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Hegemony and Sustainability. A Call for Historical Materialism

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Abstract. Social scientists have been critical about sustainability from its appearance. However, as the literature on post-politics highlight, they have failed to address why our society endures in unsustainability in what some authors call the post-ecological paradox. This article reflects on some of the major theoretical assumptions of urban political ecology, presenting the urban sustainability fix framework as the most valuable tool to perform a critique of sustainability. It adds to the debate arguing that empirical obstacles are related and rooted in theoretical incompatibility between neo-Marxist and post-structural literatures which shape the discipline, stating the need for a return to historical materialism starting by Antonio Gramsci. To this end, the article proposes to use Jessop's RSA to analyse sustainable development.

Keywords: urban sustainability fix, hegemony, Gramsci, sustainability, historical materialism.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Anthropocene, the issue of sustainable development has become an existential one. The pervasiveness of the concept makes it impossible to give a full account of its usage and social functions. Indeed, the imperative of sustainability permeates every aspect of public governance and private investment as well, despite since its appearance scholars have been highlighting its vagueness and contradictory meaning (Lélé 1991, Redclift 2005, Giovannoni and Fabietti 2013, Mensah 2019). Indeed, its dimensions are hard to operationalize, and its claims refer to needs and rights which can hardly be claimed universally. However, a broad consensus worldwide has been developed around the concept, ranging from institutional actors to civil society groups.

The scientific debate around sustainable development has been evolving erratically. Within sociology, a broad literature has been produced about institutional and political economy analyses of sustainable development (e.g. Bulkeley and Castán Broto 2013, Bulkeley 2005, Betsill and Bulkeley 2021, Nieminen *et al.* 2021, Bulkeley *et al.* 2014, Bulkeley and Betsill 2005, DeAngelo and Harvey 1998). Albeit wide, within this literature there is an agreement on the centrality of the urban dimension for sustainable development policies and analysis, and the urban context is viewed as the core site

through which sustainable development politics develops, and where sustainability must be reached in order to sustain life on the Earth (Castán Broto 2020, Kunzmann 2014).

In this article, I will focus on critical accounts of sustainable development and sustainability (see Hopwood *et al.* 2005), especially those rooted in political sociology and institutional analysis. A particular focus is placed on the sociopolitical dynamics underpinning sustainability, especially the role of power structures in perpetuating social inequalities and environmental degradation. Responding to the calls of critical sociologists such as Ingolfur Blühdorn (2022a), the article explores sustainability within a post-political, post-democratic, and post-ecological framework (Blühdorn 2014, 2022b, Swyngedouw 2007, 2022), where necessary structural changes remain elusive despite widespread ecological knowledge. The first section unpacks the implications of post-democracy and post-politics, setting the stage for analyzing sustainability as a complex, and often depoliticized, techno-managerial project. Subsequently, the lens shifts to urban political ecology, investigating how urbanization processes affect and are affected by capitalist dynamics, shaping urban governance and sustainability policies.

The concluding sections advocate for a historically grounded approach to sustainable development, drawing from Gramscian state theory and arguing for its implementation within urban political ecology. This approach offers a nuanced understanding of sustainability as a contested concept, rooted in hegemonic strategies and the interplay of economic, political, and ideological forces. By grounding the discussion in Gramscian theory, the article calls for a re-evaluation of sustainability not as a static or purely technocratic goal, but as a dynamic and conflict-laden field in which social power and ecological crises intersect.

2. SUSTAINABILITY IN THE POST-POLITICAL SOCIETY

2.1. Post-democracy and neoliberalization

As for every post-concept, post-democracy is difficult to define. It points to significant changes in the functioning of Western liberal democracies, describing a situation in which democratic institutions have retained their form but significantly changed their content. Post-democratic societies emerge through what Moini (2012) describes as the spiral of neoliberalization – a historical process where neoliberalism progressively solidifies as a hegemonic regulatory framework for shaping public action, aimed at safeguarding the capitalist system amid

crises arising from its inherent contradictions. Indeed, the socio-economic crises that erupted during the 70s put capitalism in danger and sparked the neoliberal counter-reformation, namely a long period of societal restructuring led by political elites with the main aim of restructuring the market and opening new spaces for capital circulation and accumulation led by the financial sector. The process of financialization is, maybe, the most relevant one of the neoliberal counter-reformation, because it flags «a condition whereby the accumulation process is increasingly sustained by the circulation of capital through all manner of financial transactions, rather than by commodity production» (Swyngedouw 2018a: 161), causing a modification of inter-capitalist relations towards a form of accumulation by dispossession, that places more emphasis on surplus generation by rent rather than by production (Harvey 2018).

It goes without saying that structural changes in the economic sphere involve modifications to the entire social system. Broadly speaking, it can be argued that the process of neoliberalization has been provoking a shift from a Keynesian Welfare National State to a Schumpeterian Workfare Postnational Regime, causing the emergence of a new model of governance based on «the generalization of job insecurity», the «Darwinistic selection of elites, functional to a neo-oligarchic evolution», the «authoritarian transformation of institutional system and in particular the regression of the (private) State to an operational instrument in the full disposition of the dominant class» (Burgio 2009: 214). What this means is that the role of the State and its relation with civil society has deeply changed during the last 50 years, mainly due to the massive emergence of private actors as government bodies which blurs the distinction between the public and the private spheres of society, hampering the autonomy of State actors and obfuscating the accountability of elected officials, transforming politics to «a matter of closed elites, as it was in the pre-democratic era» (Crouch 2009: 82).

2.2. Post-politics: the era of consent

Broadly speaking, post-politicization refers to a situation in which the political – understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement – is increasingly colonized by politics – understood as techno-managerial governance through consensualizing procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism (Swyngedouw 2018b: 1)

This definition gives us a glimpse of post-politics, a concept that came out of «the tradition of post- or neo-

Marxist critical theory» (Blühdorn 2014: 149) and points to a frame that «reduces politics to the sphere of governing and policy-making through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures of governance-beyond-the-state, with a given distribution of places and functions, one that excludes those who are deemed ‘irresponsible’» (Swyngedouw 2018a: 27).

«Post-politics implies the reign of supposedly objective necessities and non-negotiable imperatives» (Blühdorn 2014: 149), thus the post-political society is one whereby the governance structure tries to include all in a consensual pluralist order and, contemporary, radically excludes those who contest the consensus. It is worth highlighting that the erasure of conflict is another typical characteristic of neoliberalism which, under neoclassical economic assumptions, idealizes a society consisting of free individuals in a one-to-one rational relationship with the market.

It is in this context that Swyngedouw (2018a, 2022) has referred to the concept of “immunological democracy”, meaning that the final aim of governance-beyond-the-State is that of protecting the social system, its division, and architecture, from external “pathogens” (those excluded by/from the police order) who could advance alternative institutional forms of governance. Authoritarianism, violence, and illiberalism are, thus, constitutive of neoliberalism (and of post-democratic societies) because they are necessary to defend a small number of private interests in front of the political demands of civil society.

2.3. *Post-politicization of the environment: the ecological paradox*

The lens of post-democracy and post-politics can be used fruitfully to analyze contemporary eco-politics. Swyngedouw (2007, 2018a) argues that sustainability is at the forefront of consolidating the post-political condition. Starting from post-human and post-foundational stances, he articulates his thesis by showing how discourses of sustainability and sustainable development are built to foster a consensual setting «sutured by fear and driven by a concern to manage things so that we can hold on to what we have. [...] While clouded in rhetoric of the need for radical change in order to stave off imminent catastrophe, a range of technical, social, managerial, physical, and other measures have to be taken to make sure that life (or at least our lives) can go on as before» (Swyngedouw 2018a: 82). In this sense, sustainability represents «the empty signifier par excellence» (Ivi: 83), the vanguard of the neoliberal biopolitical governmentality. The techno-managerial approach of environmental governance, predicated upon the eco-

modernization project, is inherently political since its aim is precisely that of erasing alternative ecologies, and depoliticizing eco-politics in the name of a fuzzy social common interest.

Post-foundational and critical cultural perspectives expose the void of concepts like Nature and sustainability. Indeed, the very idea of a single Nature is replaced by «a multitude of natures and a multitude of existing, possible, or practical socio-natural relations», recognizing that «the obsession with a singular Nature that requires sustaining or, at least, managing is sustained by a particular quilting of Nature that forecloses asking political questions» (Ivi: 76-77).

Through these lenses, sustainability is viewed as a hegemonic field, a contested empty signifier filled with selected ecological issues depending on their sociopolitical understanding and salience (Béal 2011). Hegemonic accounts of sustainability and sustainable development have been produced since the 90s, when Luke, following Foucault, talked about environmentality as a mode of governance that through the articulation of eco-knowledge produces systems of geo-power (1995a). In this “conduct of the environmental conduct” the idea of sustainability has a central role, since the articulation of the disciplinary code dwells upon the technocratic management of the environment and the process of neoliberal subjectivation (Oksala 2023) through individual education and institutional arrangements (Luke 1995b, 2001, 2005).

Following the neo-Marxist tradition, Swyngedouw calls for a return of the political, «he demands that ecological communication and environmental policy are explicitly reconnected to social values and notions of subjectivity» (Blühdorn 2014: 150) and points to urban emancipatory movements as new *loci* of alternative ecologies (Swyngedouw 2007, 2018a). Recalling Alan Badiou (2010), the author states the necessity for the “communist hypothesis”, namely a disruptive democratic restructuring of socio-ecological systems through the reappropriation «of the greatest of all common ecologies, the urban process» (Swyngedouw 2018a: 164).

Such a restructuring is necessary since our society faces an ecological paradox: while the urgency for radical ecological change is widely recognized, there is an equally striking resistance or inability to implement such changes effectively (Blühdorn 2011: 36). This paradox partly reflects historical shifts occurring since the neoliberal counter-reformation, after which a distinctive “post-ecologist” era has emerged (Blühdorn 2014, 2022a: 581-583).

Indeed, while at the end of the 20th century, capitalism faced a crisis of legitimacy, nowadays we live under a form of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), in which capi-

talism permeates every social sphere with little challenge. Neoliberal reforms have blurred the line between public and private interests, reinforcing capitalist accumulation as a fundamental social aim. This makes the capitalist mode of production almost inescapable, effectively foreclosing any substantial alternative both materially and discursively (Chiapello and Boltanski 2006). Moreover, since the financial crisis of 2008, emerging social movements have largely been co-opted or neutralized by political elites. In this process, scientific knowledge and techno-managerial approaches are deployed as supposedly neutral tools, which, in practice, limit alternative socio-ecological configurations. This depoliticized framing restricts environmental discourse to technical fixes, maintaining social order at the expense of genuine political transformation. A notable example is the *Fridays for Future* movement and the so-called “Greta effect” (Imperatore and Leonardi 2023). Although it has raised awareness of climate justice and mobilized millions, its discourse has been channeled toward individual actions and techno-managerial issues, sidelining political debates about restructuring socio-ecological relations (De Moor *et al.* 2020, Della Porta and Portos 2023). Despite capitalism’s stability, democracy itself faces a crisis of legitimacy, evident in declining public confidence and the rise of technocratic and authoritarian trends in Western governance (Blühdorn 2020a). Addressing this crisis through “authentic democracy” seems unlikely; indeed, it may be the very norms underpinning democracy that fuel its post-democratic turn. Emphasizing notions of emancipation and liberation, social theory has shifted towards increasingly individualized, reflexive, and process-oriented forms of engagement. This evolution has led movements and organizations to adopt more individualistic, flexible, and identity-centered participation structures to address the changing demands for autonomy and freedom (Butzlaff 2022). At the same time, individual self-fulfilment in contemporary societies has become more rooted in consumerism and transgression than ever (Bauman 2009, 2010).

Together, these developments suggest a post-subjective modernity in which the emancipatory project has shifted from liberating individuals from bureaucratic constraints to fostering context-specific identities that are dynamic and often contradictory. Emancipation is now largely a personal, rather than collective, endeavor (Blühdorn 2022c).

These trends pose significant challenges for critical environmental sociology, which has traditionally grounded eco-emancipatory politics in values and norms that may now be outdated. Indeed, much of the debate has assumed that once alienated subjects are lib-

erated, they will naturally gravitate toward sustainable social organization. However, a historical and hegemonic understanding of sustainable development may offer a pathway to addressing these theoretical and analytical limitations.

3. URBAN POLITICAL ECOLOGY

The focus on the procedural aspects of capitalist accumulation through space is the main characteristic of urban political ecology (UPE). Urban political ecologists are concerned with the Lefebvrian (2003) idea of ‘planetary urbanization’, a concept that poses many troubles to urban theory and to urban political ecologists specifically. Starting from the analysis of the city-countryside relation in Marxist classical texts, the French sociologist highlights the fundamental role of cities as a medium of capitalist development, as the result of the historical reproductive activities of humankind, and as the privileged *locus of praxis* (Lefebvre 2022: 40-41).

«Planetary urbanization refers to the fact that every nook and cranny of the earth is now directly or indirectly enrolled in assuring the expanding reproduction of urbanization process» which is the spatial form of capitalist reproduction, implying that through this process capitalism seizes the natural and human environment forging «ever longer, often globally structured, socio-ecological metabolic flows» (Swyngedouw 2018a: 113-114). To Harvey (1996),

Urbanization must then be understood not in terms of some socio-organizational entity called ‘the city’ (the theoretical object that so many geographers, demographers and sociologists erroneously presume) but as the production of specific and quite heterogeneous spatio-temporal forms embedded within different kinds of social action. Urbanization, understood in this manner, is necessarily constitutive of as well as constituted by social processes. It loses its passive qualities and becomes a dynamic moment in overall processes of social differentiation and social change (Ibidem: 52)

This interpretation of urbanization emphasizes the dialectical interaction between society and nature, a hallmark of historical materialism. It also incorporates the essential Marxist idea of urban metabolism (see Foster 2016, Saito 2017), which highlights the dynamic relationship between material and immaterial flows such as capital, labor, energy, information, and social power. These flows create and perpetuate urban environments, while biophysical and geochemical cycles sustain both

human and non-human life (contemporary being affected by it).

However, UPE was born and developed around other conceptual frames too (Rademacher 2015, Gandy 2022). Indeed, by the 90s political ecology was well established as a non-urban and non-western discipline, interested mostly in nature-based conflicts in rural areas (clearly distinct from urban ones) and strongly influenced by the dependency theory distinctive of developmental studies (Leff 2015). Notwithstanding, the general post-structuralist shift that was occurring in the social sciences led political ecologists to follow literature other than Marxist ones, specifically critical theory and anti-essentialist materialism (post-humanism/post-materialism). This turn determined a critical node for PE in general and UPE (which was being born amidst this shift) specifically, because the latent tension «between the centrality of capital and other explanatory insights was not resolved but rather displaced through an overwhelming emphasis on manifestations of social power within the urban arena» (Gandy 2022: 23). The point is that flat ontologies are incompatible with Marxian categories because they are anti-dialectical by definition. As I said above, the main focus of UPE lies on the capitalist form of urbanization of natures, namely how non-human matter is invested by capitalist social relations and is «discursively scripted, imagined, economically enrolled (commodified) and physically metabolized/transformed to produce socio-ecological assemblages that support the urbanization process» (Swyngedouw 2015: 610). The urban fabric is understood as a “socio-nature” (Swyngedouw 1996) in an attempt to overcome the dualisms of society/nature and materiality/discourse around which the internal tensions of PE coalesced. Yet, despite significant breakthroughs in the discipline, the main problem has been precisely that of reading the urban as a process rather than as a fixed entity, something that has been called methodological cityism (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015), namely the «analytical privileging, isolation and perhaps naturalization of the city in studies of urban processes where the non-city may also be significant» (*Ibidem*: 20). In other words, the issue at stake here is that of reading the spatial processes through which the capital accumulation reproduces itself through different scales and spaces, being shaped by and shaping them; this calls for what has named an ethnography of the State (2015).

3.1. UPE and environmental governance

The contribution of urban political ecologists to the debate on contemporary environmental governance

highlights «the importance of nature’s materiality in urban political process and struggle; how local governments attempt to construct environmental subjectivities through discourses of proper urban citizenship; and the persistence of social inequality in the (re)production of urban environments» (Rice 2014: 381). A fruitful framework, capable of binding together these three analytical dimensions, has been developed by While *et al.* (2004), namely that of “sustainability fix” which points to historicize the politics of sustainable development at urban level building on the concept of “spatial fix”. Following Harvey, a spatial fix is a temporal, contested, and precarious spatio-temporal solution that capital creates to continue its process of accumulation, overcoming its cyclical crises. In order to realize a profit, capitalists must follow some steps: first, they need to accumulate some fixed capital (warehouses, technology, machines, etc.); second, they need to buy the labour force, the real site of surplus value; third, they need to arrange an encounter between fixed and variable capital, which practically consist of reunite them in the same location at the same time, establishing a spatial fix. This is repeated continuously through the (potentially) infinite process of auto-valorization of capital, which to solve its periodical crises of overaccumulation needs to create ever-new spatial fixes. Thus, the concept of spatial fix is useful to define a specific socio-ecological configuration, locally situated and shaped by the action of the abstract accumulation process, the resistance that the material world opposes to it, and the regulatory action of the State. It is a moment of the dialectical relationship between society and nature¹.

The framework is useful for reflecting a hegemonic account of sustainable development, dividing between pressures for local environmental policymaking and pressures on local environmental policymaking. This understanding of sustainable development goes beyond the emancipation deadlock claimed by Blühdorn. Indeed, while environmentality accounts of sustainability are preoccupied with hegemony, their explanations rely on the existence of passive subjects that are activated through a process of subjectivation. On the contrary,

the historically contingent notion of a ‘sustainability fix’ is intended to capture some of the governance dilemmas, compromises and opportunities created by the current era of state restructuring and ecological modernization. [...] Sustainable development is itself interpreted as part of the search for a spatio-institutional fix to safeguard growth trajectories in the wake of industrial capitalism’s long downturn, the global ‘ecological crisis’ and the rise of popular environmentalism (While et al. 2004: 551)

¹ Among his many works on the topics, see Harvey (2018).

Thus, sustainable development is read as a process whose spatio-institutional fixes are temporary moments in which specific socio-natural relations can be recognized; they appear to us as “fixed” because they are moments of the process of urbanization which reproduces itself through sustainability, namely through «the selective integration of environmental goals into entrepreneurial forms of urban governance» (Martin *et al.* 2019: 641).

To date, a growing body of research has adopted this framework in empirical research (see Temenos and McCann 2012, Hof and Blázquez-Salom 2015, Long 2016, Carpenter 2018, Jokinen *et al.* 2018, Anderson *et al.* 2022, Neidig *et al.* 2022), highlighting three main pressures that shape each urban sustainability fix: the neoliberal restructuring of the State, including international policy development and diffusion; the decentralization of government; and the role of private capital in urban development. In conclusion, «the sustainability fix relies on the participation and consent of the local population as a whole» (Temenos and McCann 2012: 1400) making it mandatory for local elites to build ideologies and narratives that can somewhat mediate between their private interests and the population’s public concerns. A sustainability fix is always the result of a political compromise between socially contested understandings of sustainable development; thus, the hegemonic dimension stands as fundamental in order to understand urban sustainable development.

4. THE NEED FOR HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

In the early 2000s, Levy and Newell signaled the need for a comprehensive analysis and theorization of hegemony in environmental governance recalling a Gramscian-inspired

multi-level analysis of social systems to build a coherent framework that can link the macro world of international governance structures with the micro level of specific issue arenas such as environmental regimes. [Contrary to other approaches] a Gramscian framework highlights disequilibrium and change. Contradictions, competing ideologies, and active agents ensure that the terrain of economic and political contestation is forever unfolding (Levy and Newell 2002: 93-94).

The call for adopting a Gramscian stance has emerged also among political ecologists (see Ekers *et al.* 2009, Ekers *et al.* 2012, Mann 2009), especially as a critique of the understanding of the State inside the discipline. Synthesizing, political ecologists have exam-

ined the State mainly from three perspectives. These include the State acting as a coercive force in opposition to local communities due to its repressive policies or resource extraction projects, as well as the Marxian view of the State as a balancing act and interplay among different groups, serving to stabilize capitalist crises and sustain conditions for accumulation (i.e. Regulationist approach). Additionally, Foucauldian theories have focused on the governing approaches and mentalities that lead the governed to internalize the norms enabling their rule, and the influence of modern state science and state representation that render populations and territories comprehensible and controllable (i.e. Governmentality approach) (D’Alisa and Kallis 2016: 231). On the contrary, a State theory based on a Gramscian understanding of hegemony conceives the State and the Civil Society as two analytically distinct moments of an organic whole, the “Integral State”: «both the State and Civil Society are affected by class struggle; the dialectic is real, open, and the outcome is not predetermined. The State is both an instrument (of a class) and a space (for the struggle for hegemony), as well as a process (of the unification of ruling classes)» (Liguori 2006, cited by Balsa 2019). This understanding concerns both coercion and consent, meaning that the effectiveness of bourgeois moral and intellectual authority in advanced capitalist societies can be understood as the continuous attempt to form a “historical bloc” through both the suppression of dissenting social groups and the promotion of existing worldviews connected to specific practices, searching for the «unity of the opposites and the distinct» (Gramsci 2014, Q 13 § 10: 1569).

The meaning of the State is “enlarged” (see Liguori 2016), comprising not just traditional coercive functions but also hegemonic ones directed towards and reproduced through Civil Society’s “private organizations”. Following a rigorous Marxist analysis, Gramsci has always in mind the dialectical relationship structure/superstructure and insists on the nature of the State as an effect of dominant property relations and production processes. Thus, the State is the manifestation of the unity of all classes and the reflection of the precarious equilibrium between them. Moreover, Gramsci analyzes in depth the role of intellectuals in shaping the State and its structure and recognizes their fundamental task in creating and maintaining the unity of State/Civil Society through hegemonic apparatuses, material and ideological “private” organizations that regulate the reproduction of the whole.

However, contrary to structuralism or post-structuralism, Gramsci always insists on the contingency of the State, that means on the contingency of the equilibrium

between State and Civil Society, between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic manifestations: each class needs to become State, which means that it needs to ensure its hegemony upon other classes in an endless struggle for stabilizing the unity, looking for solutions «necessarily set and attempted in the contradictory conditions of society» (Gramsci 2014, Q 22 § 1: 2193).

4.1. *The integral State*

In order to move on it is necessary to elaborate further on the meaning of the “Integral State” and its implications to sustainability analysis. To this end, it is useful to refer to Bob Jessop’s works on the integration of Gramscian theory of the State into the literature on spatial research. Elaborating upon the concept of “spatial fix”, the author highlights that overaccumulation crises occur when capital and labor can no longer be reinvested at a profitable rate, or at all, within their original territory, leading to the devaluation of both. This necessitates internal or external transformations of capitalism within a given geographical area or economic region to ensure the continued reproduction of capital relations (Jessop 2006: 147). The need for a spatio-temporal fix stems from capitalism’s relentless pursuit to overcome its inherent crisis tendencies by expanding and restructuring geographically. However, a spatio-temporal fix is always temporary. The attempt to escape the contradictions and crises of capitalism by reinvesting surplus capital in new areas typically only spreads these issues further, eventually exacerbating them (Ivi: 149).

The accumulation process requires what Harvey calls a “structured coherence” within a totality of productive forces and social relations. In spatial terms, this means that each precarious and temporary spatio-temporal fix requires and contributes to the production of a bounded regional space arranged according to the accumulation process, thus in which profit can be realized². This led the author to highlight the State’s key role in shaping structured coherence and regional alliances:

the state thereby actively promotes and sustains the structured regional coherence that emerges from capitalist dynamics and gives it a political as well as economic character. But this capacity is also closely linked to the rise, consolidation and strategic capacities of regional ruling-class alliances. This implies that structured coherence results as much from political and cultural processes as from an economic dynamic (Ivi: 154).

Yet, Jessop underscores that «Harvey’s analysis of temporal and spatial fixes is primarily value-theoretical» (Ivi: 161), lacking large explicit interest in extra-economic dimensions of capital relations. While understanding that «politics is an immanent necessity for every capitalist economy» (Ivi: 162), Harvey did not explore capitalism’s extra-economic dimensions as rigorously as its economic ones. To comprehend the political nature of the capital relation as a combination of economic and extra-economic elements, it is essential to consider why market forces alone are insufficient for the reproduction of capitalism. The incompleteness of the pure capital relation calls for the strategic construction of a specific dynamic between economic and extra-economic conditions for accumulation.

In other words, Jessop highlights that any specific substantive unity of the value form of capital in a given economic space must be searched outside the formal laws of capital, as it is rooted in the political domain, that is «the domain where attempts are made to (re-) define a ‘collective will’ for an imagined political community and to (re-)articulate various mechanisms and practices of government and governance in pursuit of projects deemed to serve it» (Jessop 1997: 29).

To address this issue, Jessop developed a Strategic Relational Approach to State power (see Jessop 2015) drawing heavily on the Gramscian understanding of the State in its inclusive (or integral) sense, namely as “political society” and “civil society”. While Gramsci referred to national States, Jessop highlights how his approach can be relevant also for local politics, in as much as it allows more weight to other apparatuses, organizations, and practices involved in exercising political power apart from the national sovereign State (Jessop 1997).

The indetermination of both the value form and the state form calls for strategies aimed at imparting some substantive unity to what otherwise would be just potentially re-united. Indeed, «the value form constitutes a terrain for various attempts to reproduce the capital relation and the nature of accumulation depends on the success or failure of these attempts» (Jessop 1991: 159). To analyze and give meaning to these attempts, «we need strategic-theoretical concepts that can establish meaningful links between the abstract, ‘capital-theoretical’ laws of motion of the value form and the concrete modalities of social-economic struggles analyzed by a ‘class-theoretical’ approach which neglects form in favor of content» (Ivi: 159-160).

To this end, the author proposes two pivotal concepts:

a) «An ‘accumulation strategy’ defines a specific economic ‘growth model’ complete with its various

² On this topic see the debate on the production of nature (e.g. Brenner 2009; 2017; Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008; Castree 2000; 2015).

extra-economic preconditions and outlines the general strategy appropriate to its realization» (Ivi: 160). To succeed, an accumulation strategy must be historically organic, that is it must take into account the dominant form of the circuit of capital; the predominant type of capital internationalization; the international context confronting particular national (or subnational) capitals; the balance of social, economic, and political forces at home and abroad; the margin of maneuver given the productive potential of the domestic economy (Ivi: 162). Moreover, it is important to not mislead economic hegemony, secured through a specific accumulation strategy, for economic domination. Indeed, while the latter refers to the relative positions of fractions of capital capable of securing their own particular interests on other fractions «regardless of their wishes and/or at their expenses» (Ivi: 160), economic hegemony «derives from economic leadership won through general acceptance of an accumulation strategy» (*Ibidem*). This general acceptance (if any) provides for a relatively stable framework in which competition and conflicting interests can be resolved without disrupting the overall cohesion of the capital circuit. Yet, any given instance of economic hegemony is not established once and for all, rather it is ever-changing due to fluctuations in the overall functioning of the circuit of capital and/or in the balance of power among social, economic, and political forces.

b) The extra-economic prerequisites needed by the circuit of capital accumulation are secured by the State. Since also the State is a form-determined social relation, its analysis requires consideration of the balance of forces determined by extra-statal factors. Three aspects of the State-form need exploring: forms of representation, forms of intervention, and forms of articulation of the State as an institutional ensemble (Ivi: 170). These three formal aspects of the State confer to it its “structural selectivity”, shaping what Jessop calls “the art of the possible”, formal rule of competition and conflict. Beyond these formal dimensions, the State has also two general substantive dimensions: the social bases of support for and resistance to it, and the nature of the hegemonic project around which the State power coalesces. «By the social basis of the state we understand the specific configuration of social forces, however identified as subjects and (dis-)organized as political actors, that supports the basic structure of the state system, its mode of operation, and its objectives» (*Ibidem*). The support of the social basis cannot be reduced to a question of consensus, as it is built through material concessions, symbolic rewards, and repression directed through the State to different social forces. Variations are typically related to changes in the “hegemonic project”, that is

the mobilization of support behind a concrete, national-popular programme of action which asserts a general interest in the pursuit of objectives that explicitly or implicitly advance the long-term interests of the hegemonic class (fraction), and which also privileges particular ‘economic-corporate’ interests compatible with this program. Conversely those particular interests which are inconsistent with the project are deemed immoral and/or irrational and, insofar as they are still pursued by groups outside the consensus, they are also liable to sanction (Ivi: 171).

Hegemonic projects (or visions) entail the interpellation and organization of various “class-relevant” forces, which may not be class-conscious, under the political, intellectual, and moral leadership of a specific class (or class fraction) or, more accurately, its political, intellectual, and moral representatives. Their aim is to partially solve (in particular conjunctures according to strategic intentions) the abstract problem of conflict between particular interests and the general interest embodied by the State.

The realization of a hegemonic project ultimately depends on three key factors: its structural determinations, that is the structure of privileges inscribed in a given State form, its “structural selectivity”; its strategic orientation, namely the capacity of hegemonic leadership to link the realization of some short-term interests of subordinate classes to the interests of hegemonic classes on the long run; its relation to accumulation, because while there is no compelling reason to assume that hegemonic projects are naturally economic in their aims, it is important to highlight that no hegemony cannot be secured without depending on material concessions, thus on the productivity of the economy.

By treating hegemony in terms of specific hegemonic projects, it is possible to emphasize the dynamic and conflicting nature of the concept, in as much as it is understood as «the dynamic movement of leadership towards definite aims in specific conjunctures» (Ivi: 182). Moreover, this line of discourse emphasizes that capital accumulation is not purely an economic issue, rather it is dependent on political and ideological matters which have a crucial strategic dimension. In this regard, Jessop as well as Gramsci assign a pivotal role to “organic intellectuals” in elaborating hegemonic projects, that is in translating the particular interests of the hegemonic class (or class fractions) in the general will of the State which, formally, acts in favor of the “general interest”.

In the RSA proposed by Jessop, the State is understood in relational terms. The State is conceptualized as State-power, understood as an *explanandum* – something whose effects must be explained as products of social relations. The State represents the expression of

the reciprocal power relations among subjects and (dis)organized political actors that support the fundamental structure of the State System. Thus, it is in a constant flow, shaped by struggles over its very definition. While the State System delineates the boundaries of action and the “art of the possible”, these boundaries are, in turn, the result of the power dynamics among the forces that constitute the social base of the State.

Through the State, a class (or class fractions) secures power over the decision and realization of accumulation strategies that favor particular interests. But the realization of an accumulation strategy relies on the success of a hegemonic project, that is on the capacity of a class (or class fraction) to articulate its particular interests as the “general will”, winning consent over its vision. While, as Jessop highlights, the hegemonic project is not necessarily economic, the “economy”, meaning the material basis of social reproduction, must be secured by a hegemonic project. Thus, in a State made of strategies and struggles, when analyzing State-power in socio-environmental ensembles, or socio spatial-relation, we must take into account structural as well as strategic dimensions of the State. The latter relates to “political and ideological” forces that strategically pursue particular winning interests related to specific hegemonic projects in a constant struggle to secure consent. A relational reading of sustainability as a fix involves these issues, as long as specific instances of equilibrium in the hegemonic struggle upon sustainability are the result of precarious and “in-the-making” accumulation strategies and hegemonic projects.

4.2. Gramsci and UPE

Gramscian State theory would shift the focus from socionatures as static assemblages to socionatures as moments of a dialectic process between society and nature. This shift would allow us to ground UPE in materialist tradition and reconsider the category of “class” not just as an identity among others but as structurally constitutive of socio-ecological relations since it points to relations of access and control over the means of production (Huber 2017). Indeed, engaging with Gramsci means engaging with historical materialism and some ontological and epistemological positions that are rejected by post-structuralism and new materialism. In fact, what Gramsci refers to as “the philosophy of praxis” relies on three fundamental pillars, namely absolute humanism, absolute historicism, and absolute immanence (Loftus 2015).

Absolute humanism refers to the idea that the individual is made up of a set of processes and relations

with other individuals and nature alike. In this sense, socio-natural relations are not shaped by the juxtaposition of society and nature as external to each other, nor are imposed by coercion by some external actor like the State; instead, society and nature are two moments of a dialectical process of co-production. However, in this process the agency is always placed on individuals conceived as laboring beings (see also Hornborg 2017) which produce the world «as a political construction, [as] the product of a conscious and purposive subject» (Fontana 2012: 124). Gramscian absolute humanism is blatantly anti-essentialist: in *The Prison Notebook* any reference to the “subject” is lacking, making room for the *persona* «a historically produced character that transforms according to socio-natural relations. She is formed actively, through work and technique – within a given historical and geographical moment» (Loftus 2015: 95).

Gramsci’s absolute historicism offers a complex examination of how historically and geographically specific practices shape reality and the corresponding epistemological frameworks. This shows how social and environmental constructs, and the ways we think about them, have evolved over time and can continue to change in the future. Even in this case, we are presented with a strong anti-essentialist stance inasmuch as Gramsci, besides his conception of *persona*, offers a multi-faceted conception of nature as undifferentiated matter; as second nature; as the irrational, as instinct and impulse; as chaos or disorder; as the potential overcoming of the domination and conquest of nature (Fontana 2012).

Absolute immanence acknowledges that the potential to conceive and create different versions of complex and tangible realities exists within the realities themselves. This calls for a detailed understanding of what Gramsci called “common sense”, namely the sedimented worldview of subaltern classes which emerges from the clash between hegemonic ideologies and everyday experiences. Indeed, «conditions of possibility for conceiving (and making) those fleshy, messy realities differently are to be found within them and not within the protected worlds of the academic community, the environmental technocrat or government agent» (Loftus 2015: 95-96).

These pillars, free of any trace of Cartesian dualism, allow for a nuanced understanding of society/nature relations. Gramsci argued for a revision of the concept of the individual, arguing that «we must conceive of humans as a series of active relationships (a process) in which, while individuality is of utmost importance, it is not the only element to consider. The humanity that is reflected in each individual consists of various elements: 1) the individual; 2) other humans; 3) nature» (Gramsci 1996: 28).

5. CONCLUSION

Governmentality approaches aim at analyzing the unfolding power in action, binding together power, knowledge, and practices and blurring the boundaries between the political and the social. According to post-structuralists, power relations are more important than the underlying structures from which they emerge. Their «social ontology is contingent, fragmented, pluralistic and dispersed. And without a conception of relatively enduring social structures, there is little chance of an account of social transformation and human emancipation» (Joseph 2004: 151). Flat ontologies conceive of “differentiated wholes”, different assemblages of human and non-human agents activated through processes of subjectivation. Power-knowledge conundrum is the origin, the medium, and the process of subject-making and spreads in different degrees yet in a coherent way, tending to uniformity.

On the contrary, Gramscian State theory allows for a different understanding of subjectivation. The State, in its hierarchically stratified institutions, is the *locus* where power relations emerge reflecting a structured hierarchy, with certain structures and relationships being more significant or influential than others. Thus, the process of subjectivation does not just fall into the realm of the State but its origin is there, it is inextricably linked to the economic structure of which the State represents specific interests. Yet, as the Gramscian State is inseparable from Civil Society, the process of subjectivation is a question of coercion and consent too. It becomes a contested process, specifically a geographically and temporally contested one, that presupposes active pre-existing subjects upon which the process of subjectivation works. The result is an incoherent “differentiated whole” «as an outcome of historical-geographical specific conjunctures with their sedimented power relations and multiply constituted class relations» (Jakobsen 2022: 583).

This article calls for a hegemonic understanding of sustainable development, framing it as a socio-political concept deeply intertwined with issues of power, governance, and socio-ecological relations. Through a critical lens, the article explores how sustainable development functions within post-political and post-democratic structures, shedding light on how sustainability discourse often serves as a tool for maintaining the status quo rather than fostering substantial systemic change.

While urban political ecologists have already brilliantly highlighted the role of sustainability as a domination technology, the article advocates for understanding sustainability within a historical materialist framework. This approach highlights how capitalist accumulation

processes shape urban environments, revealing sustainability as a contested concept influenced by hegemonic forces and ideological struggles. Thus, the article offers an in-depth view of sustainable development as a dynamic, conflict-ridden field that both shapes and is shaped by the socio-political order, making it instrumental for any comprehensive analysis of sustainable development and its practical implications in addressing social inequalities and ecological crises.

While aligning itself with critical accounts within UPE, this article highlights the need to clarify certain ontological and epistemological positions within the field to move beyond the “emancipation deadlock” noted by post-politics literature. Indeed, a truly hegemonic account of sustainability cannot merely consider the effects of dominance as contained within the State; rather, it must recognize these effects as emanating from the State and requiring extra-state collaboration, viewing them as products of the organic whole of State-Civil Society. In this perspective, individuals are not merely recipients of practices of dominance; they are also co-creators of these practices, which are based on a variable mix of coercion and consent.

Finally, the article proposes Jessop’s Strategic Relational Approach (SRA) as a theoretical framework for a hegemonic analysis of sustainable development. Struggles over sustainability’s meaning unfold within and through the boundaries of the State, making it essential to use relational and strategic concepts to analyze this contestation. In this view, sustainability becomes a hegemonic field, a signifier mobilized by various social forces to secure their hegemony, promoting specific interests through particular accumulation strategies articulated in hegemonic projects that must secure consent to be realized.

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