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Analysis

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

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ABSTRACT

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

1. Introduction: Ecological Economics and Development

Ecological Economics (hereinafter EE) has been broadly called the "science of sustainability" (Costanza, 1991). Since the mid-1980s when a society and a journal were founded, EE scholars have been advocating a necessary dialogue between natural sciences and social sciences, more precisely, between economics and ecology. Following this multi-disciplinary perspective, the EE community hesitantly engaged the debate on sustainable development (hereinafter SD)[1] that unfolded since the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987. After much discussion, the precise meaning of "sustainability" remains contested; however, there is consensus that EE stands for strong sustainability (as opposed to environmental economics, which would admit 'weak sustainability' standards) and for the weak comparability of values (Martinez-Alier et al., 1998). In this regard, representatives of EE positioned themselves critically vis-à-vis the Brundtland Commission (see

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

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

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

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

It becomes increasingly clear that the mainstream techno-managerialist SD discourse, with its insistence in upholding the compatibility of current, growth-based trajectories with biophysical planetary boundaries, has exhausted much of its credibility after three decades of nearly undisputed worldwide dominance with meagre results, at best (Bäckstrand, 2011; Dryzek, 2005; Hannigan, 2006; Pelfini, 2005). Therefore, we argue that the post-developmentalist critique needs to be mainstreamed if EE is to become a veritable force in promoting a socio-ecological transformation and rising as a powerful alternative to environmental economics. We will further argue that such mainstreaming is indeed possible through the synergic articulation of existing discursive forces[4] within the EE community which challenge conventional notions of (un)sustainable development, on the one hand, and development-revisionist approaches, on the other. The aim of this article is to illuminate pathways towards such synergic articulation, by focusing analytically on three purposively sampled discourses from within a much broader discursive universe within EE: Human Development (hereafter HD), Degrowth (hereafter DG), and *Buen Vivir* (hereafter BV). These three discourses were chosen as objects of analysis by virtue of their current visibility and their catalytic character in broader development-critical debates and networks in the political, academic, and/or activist spheres in the global North (HD and DG) and in the global South (BV) that have sparked global debates.

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

2. Setting the Scene: a Critical Analysis of Development

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[5] Following Arturo Escobar's (2011) concept of 'Discourses of Transition' or 'Transformation Discourses' is used here as a shortcut for discourses generally promoting a Great Transformation.

We argue that any promising engagement with the goal of sustainability at this point involves a fundamental questioning of SD (in its mainstream discursive variants) as a plausible and desirable horizon for the global political economy. With this aim, the following section reviews the Human Development (HD) discourse as the most widely covered development-revisionist approach within and outside EE, with the purpose of unveiling both its potential and limitations in the sense of a global 'great transformation' towards a type of society which is actually "capable of a future" (WBGU, 2011).

3. Human Development

The ideas of HD and more precisely of the Capability Approach (hereafter CA) have been gradually introduced to EE in the mid 2000's (Ballet et al., 2013; i.e. Lehtonen, 2004; Pelenc and Ballet, 2015; Sneddon et al., 2006). The fundamental question is whether the CA can offer suitable theoretical and ethical foundations (in particular, its idea of justice) for a great transformation towards global sustainability.

Ideas of Human Development (HD)[6] have become strongly associated with the work of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the publication of their annual reports (United Nations Development Programme, 1990). Offering a novel articulation of the space for individual agency, the HD paradigm enshrined a need for understanding development as being 'development of the people by the people, for the people' (United Nations Development Programme, 1991, p. 13). The contribution of HD can be understood in two main domains: their consideration of development moved away (a) from a pure economic-based understanding – the one measured in GDP – and (b) from a purely state-centred understanding, to one where the people become the main agents of development. HD's shift to people-centred approaches was underpinned by the CA, most notably articulated by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2000; Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Sen, 1989, 1999).

HD explicitly seeks to escape the fixation with material goods (as opposed to, for example, the basic human needs-approach[7]) and focusing instead in the expansion of people's freedom to choose. In the CA, such expansion of freedom is inherently connected to the expansion of agency, i.e., to a process of individual empowerment (Alkire, 2009; Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). Hence, here development is understood as the removal of several forms of 'unfreedom' or barriers that prevent the individual from exerting their own agency and choice to transform their own reality. In a nutshell: the CA offers a framework for addressing the multidimensionality of human well-being escaping from narrow definitions based on economic growth, and it gives a central role to freedom of choice and public deliberation in the definition and assessment of well-being.

Progressively, these ideas have permeated the praxis of development, mainstreaming the idea of a people-centred approach (either politically or economically grounded) as the fundamental means to achieve SD. Yet, simultaneously, the CA has restricted the possibility of engaging in a debate about a more radical transformation of the premises of development altogether. In fact, HD can be seen as a successful exercise of co-optation of some of the critiques to development, analogous to what the concept of 'sustainable development' did with the debate on limits to growth. In HD, ideas of development remain tied to Western, liberal democratic frameworks and to market economies (Carballo, 2015; Selwyn, 2014; Walsh, 2010). Even if the successful mainstreaming of the focus on freedom offers a necessary space of reflection, ideas of HD, in and of themselves, offer little space to address the multiple and imbricated complexities and challenges associated with the growing environmental crisis.[8] HD and the CA have also been strongly criticized for their individualist focus and assumptions, which downplay the role of individual embeddedness in cultural norms and inertias, institutional contexts, and material infrastructures. This problem has been partially addressed by some scholars under the heading of 'collective capability' (Pelenc et al., 2015), yet it remains a key limitation of the CA.

Overall, HD offers the possibility of constructing a more socially-conscious notion of development, where political, environmental, cultural and egalitarian concerns can receive more attention than in conventional economistic conceptions. However, it offers very little space to engage in systemic or macro-structural considerations of the limits and challenges associated to the promotion of development. The expansionist imperative of global capitalism, with its systematic production of inequalities and environmental degradation, is not even identified in the CA as an obstacle in the road towards HD (Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012).

The discourses to be reviewed in the following sections place such systemic considerations at the very centre of their diagnosis and prognosis. With Escobar (2011), we call them *transformation* or *transition discourses* because they seek to redefine the political-economic chessboard set by industrial societies (Dryzek, 2005), and transcend the normative horizon of the development discourse thus opening up space for alternative conceptions of prosperity.

4. Transformation Discourses

From the perspective of their content, what Escobar calls '*discourses of transformation*' are not a novelty of the 21st Century; they are rather part of the long search for and practice of alternative ways of living, forged in the furnace of humanity's struggle for emancipation and enlightenment. What is remarkable about these alternative proposals, however, is that despite the fact that they typically arise from traditionally marginalized groups (often majorities rather than minorities within the population), their critique is not limited to issues of social justice, but are also aimed at denouncing social pathologies. Or, more precisely: their critique of social injustice is rooted in a critique of social pathologies. Indeed, their diagnosis of departure is one of *civilizational crisis*, and, consequentially, their prescriptions break away (to variable degrees) from the idea of development, which is rooted in modern Western-style civilization. The quest for unlimited growth as equated with progress is generally contested by all transformation discourses, as are Western materialism, anthropocentrism, the destruction of the commons, and blind faith in science and technology.

While utopian projects are often regarded as typically *localized* experiments with alternative forms of collective organization (e.g. ecovillages and other intentional communities), the distinctive feature of transformation discourses is, in turn, their aspiration of bending developmental trajectories worldwide. Such *global* aspirations are put forward, for example, by feminisms and eco-feminism, some indigenous and peasants' movements (e.g. La Via Campesina), by the proposal of post-development, by the defense of sentient beings and the 'rights of nature', by the growing global discourses and movements for Environmental Justice, Post-extractivism, Social Economy, Degrowth, the Commons, Convivialism, Food sovereignty, the Latin-American *Buen Vivir*, and also by a weaker movement for eco-Marxism and, eco-socialism,[9] among others. Furthermore, some of these discourses have

[6] When we speak of HD we consider only the literature associated with the CA and not the Human Scale Development Theory developed by Max-neef (1991). This approach is quite different (for a comparison with the CA see Guillen-Royo, 2015; Pelenc, 2016).

[7] The Basic Needs Approach was strongly criticized by Sen and the HD literature in general for (i) its materialistic fixation, (ii) being too paternalistic and (iii) neglecting to consider opportunities (Deneulin and Shahani, 2009, p. 58; Sen, 1980).

[8] See Lessmann and Rauschmayer (2013), Carballo (2016), Shrivastava and Kothari (2012), and Martinez-Alier et al. (2015).

[9] It goes without saying that not all of the discourses listed here stand on equal footing regarding the scope of their respective transformative implications: the fundamental critique of the growth-dependence of capitalist economies, for example, has farther-reaching implications in terms of a whole-societal transformation than, say, the demand for food sovereignty, which is centred on the gaining control over food production and

undergone political experimentation: Eco-Swaraj in India, Bhutan's 'Gross National Happiness' and radical eco-centred politics in food production, or else the 'rights of nature' in Ecuador, Bolivia, India, and Australia, among other examples.

To be sure, despite their global aspirations, these are still situated discourses, born as proposals for fundamental change in (g)localized settings. In a context of post-political (Swyngedouw, 2011) and post-democratic (Blühdorn, 2011; Crouch, 2004; Rancière, 2007; Ritzi, 2014) global governance, transformation discourses intend to re-politicize the debate on the much-needed socio-ecological transformation, affirming dissidence with the currently dominant representations of the world and offering alternative ones.

Yet, the proponents of these discourses seem to build their proposals in a somewhat autarchic way without considering each other's struggles and their potential for synergic common cause towards what they variably refer to as "system change", "paradigm shift" or else "civilizational shift". Scholars and activists alike (Brand, 2015; D'Alisa et al., 2014; Escobar, 2015; Kothari et al., 2014; Narberhaus and Sheppard, 2015; Sneddon et al., 2006) are increasingly advocating a strategic dialogue among transition discourses as key for a "Great Transformation" towards sustainability.

The following sections introduce Degrowth (DG) and *Buen Vivir* (BV) as two emblematic transformation discourses – the former from the global North and the latter from the South – which catalyze many of the views and critiques of other critical discourses represented in the EE literature: for example, key insights from agroecology, eco-feminism, convivialism, etc. are part and parcel of DG; while post-extractivism, indigenous worldviews, etc. are implicit in BV. Furthermore, DG and BV – thus our argument to be developed – are particularly suitable candidates for a promising strategic dialogue with the more established HD.

4.1. Degrowth

Although the term 'degrowth' had been coined by André Gorz in 1972, this discourse experienced a strong revival about 10 years ago, when European social movements adopted it as a "missile word" to challenge the inherent ecological and social unsustainability of a growth-obsessed political economy and a correspondingly growth-dependent global economy (Latouche, 2009).

DG "challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption […] as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being" (Demaria et al., 2013, p. 209). Hence from the outset, DG not only challenges economistic approaches to development: it actually pits economic growth and development against each other, thus re-politicizing the otherwise ideological notion of development (Asara et al., 2015).

To promote a "downscaling of production and consumption" is not to be conflated with steering growth-dependent economies into economic slowdown, which would cause recession, unemployment, inequality and austerity-politics. What DG promotes, instead, is the creation of a different societal structure, transforming current institutions and rules, promoting a different balance of material and non-material forms of prosperity: time prosperity, 'relational goods' (friendship, neighborliness, etc.), non-capitalistic, community-based forms of production, exchange, and consumption, among other things, regain centrality in social and individual life vis-à-vis today's unfettered material consumerism. In this sense, DG can be better understood as 'atheism' in relation to the 'dogma' of economic growth. In fact, it is aimed at taking distance from the growth imaginary and decolonizing society of its influence (D'Alisa et al., 2014; Latouche, 2009).

Although relatively new as a scholarly concept – some authors have declared 2008, the year of the first international degrowth conference, as its academic birth date (Schneider et al., 2010) – the DG discourse has been informed by multiple intellectual sources,[10] which can be synthesized in two main strands (Latouche, 2009): the culturalist strand, including both the critique to development as ideology and to utilitarianism (Castoriadis, 1999; Escobar, 2015; Hamilton, 2003; Illich, 1973; Leff, 2008; Martinez-Alier, 1994; Polanyi, 1944; Rist, 2002; Robbins, 2004) and the ecological strand (Daly and Townsend, 1993; Georgescu-Roegen, 1971; Meadows et al., 1972), including both the disciplines of EE and Political Ecology.

Overall, the body of literature that addresses the economic, social and ecological limits to growth argues that, first, the universalization of Western affluence-standards is ecologically unsustainable; second, that it has historically been proven unfeasible; and, third, that where it has been achieved, it has not even led to happiness (Alexander and Rutherford, 2014).

DG is not just a critique of the growth-obsession and -dependence of the global economy, and the acknowledgement of physical and social limits to growth; it also involves a pro-active, transformative aim of moving towards a model of (post-)development that can dispense with a structural growth-imperative.[11] To do this, a systemic political, institutional and cultural shift is required. In the post-growth world "expansion will no longer be a necessity, and economic rationality and goals of efficiency and maximization will not dominate all other social rationalities and goals" (Kallis, 2011, p. 875). The desirable end-state of DG can be synthesized as a society that prioritizes the maintenance of the ecological integrity of the planet, on the one hand, and embraces the sufficiency-principle as its lifestyle to lessen inequalities and increase well-being, on the other (Alexander and Rutherford, 2014; Schneidewind and Zahrnt, 2014).

4.2. Buen Vivir

The BV discourse has often been defined as a dialogical alternative to development. It arises in a particular historical–political juncture at the interface of the *local* – where decades-long indigenous struggles for cultural and material recognition, eventually converged with the disenchantment of the masses with the neoliberal order at the dawn of the century (Altmann, 2015) – and the *global*, where the capacity of the development paradigm to offer satisfactory responses to the grave social, environmental, and economic challenges of our time had been losing ground over the last twenty years, and could no longer be taken for granted (Vanhulst and Beling, 2014, p. 61). In other words, BV can be said to have emerged from a historically fortuitous *glocal* convergence of multiple struggles at various scales, which influenced larger cultural and political restructuration (Beling and Vanhulst, 2016).

Beyond the idea of interdependence between society and its natural environment (crystallized here in the concept of *Pachamama* or "mother Earth"), in BV, ontological and epistemological plurality is constitutive of culture. BV thus implies a fundamental rupture with Eurocentric universalism (as well as the dichotomies therefrom derived, such as nature-society dualism) (Vanhulst and Beling, 2014). Beyond the normative orientations BV offers, however, what makes this retro-progressive utopia so mesmerizing is the impact it has had on the macro-cultural and political spheres of some Latin American countries, above all Bolivia and Ecuador, where BV has attained constitutional status as

(*footnote continued*)
distribution back from footloose agribusiness-corporations and restoring it to peasants. Yet all listed discourses tend to converge in their fundamental critique of contemporary industrialist and capitalist societies. And most of these discourses do find resonance within the EE literature: post-extractivism, for example, fits perfectly well with the abundant literature in EE on ecologically unequal trade while eco-feminist economics has had special issues in the journal.

[10] For a broader and deeper classification of the intellectual sources that nourishes DG, see Demaria et al. (2013).

[11] For a synthetic and transparent explanation of the mechanisms at the root of modern economies' dependence on economic growth, see Jackson (2009).

the basis of their "social contract".

As has been shown in detail elsewhere (Vanhulst, 2015; Vanhulst and Beling, 2014), while BV became anchored in the socio-cognitive and cultural landscape and in certain socio-political practices in the Andean-Amazonian region, its content has been diversified, forking into a range of more or less (di)similar discourses respectively re-articulated by the successive groups that have adopted and adapted it. Hence, one should rather speak of Buenos vivires, in the plural (Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2014; Loera Gonzalez, 2015; Vanhulst, 2015). In fact, a consensus-definition of BV is not available. This undefinition is probably also key to its magnetism and strength. Eduardo Gudynas (2011) thus speaks of BV as a work-in-progress, to be understood as a dialogical platform rather than as a clear and precise concept.

Yet a systematization of commonalities and differences among the diverse BV-discourses is possible. Three main strands can be identified: an indigenist, a socialist and an academic one (Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2014; Vanhulst, 2015; Vanhulst and Beling, 2013, 2014). From this heterogeneous set, we can distinguish four common constitutive elements of BV: (a) the idea of harmony with nature (including its abiotic components); (b) vindication of the principles and values of marginalized/subordinated peoples; (c) the State as guarantor of the satisfaction of basic needs (such as education, health, food and water), social justice and equality; and (d) democracy. There are also two cross-cutting lines: BV as a critical paradigm of Eurocentric (anthropocentric, capitalist, economistic and universalistic) modernity, and as a new intercultural political project.

Thus BV seek to re-politicize the collective reflection about the socio-economic and ecological drifts of the currently prevailing development paradigm and its capacity to successfully address the socio-ecological sustainability imperative. Similarly to DG and to the discourse of limits of the 1970s (Dryzek, 2005), BV advocates a radical reorientation of the paradigm of endless growth. However, BV rejects the 'promethean' backbone of the discourse on limits to growth, which remains captive to the playbook of industrialism (particularly with regard to the undisputed supremacy awarded to economic, bureaucratic, and scientific elites). From the perspective of BV, what is needed is, instead, overcoming the structures of industrial society and conceiving of new ways of relating to the natural environment – all this through the democratization of all spheres of social life.

The indigenous dimension of BV operates as an inspiration drawn from the aborigine cultural imaginaries of the Andean and Amazonian world, which are rooted in traditional ethical foundations, values, and beliefs *vis-à-vis* nature that industrial civilization has tended to erase. The emergence of BV thus reinforces the multiple voices (eco-socialist, eco-feminist, anti-capitalist, convivialist, environmental justice, etc.) denouncing the ethnocentric and anthropocentric limitations of Western-style conceptions of development and progress, which still heavily gravitate in the SD discourse.

Table 1 below synthesizes the ideational content of the three discourses reviewed above.

5. Discursive Cross-pollination and Synergic Engagement Among Discourses

Having reviewed the three discourses HD, BV, and DG, this section seeks to assess the knowledge-gain and socio-political leverage that each discourse offers, on the one hand, and their blind spots and weaknesses (or 'Achilles heels'), on the other. This will help pave the way towards understanding what can (and what cannot) be expected from each of the discourses as a contribution towards a "Great Transformation", and how they could potentially fertilize and be articulated with each other.

5.1. Buen Vivir: Heralding the Cultural Transformation

BV can be considered as the worldwide first large-scale experiment of discursive articulation of modern and non-modern ontologies (also at the level of the institutional-material sphere). Indeed, BV is the expression of a cultural shift of epic proportions, which results in a fruitful paradox: the indigenous cultural heritage, which was (and often still is) seen as mutually exclusive with the development paradigm, is now reframed as key to the renewal of the latter (Carballo, 2015). In this sense, BV highlights the limitations of (Eurocentric) modern ontology: linearity, individualism, anthropocentrism, expansionism, instrumental rationality, etc.; and set up the principles of circularity, relationality, biocentrism, holism, and an "environmental rationality" (Leff, 2004).

However, the success of BV as a government program can be safely considered to be limited, at best. This should not come as a surprise: the structural dependence of the Ecuadorean economy on a (neo-)extractivist matrix puts a systemic cap onto the ability of governments and social movements to effectively challenge the omnipotence of markets in the neoliberal global economy (Vanhulst, 2015). Proposals and technically feasible measures towards overcoming such dependence are not in short supply, yet the structural political preconditions for implementing them are not in place: "The implementation of realistic and rational proposals has little chance of being adopted and still less chance of succeeding unless [the social imaginary is fundamentally subverted through] the fertile utopia of a convivial and autonomous society" (Latouche, 2009, p. 66). It is thus in this realm of radical cultural subversion that the strength of BV has to be located.

Yet in this vein, a further question inevitably arises: can this Andean retro-progressive utopia potentially inspire change also in the West? Is there any room for cultural resonance for the eco-convivial imaginary of BV in the European worldview? Indeed, framing BV as an idiosyncratic, ethno-centred phenomenon would make it of little relevance to debates about how to bend the global developmental trajectory. Nevertheless, such framing would obscure a large part of the explanation of how BV emerged, in the first place: as existing scholarly engagement with the genesis of BV shows,[12] this discursive innovation did require the *ideational input* from and the *agency* of both indigenous actors and Western actors (e.g. development and environmental international agencies, such as GIZ, Pachamama Alliance; Acción Ecológica; as well as intellectuals and politicians).

In other words, the domestic political and cultural movement shaping BV through the living resonance of indigenous civilizations of the Andes and the Amazon was met by a global movement of political contestation over the prevailing global development model, seeking to establish links of territorial legitimacy by docking to longstanding local struggles (Beling and Vanhulst, 2016). Thus, BV constitutes a prime example of *glocal* discursive articulation in search for post-growth and post-colonialist utopias. This process of 'glocalization' constitutes the backdrop against which the discursive repertoire of BV developed; furthermore, it offers valuable lessons when viewed from a genealogical perspective, as a structural re-balancing of political forces disruptive of "politics as usual" (De La Cadena, 2010).

BV thus appears as both a product and a strong source of cultural transformative waves, matching long marginalized voices from the global South with a global momentum for a discursive shift. This has been and continues to be its main performativity as a social movement and as a political project. In its ambition regarding programmatic deliverables, however, the Ecuadorean and Bolivian experiments with BV simultaneously showcase the limitations of a political revolution without an effective transformation of the material base.

5.2. Degrowth: Envisioning the Material-structural Transformation

If the fundamental transformation of culture is the core business of BV, the transformation of the material base is that of the DG discourse.

Indeed, while DG contains many counter-cultural docking points

[12] See, for example, Altmann (2015) and Espinosa (2015).

Table 1
Main features of the three different discourses analysed.

	HD	DG	BV
Origin of the discourse	– 1990s, – International level (Global North but with rapid spread in Global South through UNDP)	– 1970s, revival in 2000s, – Western Europe	– Early 2000s, combining modern and ancient worldviews – South America
Main message	People-centred development	Infinite growth on a finite planet is ecologically unsustainable and socially undesirable	Living well rather than living 'better'.
Main goal	Conditions and expanding capabilities that allow people to flourish	Challenge the hegemony of growth and propose alternatives to it	Living well in harmony with other humans and the rest of nature
Means and actors conveying the discourse	UN and other international development agencies	Grassroots alternatives, oppositional activism and academia (e.g. international conferences)	Andean communities and governments, grassroots movements and academia
Ontology	– Dualism Nature/culture – Individualism (wellbeing defined at the individual level)	– Dualism/anthropocentrism, even if there is a call to change human-nature relationship – Individual and collective level are regarded as complementary	– Holism (humans are not distinguished and separated from the rest of nature in the Western sense) – Predominance of the collective level (community)
Perspective on growth and development	Focus on HD instead of solely on GDP growth (growth can be a means but not an end)	Growth is the problem and the idea of growth-driven development should be overcome	Growth is a problem and positioning with regard to development is ambiguous (ranging from total rejection as ideologically laden to more conciliatory attempts)
Natural environment	The natural environment should be preserved as a means of guaranteeing present and future human freedoms	Acknowledgment of limits of the biosphere; decrease in production and consumption; voluntary simplicity	Intrinsic value and Rights of Nature; spiritual relationship with nature
Culture	Even if this discourse maintains the idea of development as a goal, the importance of cultural diversity is acknowledged	Acknowledgement that the definition of a good life is culturally diverse. Ecological sustainability and social equity as lowest-common-denominator cultural goals.	– Culture as a key force driving history. Acknowledgment of cultural diversity, interculturality; – Importance of a spirituality; – Importance of indigenous knowledge
State	Nation-state and social welfare but also individual and community empowerment	Nation-state and social welfare but with more democracy; community experiences that might prefigure a post-growth society.	Multi-cultural and Plurinational state, Centrality of the community level
Market	Market as a means to human flourishing, not as an end	Markets as one means of socio-economic organization among others (commons, reciprocity, public sector, etc.) Advocate a de-commodification of the world	Stronger emphasis on de-commodification of the world; solidarity economy
Governance	Deliberative governance	Diversity of positions: from parliamentary democracy up to bottom-up governance.	Participatory and bottom-up governance

Source: own elaboration.

that resonate with BV (e.g. the decolonization of the imaginary), the focus here is on the transformation of material structures as a condition of possibility for a broader societal transformation. Basing on the fundamental insight that infinite growth is unviable in a finite planet (which draws on the intellectual tradition of Nicholas Georgescu-Rogen, Kenneth Boulding, and Herman Daly, all prominent figures of ecological economics), growth-critics have developed an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms locking contemporary capitalist economies into a growth-path. Consequentially, they have elaborated a number of technical-programmatic measures of varied ideological inspiration,[13] which, if implemented, could dissolve the structural dilemma of decision-makers between short-term economic stability and long-term environmental sustainability (Jackson, 2009).

Analogously to BV, however, DG requires cultural preconditions to be fulfilled before it can be translated into an effective political program. There is a danger that premature institutionalization of the DG programme in the form of a political party would lead into the trap of mere 'politicking', i.e. political actors becoming divorced from social realities and being trapped in the political game (Latouche, 2009).

The growth-critical community is a heterogeneous group with its own internal diversity (D'Alisa et al., 2014; Schmelzer, 2015), whose composition varies according to particular spatial settings: liberal-reformists, subsistence-based, capitalism-critical,[14] and feminist strands can be identified within the discursive spectrum, and, in some places, even a conservative strand, represented, for example, by Meinhard Miegel in Germany or Alain de Benoist in France. All of these positions illuminate important shortcomings of growth-based societies and economies, and all prioritize particular transformative agents, instruments and points of intervention.

We argue that it is in particular the liberal-reformist strand, that is a social reformist, ecologically-driven critique of economic growth (partly supported by established organizations in the environmental and development sectors), that holds more promise of spearheading dialogue with mainstream economic critique, thus opening the door to a broader acceptance for more fundamental questioning. While ecologically uncompromising and socially emancipatory, this approach remains institutionally conservative, as it seeks to transform existing structures that are essential to a liberal world-order, rather than dispensing with them altogether (Schmelzer, 2015). Basic guidelines for a political economy here are the reduction of energy- and resource-consumption in accordance to science-informed sustainability goals, hence forcefully dropping GDP growth as a valid criterion to guide political action. The distinctive demand from this strand of thought, however, refers to the restructuration of growth-dependent and growth-driving institutions and infrastructures such as pension systems, health care, education, work, fiscal structures (with eco-taxes playing an important role), let alone financial markets. In this approach, GDP-contraction is not viewed as a goal in itself, but rather as a likely outcome of abandoning the growth-orientation of political economy in compliance with ecological imperatives.

The controversy about decoupling GDP growth from ecological degradation is thus circumvented, rather than resolved. Indeed:

[13] Compare, for example, Demaria et al. (2013), Jackson (2009); Latouche (2009); Miegel (2011).

[14] Worthwhile mentioning within the capitalist-critical strand is the search for an alliance between the Degrowth movement and the movement for Climate Justice: https://www.degrowth.de/en/2017/02/no-degrowth-without-climate-justice/

questioning the growth-orientation on ecological and social grounds shift the terrain of the debate away from technological speculations towards issues of risk of ecological destabilization, on the one hand, and convenience/desirability, on the other, drawing on the historically unfulfilled promises of decoupling growth from ecological degradation and coupling it (back) with wellbeing and happiness. To that extent, there is an evident affinity with the Sen/Nussbaum-inspired discourse of HD, and, for that matter, also with BV – insofar the state works as an instance of institutionalization in all cases – and with other counter-hegemonic struggles in the South. Indeed, while many anti-systemic movements and intellectuals from the global South do share the negative assessment of a growth-oriented politics,[15] they would not straightforwardly endorse the prescription of a contraction in economic output as solution (Brand, 2015).

In the following section, we argue that – if strategically articulated, this convergence might lay the foundation for a political transformation, as their aims of redefining progress and transforming society are complementary (Escobar, 2015). In the case of the Global South, the main challenge is not downscaling the production and consumption – as is the case in the industrialized world – but developing a model that does not rely on the economic growth for the attainment of ecological and social goals.

5.3. Human Development: Sketching Out the Political Transformation

While doubtlessly less innovative from a cultural perspective than BV and DG, and lacking any in-depth analysis of the endemic inbuilt unsustainability in Western-style, globalized economies, the CA of Sen/Nussbaum does hold, in turn, deeper resonance with established political views, both in international as well as in national and local political circles.

Viewed from a perspective of strategic dialogue, its academic and political respectability deliver the key resource of access to mainstream discursive arenas. From the perspective of its transformative potential, HD holds promise insofar change agents informed by BV and DG manage to tap into the transformative "surplus of meaning" (Muraca, 2014) of core liberal values such as freedom, autonomy, individuality, emancipation on which HD builds. Indeed, ecological sustainability doesn't need to be framed as constraining freedom, for example, but rather as preserving it for future generations and restoring it to the disfranchised in today's world – be these materially deprived populations in the global South or the alienated individuals of the rich countries in the north – as the CA suggests. Feminist scholar Uta von Winterfeld (2011), for example, has interestingly advanced such a positive framing through the concept of "right to sufficiency": in a world where consumption has become the central means of social differentiation, both identity-building and social acceptance become increasingly associated with part-taking in the consumerist frenzy. Those voluntarily pursuing materially frugal (i.e. ecologically sustainable) lifestyles are systematically exposed to lack of societal recognition, that is: they suffer from a form of social discrimination. She therefore advocates affirmative action in favour of sufficient lifestyles invoking liberal values of equality and freedom, with the slogan "nobody should be forcefully made to wanting to have ever more".

In addition, the dominant notion of freedom as a lack of constraints *from* the environment ('negative freedom') should be de-emphasized in favour of an understanding of freedom as potential *for* intervening onto this very environment ('positive freedom'), which is enshrined in the notion of 'capabilities' and in the overall focus of strengthening people's agency. This reconceptualization of discourses of development could surely benefit from discursive cross-pollination with DG and BV. Provided this work of re-elaboration proves successful, HD could hold the political key to help replace a growth-oriented politics by an approach centred on (contingent and politically defined) human needs, democratization and pluralization of the economy and dematerialization of lifestyles.

In conclusion, the three discourses analysed complement and need each other if a "Great transformation" to sustainability is to succeed: BV providing the reservoir of the boldest cultural innovation; DG offering detailed analysis about technically up-scalable forms of macro- and micro-socio-economic organization; and HD the potential docking points with mainstream cultural and political values and discourse (Fig. 1).

6. Further Pragmatic Considerations Towards a Fruitful Dialogue Between BV, DG, and HD

The three discourses under consideration carry diverse symbolic and material markers which stem from their respective socio-cultural contexts of emergence: they are to be seen as situated discursive productions. The obstacles that transformative discourses face are not to be located mainly in a lack of conceptual or analytical clarity, but rather in the particularities of diverse geo-historical contexts and contingent moments, with their varying political and socio-cultural connectivity points (Brand, 2015).

In this regard, the greatest disparity can be safely said to separate BV, on the one hand, and DG and HD, on the other. Indeed: BV is heavily influenced by the specific socio-historical heritage of the Latin-American region – and the Andean-Amazonian countries, more specifically – as well as by their geopolitical and geo-economic situations in the (semi)periphery of the globalized capitalist economy. Historical experience of direct and structural oppression, exclusion, or subordination has left a strong cultural imprint leading to an unwavering discursive foregrounding of power relations and imbalances, more than is the case with most growth-critical approaches, and even more so *vis-à-vis* HD.

From a southern vantage point, capitalism is framed not only as a system of production and consumption, but first and foremost as a system of power and domination (not least over nature) (Brand, 2015, p. 29). Furthermore, five hundred years of colonial experience in Latin America have left 'open veins' also in issues of cultural identity, with the reassertion of native cultures and traditions constituting a main discursive vector in BV, as well as the stronger emphasis on territorial struggles as a (meta-)physical space for collective organization, self-determination, identity, and belonging. To varying degrees and qualities, this applies not only to indigenous communities (or nations), but to peasants and suburban slum-dwellers, as well. Such focus on territory is absent from the two northern discourses. In addition, this discursive strand is comparatively more collectivistic and less anthropocentric than the two Northern ones (Escobar, 2015).

At the same time, however, the development ideology is deeply anchored in the political identity of Latin American countries, whereby questioning growth would be counter-commonsensical and find little resonance in larger public debates. Much of the critical and combative energy in social movements and intellectuals comes from frustration derived from *maldevelopment* (Svampa and Viale, 2014; Tortosa, 2001), characterized by alienation, social inequity and ecological unsustainability; i.e., frustration with the unfulfilled promises of development, rather than with the idea of development itself.

Furthermore, and largely as a result of the position of the subcontinent in the scheme of international division of labor, transformative processes in Latin America are focused on production and distribution, rather than on consumption. The already mentioned structural dependency of Latin American economies on the export of raw

[15] Indeed, radical transformative concepts such as post-extractivism (Acosta, 2014) and post-development (Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 2009; Sachs, 2010; Ziai, 2012) stem from the global south, yet they articulate a critical and utopian narrative in terms of post-colonialism and post-capitalism, rather than DG (Brand, 2015), although a dialogue among both perspectives – at least in the academic sphere – is incipient (see for example Acosta, 2014; Brand, 2015; Escobar, 2015; Monni and Pallottino, 2015; Wichterich, 2013).

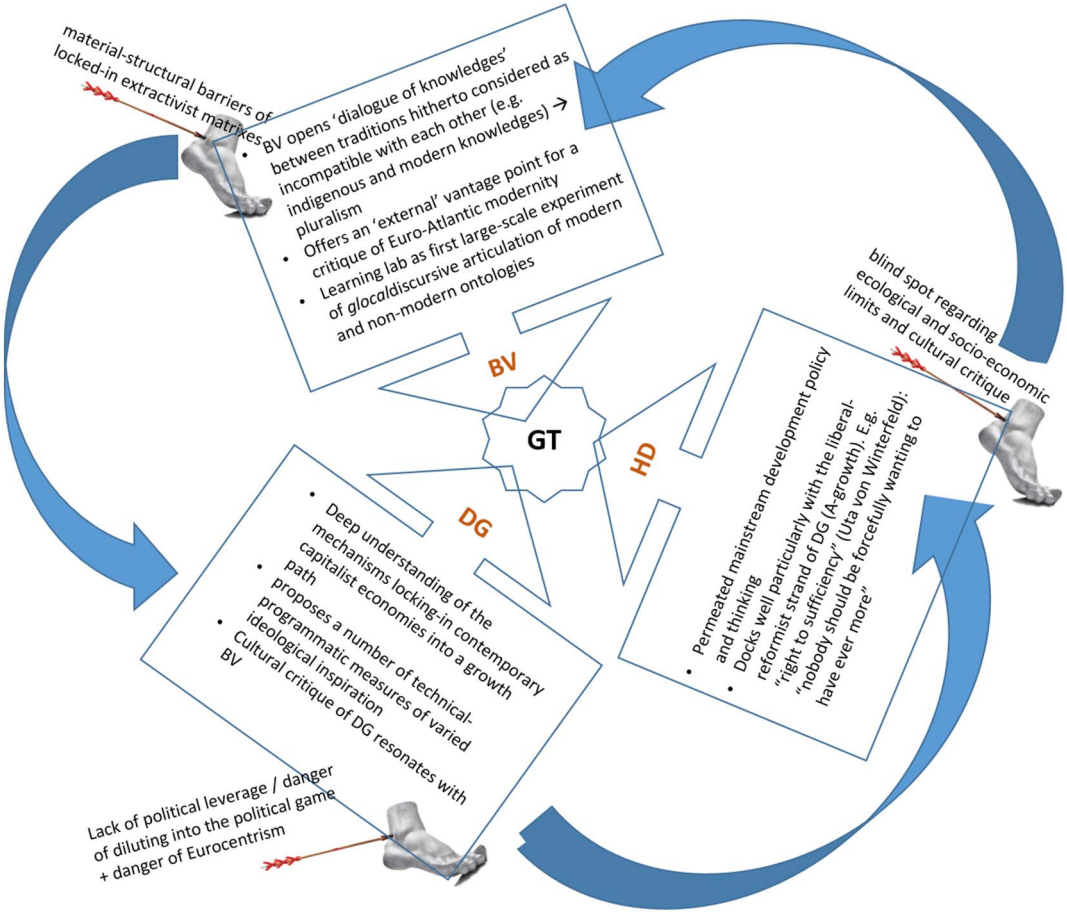

Fig. 1. Synthesis of the main features and weaknesses of the three discourses.
Source: own elaboration.

materials tightly constrains the room for manoeuvre (although that which is actually available can hardly be said to have been already exhausted).

The two above described discursive trends in Latin America trigger various and partly contradictory demands and claims. Such contradictions are, in turn, reflected in the policy landscape of the respective countries: territorial and identity issues are the hallmark of rural peasant and indigenous communities, while a more classical left-distributive approach rather characterizes the urban working-class and partly also bourgeois liberal milieus making out the expanding consumer class. The former are discursively represented mainly by indigenous and critical intellectuals, while the latter finds expression prevalently in pragmatist political spheres (Vanhulst and Beling, 2014).

Yet the expansion of the middle class in Latin American so-called "emergent countries" (most spectacularly, but not exclusively, Brazil), as well as in other countries of the Southern hemisphere, is causing the expansion of imported, Western-style consumption patterns, somewhat blurring the line between North and South,[16] and thus – relevantly for our argument – bringing issues and problems informing the three discourses ever closer towards convergence.

Yet although it is widely acknowledged that the material conditions of life in the Global South need to be improved, many traditions of thought such as post-colonialism, have argued that growth is part of the problem, rather than the solution to the social and ecological issues. Likewise, it is important to keep in mind that, recalling both postcolonial and Dependency Theory, the prevailing conditions in the Global South and North are mutually determining, as two sides of the same coin. Because of this, it is relevant "to resist falling into the trap, from northern perspectives, of thinking that while the North needs 'degrowth', the South needs 'development'. Conversely, from southern perspectives, it is important to avoid the fallacy that degrowth is "ok for the North", but that the South needs rapid growth, whether to catch up with rich countries, satisfy the needs of the poor, or reduce inequalities" (Escobar, 2015, p. 456).

The rejection of the growth-imperative in the North would imply a reconfiguration of international trade that may drive a shift in the productive matrix of the South, which is mainly primary and highly dependent on exports to the North. In geopolitical terms, the denial of the developmentalist discourse of international aid can create an opportunity for moving away from a view of globalization as the universalization of Western-style modernity and, in consequence, the rise of alternatives of/to development towards a plural economy in a plural world – a pluriverse (Escobar, 2015; Gudynas, 2011).

7. Conclusion

This article is meant to contribute to an emerging research agenda on the question: How can complementarities among different transformation discourses be made fertile towards a global socio-ecological transition? (Acosta, 2014; Brand, 2015; Escobar, 2015, 2011; Kothari et al., 2015). This involves envisioning pathways towards a pluriverse, "a world in which many worlds fit" (Demaria and Kothari, 2017).

In the introduction to this article we provocatively argued that while the EE community has been relatively receptive to development-

[16] The inter- and intra-societal heterogenization of socio-economic markers has blurred territorial fault lines separating the "Global South" from the "Global North", which thus become more of socio-economic than of geographic categories.

heterodox transformation discourses, it has hitherto failed to systematically foster a fruitful debate and cross-fertilization among them. Alongside this dialogical research- and intervention-line advocated by leading authors in the discussion on a global social-ecological transformation (i.a. Acosta, 2014; Brand, 2015; Escobar, 2015), we have sought to show promising ideational and pragmatic avenues to advance conversations, complementarities, and alliances among three discursive strongholds within the EE literature (though by no means the only ones worthwhile exploring in terms of dialogic-transformational potential). At the same time, with its transdisciplinary, cross-territorial base, and its critical tradition of weaker, utilitaristic conceptions of sustainability, as well as its sourcing from post-development thought, we have sought to make the case for the EE community embracing the role of becoming a privileged platform for such discursive synergies between HD, DG, and BV to unfold.

The goal of this article was creating a 'discursive bridge' between the global mainstream (represented here by HD), on the one hand, and two radical transformation discourses in the tradition of post-development, on the other – each standing as representative for the south (BV) and from the north (DG); showing concrete possible forms of ideational and pragmatic articulation. The lowest common denominator between DG and BV is to be found in the systemic interconnections and interdependencies of the globalized capitalist economy, as well as social and cultural structures underpinning it. Hence, debates around BV and DG should be brought into convergence towards this common, systemic root of the issues both seek to address, re-framing them as two sides of the same coin (Acosta, 2014; Brand, 2015) and the possible ways to tackle them from such systemic perspective. Mutual support and understanding of complex and interdependent feedback loops would thus potentially enhance the efficacy of the respective local struggles (on which both discourses draw their legitimacy and the support-base needed to expand their influence) significantly.

Taking into consideration the key situational and contextual markers of the discourses analysed here, some promising complementary features between BV and DG to enrich their respective understandings of the systemic interconnections would be, for example, amending BV's focus on the centrality of territory with DG's focus on global relationships and exchanges; the focus on production of the former with the focus on consumption of the latter, or else the focus on systemic interdependences (prominent in HD and DG) with that on power and domination (implicit in BV).

At the level of cultural values, HD's broadly defined aims also allow room for cross-fertilization with DG and BV. The "surplus of meaning" of established liberal values (chiefly, 'freedom') offers the most promising *locus* for a cross-fertilizing dialogue among the three discourses. The anti-utilitarian, celebrative ethos of BV resonates with the aspiration to freedom, and so do the (self-)sufficient, time-wealthy, and less individualistic lifestyles conveyed by DG. Out of the heterogeneous DG strands, it is therefore the liberal-reformist strand (which is institutionally conservative yet ecologically uncompromising and socially emancipatory) that presents the clearest natural affinities for a dialogue with HD. We have further argued that, as a well-established discourse geared towards human flourishing, HD holds potential for spearheading a shift in political climate towards a Great Transformation. Indeed, HD offers important keys as how to frame the issue in order to make it socially and politically acceptable: it's all about enlarging the capabilities of current and future generations to live fulfilling lives – provided, of course, that there is a future for humanity on this planet, in the first place, which cannot be taken for granted any longer without fundamental transformations of the scale and scope envisaged in DG and BV.

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