

CHAPTER 8

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND THE ECO-SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL: A CHALLENGE TO THE NEOLIBERAL WORLD?

Tor Halvorsen

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embedded within it (United Nations, 2015), aptly synthesise the debates surrounding our present development trajectory and the urgent need for change. What the agenda and the goals share is a call for a fresh way of thinking: about how capitalism is organised, how we consume and produce, how we use energy, and most importantly, how we might ensure that human wellbeing becomes possible for all – given the finite resources of the Earth and the reality that only around 30 per cent of the global population, mostly men, currently enjoy what in parts of the Western world is considered ‘decent work’, meaning a normal working day with a living wage.

The question then becomes: what does the ‘transformative shift’ demanded by the UN Agenda 2015 mean in an era where economic globalisation has widened the divide between the West and the rest; where poverty and inequality are expanding; where warfare increasingly replaces cooperation between states; where most

people on Earth still lack access to decent work; and where the vital reproductive work, largely performed by women, that ensures our daily survival remains unrecognised and uncounted? Moreover, the recent surge of ethno-nationalism has fuelled anxieties within and across nations, accompanied by rising xenophobia and conflicts. A form of social fascism, survival of the strongest, of the wealthiest individuals and nations, is spreading. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to assert a shared global citizenship or the universal right of all human beings to a decent life. The SDGs, in seeking to ensure that ‘no one is left behind’, thus stand directly confronted by the social fascism now spreading across the globe.

The normative position of this chapter is that a truly transformative shift must break with the prevailing hegemonic development model, and the forms of knowledge on which it is built, and must instead embrace an eco-social model guided by values other than economic growth as we have traditionally pursued it. Crucially, this also requires restoring meaningful democracy. Such a model directly confronts the ethnonationalist reactions provoked by neoliberal globalisation, reactions that neoliberalism itself skilfully exploits for its reproduction. The central question is how the debate on the SDGs, especially as they come up for revision, can focus on the radical changes required in global capitalism. Furthermore, it is essential to consider how knowledge, now and in the future, can help foster a continuous broadening of democracy, beyond its narrow (neo)liberal form, and support collective efforts to build a socially just, solidaristic society within an economy that remains within the planet’s ecological limits.

The SDGs and their background documents have been described by Pekka Eskelinen (2021) as rhetorically and epistemologically embedded within a neoliberal political framework, albeit one that includes a limited social policy element (similar, perhaps, to the German ordoliberal tradition). In his close reading, Eskelinen demonstrates how neoliberal logic permeates the economic vision behind the SDGs. My argument here is that if the SDGs, whether in their current or future revised form, are to contribute meaningfully to global transformation, they must first liberate themselves from these

neoliberal constraints and promote institutional changes that foster genuine eco-social development.

A turning point?

After decades of neoliberal hegemony, which has reshaped our institutions to serve global capitalism, this dominance is, at least on paper, now being challenged by the agreement reached in September 2015 through the adoption of the SDGs. In these documents, there is explicit talk of the need for a formative shift in our development model to meet the growing eco-social challenges of our time. When viewed holistically and as interconnected, the SDGs, despite their continued emphasis on technology, markets, and neoliberal governance strategies favouring unlimited growth, can also be read as a critique of the effects produced by this very model: that it generates more problems than it can resolve.

Indeed, growing knowledge of global challenges has led to several related international agreements that address the preservation of nature, oceans, air quality, and human relations, all framed within the logic of sustainability as articulated by the SDGs. These agreements suggest that the SDGs, when backed by such global commitments, can be seen as representing a critical and alternative *project* to the Western neoliberal development model that has now become globalised. If future revisions of the SDGs are to wield genuine influence and lead us towards an alternative development trajectory, it is precisely this interpretation of the SDGs that must be advocated and supported.

From the Western development model to a global alternative?

The UN Agenda, particularly when viewed from the perspective of the Global South, appears deeply embedded in the Western value system, built around liberal democracy, rule of law, human rights, industrialisation, the ideal of full-time 'normal' work, and a model of continuous economic growth.

Yet, alongside this Western framing, there has also emerged what might be termed a global critique. As already indicated through agreements concerning air, water, and land, these critiques demand more fundamental changes, a genuine formative shift that breaks with the prevailing development paradigm. As stated explicitly in paragraph 9 of the UN Agenda 2015, what is now required is not mere economic growth in conventional terms, but growth in ‘wellbeing’: a form of socially committed growth that reduces poverty and inequality while operating within environmental limits that preserve nature. Furthermore, when the power of capital ownership and private economic decision-making threatens democratic values, the latter must take precedence.

This is a radical idea that is far from easy for all participants in the SDG negotiations, such as state bureaucrats, academics, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to accept. Accordingly, the UN Agenda 2015 embodies substantial ambiguity and compromise, reflecting unresolved conflicts between negotiating parties on numerous issues, particularly around democracy and neoliberal models of economic growth. What kind of economic growth is still acceptable, and who should benefit from it? These questions continue to generate intense debates that hold serious implications for how we interpret and apply the SDGs today and in the future (Halvorsen & Higgins, 2020).

In addition, the extent to which values like the rule of law, democratic governance, and the protection of human rights, values largely rooted in Western historical experience, can serve as globally valid principles remains contested. These values, while claimed universally, are often violated by the very neoliberal regimes that present themselves as their originators. This creates space for a critique of neoliberal interpretations of the SDGs and calls for a more radical reading, one that would allow concrete action towards realising these values within the eco-social development framework. The first essential step in this process is to dismantle neoliberal policies and allow democratic principles to guide our critiques of current economic growth patterns and the formulation of alternatives.

The neoliberal

As I will demonstrate, the appeal to Western values is not necessarily at odds with neoliberalism, despite the fact that neoliberalism has worked systematically to transform and, in many ways, dismantle democratic societies. As Wendy Brown (2016) has observed, neoliberal policies have not prevented the erosion of the demos, the democratic sovereign people. Neoliberal discourse, while invoking the language of 'liberal democracy', seeks to protect capital from democratic control, to transform the state into an instrument for constructing markets wherever possible, and to redefine 'good governance' as public support for private enterprise, often at the expense of welfare and social protections.

At this juncture, we must ask how realistic the notion of a 'turning point' truly is in today's world. As previously emphasised, approximately 70 per cent of the global population remains outside the formal world of decent work. Meanwhile, the industrial strategies of most OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries continue to consume resources at nearly double the planet's regenerative capacity each year. Inequality and public poverty are escalating at unprecedented rates. Nevertheless, neoliberal theorists have convinced most governments that 'human capital development', combined with continued industrial growth, will eventually generate decent work for all. Yet the world is increasingly governed by autocrats indifferent to the SDGs, and political leaders who are unwilling to pursue the institutional and policy changes necessary to realise them. Many dismiss the SDGs as little more than a list of good intentions.

Such positions, however, are entirely contrary to any serious strategy for a transformative shift. Moreover, we must recognise how difficult systemic change will be as long as world leaders remain unwilling to prioritise the SDGs when they might threaten their regimes. The prevailing principle remains: security first, growth first, ethnonationalism first. Whenever the SDGs, with their strong emphasis on environmental sustainability, equality, and global citizenship, conflict with these priorities, they are invariably sacrificed.

But is there hope?

Despite these obstacles, there are grounds for cautious optimism. Under the banner of the UN's call for a 'transformative shift' and the development of a new model, an eco-social and social-solidarity economy is beginning to emerge as a moral and normative alternative to neoliberal hegemony. This alternative offers the potential to unify many otherwise fragmented and uncoordinated critical voices that oppose contemporary neoliberal capitalism, including labour unions, environmental movements, women's organisations, peace movements, anti-nuclear movements, and others.

Particularly important is the growing role of the academic world, where many scholars are now using the SDGs to frame research that critiques the present neoliberal development model and fosters alliances with democratic forces. What unites these diverse actors is a shared demand for a new, just, and sustainable human-nature relationship, one that breaks decisively with the exploitative logic of capitalism as it has thus far operated.

Such a transformation also requires looking backwards: to earlier economic experiments and historical traditions that organised production, work, governance, technology, and nature in ways not driven solely by markets, private capital, and profit. These past models can provide inspiration for developing alternative futures in which justice, equality, and ecological sustainability take priority over economic growth for its own sake.

Social agents for change: A new beginning

Societal change occurs through social movements that cut across social divisions and build broad class alliances. These movements, in their search for new knowledge about how to manage human-nature relations, develop alternative norms that directly challenge the hegemonic neoliberal narrative. Neoliberalism has long penetrated society with slogans such as 'human capital', 'innovation',

‘entrepreneurship’, and its unwavering defence of private ownership of capital and knowledge (including control over digital technologies and intellectual property frameworks such as the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement).

The success of neoliberalism rests largely on its alliances with powerful actors who work behind the scenes to institutionalise neoliberal norms globally. In contrast, the emerging social movements advocating an eco-social model increasingly rely on knowledge developed to support alternative economic and political structures.

These movements resist the marginalisation of women’s (re) productive labour, the erosion of standard working hours in the Western world, and the decoupling of growth from wages and rewards that exacerbates inequality. They also challenge the absence of redistributive mechanisms tied to ownership of land and capital, the expansion of public poverty that undermines welfare provision, and the persistent underdevelopment of low-welfare nations, so-called ‘developing countries’. Crucially, these struggles also address environmental degradation and the need for new, more just interactions between humans and nature, including respect for Indigenous populations.

Many of these issues have been brought to light through research and knowledge production that aims to decolonise Western epistemological hegemony and foster genuinely global approaches to development. Neoliberalism has colonised not only politics but also academic and intellectual life, restructuring universities, work environments, and most institutional frameworks according to its logic. It has become a global movement colonising nearly every part of the world.

Thus, any countermovement must be global in scope. While the UN Agenda 2015 remains embedded within Western intellectual traditions, as previously discussed, it simultaneously adopts a global orientation. As we have argued, the Global South increasingly holds the key to the future of global development and the SDGs themselves, especially as the revision process now begins (Halvorsen & Higgins 2020).

The neoliberal society vs democracy

Democracy is premised on openness, participation, equality, freedom of expression, and universal access to information and knowledge within an open public sphere. When democratic and capitalist interests collide, democracy must prevail. In sharp contrast, the capitalist firm operates according to principles of inequality, secrecy, hierarchical (often patriarchal) decision-making, and the right of owners and managers to pursue private goals using capital, knowledge, and wage labour as they see fit. While democracy advances society through legally formalised decisions based on a measure of consensus, the economy functions on contracts between so-called ‘willing’ participants. In reality, however, these contracts are heavily shaped by capital’s dominant bargaining power, with the state and judiciary protecting private ownership and securing capital’s ongoing access to labour.

The state, in turn, not only secures citizenship rights but also determines who qualifies for such protections and which rights they may access, such as healthcare, welfare, education, job security, and housing, as persistent patterns of racism across the world demonstrate. Citizens sustain the state through taxation, military service, and cultural adaptation to the norms of national hegemony. Yet they remain largely excluded from key economic decisions. While the state focuses on reproducing the power of ruling elites, citizens may pursue interests that conflict with this hegemony, such as inclusion, protection from economic exploitation, taxation policy, and limits on private power.

The SDGs, when read as a coherent whole, demand that we revisit these foundational questions in light of nature’s ecological constraints and the principle that all investments must reduce poverty and inequality. The historical expansion of individual freedom, from subjects and slaves to full citizens, has allowed individuals greater life choices, but only within the constraints imposed by the dominant growth paradigm.

The growth economy relies on the state to guarantee the non-contractual foundations of market and labour relations, including

property rights, an educated workforce, and the expansion of markets across borders (facilitated by capital mobility). In turn, the state depends on taxing surplus capital to fund infrastructure and public services, and to stabilise the political system through employment, discipline, and policy direction. Yet meeting today's global challenges would require OECD states to significantly increase taxation and redistribution to realise the SDGs, a scenario made virtually impossible as long as neoliberal capitalism and the neoliberal state prevail.

The economy draws citizens into wage labour via employment contracts that often leave them vulnerable when work is precarious or when contracts fail. The SDGs, in many ways, reflect neoliberal poverty thinking: the World Bank's dominant model aims to lift people just above the threshold of absolute poverty, rendering them useful as labour, but little more. In contrast, genuine wellbeing for all and long-term security through welfare states remain marginalised.

For citizens to expand their choices and build alternative development models, democracy is essential to protect welfare, social and environmental justice, and individual freedoms. At the same time, democracy itself depends on active citizens whose participation is supported by robust social and political rights, as well as the freedom of critical academic discourse.

Thus, democracy, as a mechanism for eco-social transformation, must directly confront neoliberalism. Under neoliberalism, societal institutions have become conflated: the economy undermines democracy, reduces citizens to 'human capital', and transforms the state into a 'competition state'. Furthermore, neoliberalism distorts immigration policies, using border controls to serve capital's needs while disregarding humanitarian obligations towards migrants. Globalised capitalism weakens state capacities and leads to declining welfare for the most vulnerable.

The economy draws on the citizenry for its workforce while marginalising all others, rendering many 'cast away' from full participation. Citizens become wage-dependent, compelled into work contracts without protection.

Why has neoliberalism succeeded?

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, neoliberalism has come to dominate global politics, shaping state capitalism (as in China) and liberal democracies alike. Whether discussing the Global North or South, most of the world seems caught within this neoliberal discourse. Even as China has risen to become far more than simply the ‘factory of the world’, presenting an alternative to liberal democracy, neoliberalism remains a global force influencing virtually all nations. This global reach is in part sustained by the work of neoliberal think-tanks, now increasingly present even in China (Slobodian & Plehwe, 2022).

The term ‘neoliberalism’ was originally coined in 1937 but became more fully institutionalised with the establishment of the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS) by Friedrich Hayek in 1947. Neoliberalism advances the *economisation* of society, leading to a form of *de-differentiation* where virtually all social relations and institutions, political, cultural, and educational, are reorganised according to market logic, even universities (Münch, 2012, particularly on the growth of the liberal competition state see p. 213).

At the global level, the neoliberal regime has been described by many scholars as a form of “new constitutionalism for world order”. Alongside this new legal framework, a parallel system of informal governance has emerged, relying on mechanisms such as benchmarking, ratings, rankings, and international comparisons, tools of ‘soft regulation’ that exert powerful influence, particularly by forcing public institutions to mimic private market competition. Within this framework, neoliberalism promotes de-differentiation across society to extend the market’s reach.

When Gill and his colleagues discuss the “new constitutionalism” that structures neoliberalism’s global political economy, they emphasise that this shift is not only about moving governance to higher levels, but also about transferring power to economic actors through legal and normative instruments:

New constitutionalism limits democratic control over central elements of economic policy and regulation by locking in future governments to liberal frameworks of accumulation premised on freedom of enterprise. (Gill & Cutler, 2014)

The core ideas of the MPS rest on a particular conception of human motivation: that only competition produces efficient behaviour, and that market competition is the most effective form – *though this has never been scientifically proven*. Unlike classical liberals, these ‘new’ (neo)liberals accepted the necessity of legal frameworks to regulate competition, as well as an active state to construct market-like competition wherever possible and to build institutions that serve global capitalism. Contrary to romantic notions of “disembedded markets”, as Richard Münch (2011) demonstrates, neoliberal markets are deeply embedded through state action, as well as through international organisations that operate largely beyond the influence of democratic national governments. For neoliberals, democracy may serve peaceful transitions and interstate communication, but it must not interfere with the supreme laws of global capital.

Quinn Slobodian (2018), analysing the post-colonial period and the birth of neoliberalism, traces how economists and lawyers, particularly those collaborating in Geneva from the early 20th century onwards, transformed the relationship between states and markets. Over 50 years, the MPS established itself as the most influential neoliberal think-tank, working in tandem with legal and economic networks focused on reconciling national sovereignty with global capital. This was especially relevant as newly decolonised African states asserted self-determination after the 1960s. For neoliberals, global economic law had to override the principle of national self-determination, subordinating democracy to global capital. As Slobodian’s more recent work in *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy* (2023) demonstrates, these neoliberal forces continue to envision global markets insulated from democratic interference, through zones of exception where free-market radicalism flourishes.

In line with Gill's (2012) analysis of post-national constitutionalism, Slobodian argues:

What neoliberals seek is not a partial but a complete protection of private capital rights, and the ability of supranational bodies like the European Court of Justice and the WTO to override national legislation that might disrupt the global right of capital. (Slobodian, 2018:12)

In *Crack-Up Capitalism*, Slobodian shows how neoliberals worldwide share the conviction that “[c]apitalism had to be protected from democracy in the age of mass democracy” (Slobodian, 2023:26), and provides striking examples from the Global South, including South Africa.

Mirowski and Plehwe summarise key features of neoliberalism: neoliberal societies must be actively constructed; they do not emerge naturally through the ‘invisible hand’ of markets. For neoliberals, markets function as information systems superior to any human attempt at planning or organising. Thus, the state itself must be reconstructed accordingly, often under the guise of an “economic theory of democracy” that justifies state involvement only to facilitate market functioning (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009:434–446). As Axel Honneth (2014) observes, freedom is redefined as an individual's ability to make atomistic choices within this system.

Under neoliberal logic, education and research are treated as consumer goods rather than as cultural or emancipatory practices. Knowledge becomes commodified, useful primarily for generating ‘human capital’ rather than cultivating critical or informed citizens. Gary Becker, a long-standing member and former chair of the MPS, extended this logic by elevating the “strategic citizen”, individuals whose worth is measured by their capacity to invest in their human capital to enhance personal productivity. This neoliberal ideal has restructured institutions across the Western world, making human capital accumulation the primary purpose of work and education. Those who fail to participate in this self-investment process are left behind.

This ideology demands not only free flows of capital across borders but also unimpeded flows of knowledge and educational services aligned with capital's needs. As Hayek famously argued: "All human knowledge can only be used to its fullest if it is comprehensively owned and priced" (cited in Mirowski & Plehwe, 2019:440).

Honneth (2014:236), like many eco-social theorists, concludes that only a mass mobilisation of social movements can challenge this situation:

The only way out of this crisis of the democratic constitutional state would be to bundle the public power of organisations, social movements, and civil associations in order to put coordinated and massive pressure on the parliamentary legislature, forcing it to take measures to ensure the social re-embeddedness of the capitalist market [...].

He further observes that globalisation and mass migration have undermined many of the shared cultural frameworks once capable of sustaining national solidarity, making such mobilisation all the more difficult.

Conflicts and ambiguity: Pushing the SDGs towards the eco-social model?

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and the interests that underpin them, are marked by considerable ambiguity, especially regarding the central questions of economic growth, global capitalism, and access to meaningful work. Yet, despite these ambiguities, it remains clear that all the SDGs (and their sub-goals) in one way or another challenge neoliberal assumptions.

The Western development model, as previously indicated, remains paradigmatic, giving the voices of the West continued authority in defining concepts such as 'democracy'. However, within this paradigm, there is important space for critique, given the SDGs' central emphasis on 'wellbeing' as the ultimate goal of future development (Dodds et al., 2017).

Although the SDGs continue to refer to economic growth, and often implicitly to growth as defined by the OECD, other actors involved in shaping the goals have introduced more nuanced understandings. They advocate growth that decouples carbon emissions from economic expansion, for green technology policies, for job creation through environmentally friendly industrialisation, and for circular economies that reuse resources. Most importantly, they have revived the language of “limits to growth”, a slogan that originated in the 1970s but has now returned as part of serious political debate in the 2020s.

There is growing recognition, even among mainstream institutions, of the negative consequences of the growth paradigm. SDG 10, for example, explicitly calls for a reduction in inequality, particularly the forms of inequality created by capitalism itself, which remains the dominant example in most discussions. Increasingly, doubt is spreading about the appropriateness of the Western development model for countries in the Global South. The discourse has shifted from ‘catching up’ with Western living standards to seeking alternative development paths altogether.

During the negotiations that led to the adoption of the SDGs, and in the expert reviews that followed, the work of economist Simon Kuznets (dating back to the 1930s) gained renewed prominence. Kuznets’s critique of the use of ‘the economy’ as the sole measure of social value, and his argument that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is an inadequate proxy for social wellbeing, resurfaced as part of these deliberations. As the International Council for Science and the International Social Science Council emphasised in their expert review of the SDG targets:

The ‘ultimate end’ of the SDGs – and how the 17 goals and targets would contribute to achieving this end – needs to be more compelling. An overarching goal, such as: ‘a prosperous, high quality of life that is equally shared and sustainable,’ could help group the 17 goals and make the full list more understandable to a broader range of people. The overarching goal should also be reflected in new metrics for measuring

progress towards it, and it could stimulate progress towards moving beyond using GDP as a proxy for development. GDP was never designed to measure development, much less sustainable development. As Kuznets (1934) pointed out when first proposing GDP as a metric of national income: ‘The welfare of nations can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income.’ The SDG framework should promote a new approach to measuring economic progress towards sustainable development. (UNESCO, 2015:9)

The work of Kate Raworth and her colleagues at Oxfam played an influential role even during the early phases of SDG negotiations. Raworth’s concept of *Doughnut Economics* (2017), which fundamentally critiques the economics profession’s obsession with growth, provides a new visualisation of planetary boundaries combined with social foundations. The original Oxfam Doughnut (Raworth, 2012) was subsequently used as a central framework for the “World Social Science Report” (2013) under UNESCO’s International Social Science Council.

By shifting focus away from GDP addiction, social scientists position themselves as key contributors to the global debates on sustainability. The global challenges that led to the development of the Doughnut framework, and later the 17 SDGs, cannot be addressed through the current model of economic globalisation. Instead of focusing on expanding the global economy, future models must centre the planet itself, recognising its finite resources and capacity.

The Anthropocene and the eco-social strategy of social justice

The so-called Holocene period, which spanned the last 11,000 years, has been a remarkably stable geological epoch, providing the conditions under which human civilisation emerged and flourished. This long period of stability, however, has been fundamentally disrupted since the advent of industrialisation, first with the discovery and use of coal,

and particularly after the 1960s, when oil-based industrial capitalism accelerated. This marked the moment when GDP was elevated as the principal measure of national progress and was tightly coupled with fossil fuel expansion.

By the beginning of the 21st century, scientists had begun debating whether we had now left the Holocene altogether, entering a new epoch they termed the Anthropocene, defined by the extent to which human activity has become a dominant force reshaping the Earth's systems. The question posed at a scientific conference in 2000 was explicit: have humans themselves now become the central agent shaping climate, land, oceans, and even the seabed?

Indeed, reports, such as the OECD's (2016) study on the ocean as "the last frontier of economic growth and industrialisation", illustrate how human intervention now reaches into every corner of the biosphere. Nature and human systems have become so entangled that scientists now widely agree that humans and nature must co-govern planetary futures. As Schmelzer argues, this demands a radical departure from the OECD's dominant growth paradigm, formulated during the early post-Second World War years:

The growth paradigm is ultimately unstable and self-contradictory since the expectation it raises of continually increasing levels of material production run up to the ecological limits of a finite planet. (Schmelzer, 2016:357)

Under the OECD's growth paradigm, nature is not seen as a partner but as an object to be conquered, an attitude deeply embedded in colonial histories. From John Locke's justifications of English conquests in Ireland, to the genocides of indigenous peoples in the Americas, Western political thought legitimised the expropriation of land and resources wherever it could be seized (Wood, 2002).

We therefore need to examine far more carefully which humans have driven this process. The Anthropocene concept risks homogenising humanity's role, but in reality, it is primarily capitalism, and capitalist classes, that have led this global transformation. The energy

transitions of coal, and later oil, are inseparable from capitalism's historical expansion. Today, this system has produced an extraordinary concentration of wealth and power. As Mbembe has argued, Silicon Valley now represents the new epicentre of imperialism, built on a knowledge capitalism supported by more or less privatised universities (Svendsen, 2024).

In the starkest terms, inequality remains extreme: one per cent of the global population owns more wealth than most nation states; OECD countries consume more than any low-income society; and even within the Global North, poverty grows amidst obscene concentrations of private affluence. An average American consumes (at least) 32 times more than a Kenyan; one per cent of the world's population monopolises nearly half of global wealth; the wealth of the world's 80 richest individuals exceeds that of 460 million of the world's poorest – and these cleavages escalate year by year (Raworth, 2012; Hardoon, 2015).

Thus, the Anthropocene should not be seen as equally driven by 'humanity', but rather by a particular class within global capitalism. The Western growth model was designed by, and for, a privileged minority, whose interests remain embedded in new forms of imperialism and intellectual colonisation. The SDGs explicitly argue that this system cannot continue. Although the full implications of their critique have yet to be realised, we already have sufficient knowledge to see where we are headed if an alternative eco-social development model is not urgently pursued.

Predictably, the wealthy remain united in defending the hegemonic growth model originally constructed and institutionalised in the aftermath of the Second World War under OECD coordination.

A new model?

The hegemonic development model can be understood through how borders are constructed and regulated to promote capital mobility, how the state is historically constituted as a centralising force, and the type and degree of popular influence and democracy that guide

the state. Together, these shape the form of citizenship and the functioning of the economy under globalised neoliberal capitalism. All these institutions must be mobilised to effect change, aligning transformation with eco-social needs.

Neoliberal policies interpret the movement of people primarily in terms of economic utility while closing borders to others, such as environmental refugees. For the SDGs to be realised, those fleeing climate impacts, war, and other crises, the poor and vulnerable, must be allowed to cross borders when their lives are endangered, ensuring that the burdens of environmental and economic decline are shared more equitably. This implies embracing the principle of 'leaving no one behind' and promoting the ideal of global citizenship.

Neoliberal politics use the state to promote the free movement of capital with minimal taxation, to lower wages, and to individualise the world of work. The SDGs, by contrast, require a state that regulates the movement of capital to prevent concentration of power, restricts environmentally destructive investments, and uses its monopoly of force to protect human rights and guarantee livelihoods when necessary. Historically, citizenship gradually expanded to include the propertyless and marginalised, with rights and obligations defined through the state's protection of borders. Today, however, economic and political elites once again curtail these rights. Neoliberalism seeks to minimise the state's role as a democratic economic actor, turning it instead into a facilitator for market expansion and labour control.

The SDGs presuppose a state that uses its public authority to protect human rights, ensure social welfare, and prioritise environmental concerns. The neoliberal state, which claims to operate under the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*), creates an appearance of equal competition but in reality enables large corporations to bypass national restrictions. Public law is reduced to serving private capital, shaping education and public institutions to produce 'human capital' for the market. To achieve the SDGs, the state must once again become an active economic actor, supporting alternative forms of production and consumption that meet human and environmental needs. Legal rationality must be grounded in guaranteeing rights to water, sanitation, food, and other

basic goods (SDG 6, SDG 2), while designing state interventions that secure these rights without degrading nature. For neoliberals, public institutions are permitted to exist only if they contribute to the market logic of competitiveness; for the SDGs, the goal is to create conditions for wellbeing for all, enabling cooperative learning processes in schools and universities that foster solidarity.

The neoliberal system is driven by economic growth based on private accumulation (Kocka, 2016). Without growth, there can be no taxation of firms and wages – yet neoliberalism has systematically reduced corporate tax burdens, producing public impoverishment and widening inequality. For neoliberals, private investment secures eternal progress. For the SDGs, however, the priority must be alternative modes of production and consumption that privilege eco-social needs over profit. Neoliberalism justifies war as a means of securing economic growth for the sake of stability. The SDGs suggest that a world characterised by growing inequality, environmental injustice, and hunger is inherently unstable. In other words, the four ‘modern’ institutions – the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), and OECD – that today interact under a neoliberal logic must be transformed if we are to address the global challenges articulated in the UN Agenda 2015. Only then can an eco-social model take root.

The historical trajectory of neoliberalism is one of expanding markets, globalising production, transforming borders to restrict people while allowing capital to flow freely, and reshaping the state from border-protector to competition state, supporting domestic economic actors in global markets. This has entailed a shift from ‘methodological nationalism’ to engagement in post-national processes, embedding global economic imperatives into nation state institutions. By weakening democratic influence, focusing the state on supporting economic actors, suppressing civil society and unions, and elevating economic growth as the precondition for labour use and national wellbeing, the global neoliberal ‘constitution’ has entrenched its hegemony.

Some argue that we are witnessing a return to mercantilism and imperial nationalism, with renewed focus on the nation state marking the end of the neo-colonial period. Domination by global corporations

and multilateral institutions is being replaced, or supplemented, by the domination of great powers. Brexit is cited as one symptom of this development. Yet neoliberalism persists within this revival of mercantilism, as evidenced by the alignment of state power with the interests of major corporations, including in the context of the war in Ukraine. Despite tighter borders and shifting trade patterns, the global dominance of ‘big tech’ and other corporate giants continues, often to the detriment of smaller nations’ economic development. Social protest movements have so far made only limited inroads into globalised capitalism, despite claims that neoliberalism has reached a turning point.

The SDGs, however, provide a normative framework for global mobilisation against neoliberalism and neo-mercantilism. They offer an opportunity to revise our understanding of ‘economic growth’, to foreground human wellbeing and ecological sustainability, and to reassert the centrality of democracy in guiding national development and global governance, now more urgently needed than ever. As the “Spotlight on Sustainable Development” report stresses (The Reflection Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2016:15), civil society organisations must play a crucial role as independent watchdogs, monitoring progress and regress alike, holding governments and multilateral institutions accountable.

The turning point?

We are currently in a global moment where the stabilising mechanisms of the Western growth model are faltering, while the ecological crisis demands urgent action by all states. The opportunity for alternative pathways, such as the eco-social model presented here, depends on whether social movements are able to build sufficient strength within and across institutions. The critical question remains: can the eco-social alternative emerge from within the Western development model through a transformation of its current neoliberal form, or, as Nancy Fraser (2021) suggests, does it require a more fundamental break altogether?

If Fraser's position is correct, then we face a profound challenge: the various social movements that might lead such a transformation are not yet unified into a "clear and convincing perspective that connects all of our present woes, ecological or otherwise, to one and the same social system, and through that to one another" (Fraser, 2021:126). Nor does the academic community currently possess the institutional coherence to organise and disseminate alternative forms of knowledge sufficient to support such a transformation.

More than 25 years ago, Robert Cox (1997), in his seminal article "Democracy in hard times: Economic globalisation and the limits to liberal democracy", identified how debates over "state overload" in the 1970s and early 1980s gave momentum to neoliberal influence over the Western development model. In particular, neoliberalism advanced its agenda by limiting popular democratic influence, enhancing undemocratic economic control, and expanding state powers in ways that served globalising capital (what Cox termed the "competition state"). This shift undermined civil society organisations that had traditionally placed democratic demands on the state – thus weakening the very social foundations of democracy.

Cox foresaw how capitalist expansion would increasingly come into contradiction with nature and social demands. He also identified an emerging cleavage between growth-oriented segments of the labour movement, willing to compromise with neoliberalism, and eco-social movements that insisted on revitalising democratic power structures as the precondition for any viable future. Whether such alliances can eventually form remains an open question. Cox warned that the re-democratisation required to address the biosphere crisis and growing inequality must be rooted in strengthened civil societies rather than in interventions from powerful external actors:

All we can say today is that a democratic movement which would transcend the limited formal kind to embrace a social dimension would have to be based on a socially cohesive revived civil society, and this will have to be generated from within. It would not be democratic if it were to be dependent

on infusion by well-meaning but intrusive foreigners. This is crucial to a politics that would work to sustain the biosphere, and to make social equality the goal of public policy. Such a movement would presage an alternative meaning to 'globalisation'. (Cox, 1997:68)

The historical trajectory of neoliberalism has involved expanding markets, transforming economic structures through globalisation, redefining borders to serve capital while restricting human movement, and transforming the state into a competition state whose primary role is to promote corporate competitiveness on the global stage. In this context, the state has shifted away from 'methodological nationalism' and now plays an active role in post-national global governance through institutions like the World Bank, IMF, WTO, and OECD. These institutions help integrate national states into global market frameworks while insulating global capital from democratic accountability.

The neoliberal transformation has weakened democratic participation, transformed the state into an agent of capital, suppressed civil society organisations (including labour unions and protest movements), and further entrenched the idea that economic growth remains the only viable foundation for social stability, employment, and wellbeing. In this way, neoliberalism has achieved a global constitutional hegemony. Thus far, social protest movements have succeeded only in producing modest disruptions to this deeply entrenched global system, despite frequent claims that neoliberalism has reached its limit. The real turning point has yet to materialise.

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