.

- **Disperse cooperatives**

Housing cooperatives will be built within abandoned buildings that are not consecutive, but close to each other. The idea is to promote the recovery of degraded areas of the city and help prevent gentrification, in favour of the right to remain in the neighbourhood.

- **Feminist Co-housing**

This initiative is run by older adult women who can contribute to maintain their common house. The aim is to generate an enabling environment for older women and their right to the city, allowing for different ways of living according to the desires, needs and interests of people. A proposal was presented by the civil association “Women with history”, which aims to promote and develop strategies for recognition and defence of human rights focused on inclusion, justice and gender equity, especially when it comes to older women. The association is responsible to manage this housing proposal, while at the same time organising sociocultural and educational activities in dialogue with the neighbourhood.

This example shows that from the complaints presented to the Defensoria by citizens who care for the wellbeing of their families, neighbourhood and beyond, it was possible to move towards a public programme centred around life, offering housing and communal solutions to a variety of situations, displacing the centrality of ownership and capital, and having people’s participation at the centre.

ii. **Sanitation services**

Montevideo covers 91% of its urban population with sanitation services through the main sewer network²⁰. In spite of that, part of the remaining 9% face serious problems in relation to sanitation, in particular through the overflow of cesspools and the associated health and environmental problems.

²⁰ Intendencia de Montevideo, El saneamiento de Montevideo en números, <https://montevideo.gub.uy/areas-tematicas/educacion-y-formacion/educacion-ambiental/saneamiento-objetivo-de-desarrollo-sostenible>

Every year the *Defensoria* receives a high number of complaints in relation to sanitation (with women presenting usually twice the number of complaints than men in this area), resulting in suggestions or recommendations to the departmental government. One of the complaints received in 2016 had to do with the fact that some areas of the city were not yet included in the planned next stage of the sewer network and would have to wait for several years. On the basis of this information the *Defensoria* decided to work on a very comprehensive recommendation that analysed the situation of the sewer network and of the various environmentally friendly alternative solutions. Several studies about alternative systems for the final disposal of domestic effluents that could be considered adequate sanitation were analysed, together with several role-players. There was also information available in relation to the impacts on health due to the contamination of watercourses, among other reasons, associated to the discharge of sewage. Therefore, it was clear that urgent solutions were needed before the next stage of the sanitation plan.

As a result of this process, the *Defensoria* presented a recommendation to the government of Montevideo for the implementation of what was called transitory solutions based on these already proven environmentally friendly and community tested solutions (such as ecological sanitary systems, dry toilets and others), until the approval of funds for the next stage of the plan. The recommendation also called for these areas to be prioritised in the plan, and that financial support be provided for the regular emptying of the cesspool until the construction of the transitory solutions.

Shortly after the recommendation was presented, the *Defensoria* was informed that one neighbour, a woman, had written to the *Intendente*²¹, asking him to ignore its content. In her note – which was forwarded to the *Defensoria* - she said explicitly that she did not want the alternative solutions (which, as already mentioned, had been proven as adequate sanitation), but the connection to the sewer network. This can be read as an example of how the desire for mainstream solutions prevailed, even if that meant postponing the solution itself.

As Wolfgang Sachs wrote in 2009 in the Preface to the new edition of *The Development Dictionary*: “Looking at *The Development Dictionary* today, it is striking that we had not really appreciated the extent to which the development idea has been charged with hopes for redress and self-affirmation” (Sachs 2009, viii). This idea expressed itself in the desire for development, the desire for industrial solutions, the desire not to be treated “with alternatives”. At the time of writing this

²¹ Head of the Montevideo government.

article (2022) there is a strong political struggle in Montevideo in relation to the funding of the sanitation plan. But those other sanitations, equally adequate for the correct disposal and treatment of human waste, had been “actively created as non-existent” (Santos 2010, 22-27), that is, as non-viable solutions, not just among officials but also in the imagination of people.

6 Final reflections

Our aim in this article was to contribute to the discussion to what extent PD theories and associated practices can offer practical footholds for transition towards a “good life” within the state, rather than on its margins.

Analysing the two examples shared from the work done at the Defensoria -which are part of the state sphere- we can ask to what extent they are informed by PD views. It is important to say that the implementation of public policies were necessary –and were demanded by citizens- in both cases in order to produce changes in people’s lives. The reconversion of houses that were generating environmental and urban degradation in the city into places of communal activity, housing, care and encounters, transformed the lives of those who are benefitting directly from the new facilities and of the neighbourhood at large. In the case of sanitation, some neighbours’ lives were improved through the new plan but others were left out of the transformation because resources were not enough for completing the plan. Implementing non-conventional solutions would have also contributed to improving their sanitary conditions but there was a clear desire not to get “alternative solutions”. It must be said that implementing these non-conventional and environmentally friendly solutions also requires new policies to enable putting them into practice, as the municipal bylaws do not include them among the allowed sanitation facilities. As Sachs stated: “Ensuring sustainable livelihoods...will therefore largely require policies which put democracy, equity, and environmental care before the quixotic pursuit of monetary economic growth” (Sachs 2000, 27).

We believe that these examples are informed by PD views, in as far as PD associated practices are not only the ones called so by those implementing them, but the ones that take distance from mainstream ‘development’ moving away from an economic and productivist logic, aiming at wellbeing, care and relationality. It is this shared sensitivity reflected on the ground that allows for reading them as beyond development. People’s participation plays a key role in order to bring these visions,

knowledges and ways of inhabiting as inputs that inform public policies, beyond mere consultations on decisions taken at the level of governments. In fact, the possibility of PD associated theories and practices to contribute towards transitions at state level, relies on an understanding of participation that tends to transgress mainstream institutionalised ways of participation and brings into the public sphere areas of concern not yet included, opening in this way new possibilities for debate, incidence, and new policy formulations.

Following these arguments, and using the lens of PD and the sustainability of life, we affirm that the public programme “Fincas Abandonadas” that provides housing and communal solutions in response to urban degradation and other problems, can be placed as a practice contributing to moving beyond the logics of ‘development’. The option to call real estate investors for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of abandoned houses transforming them in commercial and residential spaces for high-income owners to activate the markets and contribute to economic growth (a clear ‘development’ path) was one of the possibilities to follow in response to the complaints from neighbours. The route followed, though, is in line with what Graham-Gibson state: “The work of making this diverse economy (or ecologies of non-capitalist productivity²²) visible and valuing its contribution is but one step in a postdevelopment practice” (Gibson-Graham 2004, 17).

The proposals were made by citizens engaged with their communities and thinking beyond their personal predicaments. Various role-players contributed with knowledge, vision and concrete proposals and work. The “abandoned houses programme” from the government of Montevideo was key to move from “reflection on what the community is nourished by (rather than what it lacks) and public discussion of which of these practices could be strengthened or extended” (Gibson-Graham 2005, 16) to the formulation of a plan, the allocation of resources and the implementation, resulting in improved life conditions for the community.

The process that led to the programme shows, in turn, the importance of agency, recovering the dignity inherent in self-determination, in being able to participate in the decision-making over people’s own lives. It is not necessarily radical democracy, as envisioned by many PD theorists, but it

²² The concept of ecologies comes from the Sociology of Absences and Sociology of Emergence from Boaventura de Sousa Santos, where he argues that forms of non-existence are replaced by ecologies of possibilities creating the “conditions to enlarge the field of credible experiences” and widen “the possibilities for social experimentation” (cited by Gibson-Graham, 5-6). In the example presented, there was a clear enlargement of possibilities with respect to mainstream development approaches to respond to the problems arisen from the abandonment of houses and its impact in urban degradation.

is strengthening democracy by enlarging decision spaces, which necessarily means a recognition of people's knowledge and abilities to contribute to solutions from their life experiences.

While the examples above show hopeful openings in practicing politics otherwise, they can only be as much as a first step towards an entirely "other way of doing things" as long as, as Sachs points out, states remain entangled in the prime pursuit of monetary economic growth that a globalised capitalism prescribes (Sachs 2000, 27). Nevertheless, we are ending on a more hopeful note. The examples shared above show that *other ways of doing* can exist despite the seemingly all-consuming discourses and practices of 'development' and the equally flawed concept of 'sustainability'. However, they also make clear that certain policy spaces are needed in order to enable these practices "otherwise" and therefore contribute towards the sustainability of life. We believe that the examples given are part of the process towards a more postdevelopmental way of politics and policy-making that might lead to more openings and eventually a form of radical democracy that takes into account the well-being of all beings, rather than the primacy of capital. The examples show that what the policy environment does is enable a wider reach of these practices and wider recognition of others in society of the validity of these responses. The political will to engage in a process of policy-formulation that is participatory is the precondition. We believe that this is food for further research to identify national and international practices that are set in the cracks and work to widen them.

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