



Essentialist Approaches to Global Issues: The Ontological Limitations of Development Studies

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing consensus among development researchers and practitioners that development studies is in a critical moment. This chapter offers reflections on the challenges and transformations that development studies face in order to redefine its remit, and to position itself within broader academic, policy, and practice communities. Basile and Baud explain the factors that took development studies to a critical impasse: the increase of cooperation among regional powers, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), that broke with the traditional north–south schema; the participation of new players, new sources of funds and new initiatives in the system of aid and development finance; the United Nations’ (UN) MDGs and SDGs campaigns that monopolised

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global development goal setting, but neglected important development issues; the increase of international migrations, which is already playing a key disruptive role in international relations; and the emergence of new economic and political power relations that made marginalisation and deprivation manifest both in the South and the North (Basile & Baud, 2019, pp. 3–7). These factors make the study of the development of societies in the South and in the North a complex task that challenges traditional theoretical schemas. The authors conclude that ‘the scope and seriousness of development issues – and their urgency – require ontological and epistemological reassessments of development studies’ (Basile & Baud, 2019, p. 10).

According to Basile and Baud, one of these reassessments concerns development research. They explain that there are broadly, two theoretical approaches to social issues. On the one hand, problem-solving, which shares a positivist approach to reality, and takes the existing power relations as the framework for action. On the other hand, critical thinking, which tackles social issues from a historical perspective and questions the power relations that problem-solving theories take for granted. The authors ask:

Do development studies have a primarily problem-oriented approach or should critical thinking prevail? Clearly, the aim of development research is to address development problems and propose feasible solutions. Yet, development research also requires the analysis of the origins of such problems and the socio-economic and political changes that can address them. This means that development studies have to engage with issues of power relationships and transformation as major issues in redefining development studies (Basile & Baud, 2019, p. 11).

My argument in this chapter is, first, that during the last decades development studies underwent a normative (political) and an epistemological critique but neglected a critical reflection about the ontological assumptions that sustain development thinking; second, that an ontological critique of development logics shows that the essentialist foundations of development theory and practice impose important limitations to the way global issues are understood and tackled.

The chapter is divided into seven sections. Sections “[Introduction](#)” and “[Critical Approaches to Development Thinking](#)” explain that, during the second half of the twentieth century, development thinking internalised

a political and an epistemological critique, but did not reflect critically about the ontological foundations of development logics. Section “[Defining Development Studies](#)” explains what ontology is and what an ontological critique of development thinking would look like. In Sect. [The Ontological Dimension](#), I show the three essentialist assumptions that sustain development thinking. In sections “[Three Ontological Assumptions](#)” and “[Development of the Individual](#)”, I analyse the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, I expose the ontological assumptions that implicitly sustain the discourse of the UN and explain the limitations that these assumptions create. The final section concludes that an ontological reflection is necessary in development studies to face the global challenges of the complex twenty-first century world.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT THINKING

Development studies begun in the 1960s as a problem-solving approach to social issues, intended to analyse and understand social change in former colonies. The declared aim was to promote positive transformations that would end poverty, exclusion, and inequalities. Since its inception, it was influenced mainly by two different—although complementary—theoretical approaches. On the one hand by modernisation theories, which in the mid-twentieth century became mainstream in social sciences—especially in sociology departments (more prominently Lewis, 1954; Parsons, 1937; Rostow, 1959). For this approach, underdevelopment was a lack of modernisation, including a lack of capital, knowledge, industry, resources, social services, governance skills, stability, and trade opportunities. It was assumed that underdeveloped areas could develop by following the modernisation process that Western, industrialised, rich countries historically implemented since the eighteenth century. On the other hand, development studies were influenced by dominant economic theories. Many research institutes and university economics departments adopted development economics as a new field of expertise directly related with welfare economics (see Pareto, 1906; Pigou, 1920; Schumpeter, 1961) and applied quantitative, econometric methodologies to development issues. In this way, development became synonymous with economic growth and, following modernisation logics, underdevelopment was understood in terms of the lack of economic growth. At the practical level, the UN adopted this conceptualisation of underdevelopment and played, since its inception, a leading role in the

promotion and coordination of global development strategies. During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the UN created several bodies intended to help non-industrialised countries in acquiring what, according to modernisation theories, they lacked, such as food, economic growth, modern political institutions, and education. In 1961, the UN General Assembly passed the ‘First Development Decade’ document (1961–1970)—a global strategy that would coordinate the cooperative efforts of both North and South governments in promoting development. This was followed by the second (1971–1980), third (1981–1990), and fourth (1991–2000) development decades. The recent Millennium Declaration and the MDGs (2000–2015), and the current 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs (2015–2030) are the continuation of such efforts.

During the 1960s and 1970s, econometric evidence showed that the development endeavour was not producing the expected results. After years of designing and implementing development plans and strategies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, in some countries economic growth did not occur, and in others sustained growth did not translate into better conditions of life for the majority of the population. Rather, poverty grew, and inequalities increased both within and between countries. According to the United Nations Development Programme, or UNDP (1992, p. 1), in 1960 the richest 20% of the world population had incomes 30 times greater than the poorest 20%; this ratio grew to 40 times by 1970. This situation generated two different theoretical reactions. On the one hand, many researchers and practitioners continued with the previous approach to development issues. For them, the original development endeavours of modernisation, industrialisation, and economic growth were not the problem. Instead, the issue was that the development project had not been properly implemented. For example, this was the perspective of the basic needs approach—initially championed by the International Labour Organization in the 1970s and then adopted by the World Bank in the early 1980s—and of the human development approach promoted by the UNDP since the early 1990s. According to these perspectives, to avoid increasing poverty and inequality, development implied not only promoting economic growth, but also ensuring redistribution. Accordingly, redirecting development policies and plans was a matter of better managing political and economic institutions, regulating markets, implementing redistribution policies, promoting employment, and bringing the informal economy into the more formal and regulated sector.

On the other hand, many critical researchers argued that development was not only a technical issue, but also a political one (Amin, 1976; Frank, 1967; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). Here, ‘political’ was not understood merely as the design and implementation of development policies, but as the recognition that different groups of people with varied (and confronting) interests and goals (co)existed in the international realm. Influenced in many cases by Marxist theory, they attributed the failure of the development endeavour to the clash between the interests and objectives of countries in the Global North and those in the Global South. In this critical perspective, underdevelopment was the outcome of the tensions and confrontations between different international actors with confronting aims and needs regarding international trade and finances. Promoting development then was seen as a matter of changing global power structures and dynamics. These authors did not assume that development was a kind of race to modernise that each country had to run individually, but a matter of removing the structural constraints that impeded non-industrialised countries to develop their own economic and political systems.

In the late 1980s and early 1990, coinciding with the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new international scenario characterised by the globalisation of a single economic and political model—i.e., neoliberal capitalism—, a novel critique of development logics emerged: post-development (see Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995; Rist, 1996; Rahnema & Bawtree, 1997). Strongly influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, post-development criticised the positivist idea that development theories objectively represented social, political, and economic issues. It explained underdevelopment as the discursive construction of an object of study—‘the creation of a domain of thought and action’ (Escobar, 1995, p. 10)—with important consequences regarding knowledge-power dynamics. According to this approach, within development discourses ‘each concept filters perception, highlighting certain aspects of reality while excluding others’ (Sachs, 1992, p. xx), which is a bias ‘rooted in particular civilizational attitudes adopted during the course of European history’ (ibid.). In this way, post-development problematised the universal character of mainstream development theories and practices. Instead, post-development explained that development was not the solution, but an ethnocentric discourse intended to impose an economic, political, and cultural distinction between the rich, industrialised, and powerful West and the Rest. To do so, development discourse colonised reality and

achieved the status of certainty in the social imaginary (Escobar, 1995, p. 5). Post-development scholars criticised the assumption that a single and universal subject position existed, and instead argued that many plural and diverse subject positions should participate in the construction of a world where different and plural worlds coexist. This became known as the pluriverse (see Escobar, 2020; Kothari et al., 2019).

DEFINING DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

The lack of success of development practices has generated three reactions since the 1960s. Following Basile and Baud (2019), who differentiate between problem-solving and critical approaches to social issues, we can classify these reactions into two groups. In the first group, there is the reaction of the basic needs approach, represented by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the World Bank, and the human development approach, used by the UNDP. These organisations adopted a problem-solving perspective that did not analyse the origins of development issues. Conversely, the reaction of dependency and post-development theorists adopted a critical perspective: dependency theory exposed how the structure of international power relations impeded the development of many countries, and questioned and challenged this order; post-development denounced the knowledge–power dynamics that development discourses generated and challenged the most basic epistemological assumptions of mainstream development discourses. However, these political economy and epistemological critical approaches were never complemented with a critical analysis of the ontological assumptions by development thinking.

The definition of ‘Development Studies’ proposed by the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI) in 2017 is a good example of the lack of interest in ontological issues. EADI defines development studies as:

a multi- and inter-disciplinary field of study [that] seeks to understand the interplay between social, economic, political, technological, ecological, cultural and gendered aspects of societal change at the local, national, regional and global levels.¹

The focus of development studies, according to this definition, is societal change. Based on this succinct definition, EADI internalises the normative and epistemological concerns of critical researchers in the 1960s and the 1990s, respectively. First, EADI explains that development is not merely a descriptive field of study. On the contrary, it ‘is also characterized by normative and policy concerns about inclusive and sustainable development’.² In this way, the definition internalises the political critique of 1960s and 1970s: development studies does not aim for technical neutrality; on the contrary, it acknowledges the ethical and political dimension of development issues. Second, EADI explains that methodological and epistemological aspects are central to development studies: ‘At an epistemological level, development studies includes a variety of social inquiry approaches embedded in positivist, interpretative, historical and critical social research’.³ Then, the text clarifies that positivist and quantitative approaches tend to be the most influential in development studies—as it was the case before the post-development critique in the 1990s—but adds that the range of methods and empirical approaches to development issues are diverse. Thus, EADI is aware of the limitations and biases that a problem-solving and technical approach to the analysis of societal change implies and includes the normative and epistemological concerns in the definition of development studies.

However, EADI’s definition does not consider the limitations and biases that ontological assumptions can generate in the analysis of development issues. The definition shows normative and epistemological reflexivity but neglects the influence that traditionally and implicitly accepted ontological assumptions about societies and social change have in development thinking. In this way, the definition uncritically reproduces the ontological stands by most influential political, economic, and

¹ Retrieved from EADI’s website (<https://www.eadi.org/development-studies/definition-of-development-studies>), section Definition and Goals of development studies, item 1. Access on 6 June 2022.

² Ibid., item 2.

³ Ibid., section Learning and teaching development studies, item 3.

social Western thinkers. To explain how the ontological assumptions of mainstream development thinking limit the ability to understand otherwise social issues and social change, in the next section I present an ontological critique of development discourses.

THE ONTOLOGICAL DIMENSION

To understand what an ontological critique is, we need to understand the difference between epistemology and ontology. Generally understood, epistemology is a theory of knowledge. It examines the relation between a knowing subject and a known object: more specifically, it focuses on the nature and characteristics of this relation, and on how it enables or limits the production of knowledge. For that reason, epistemological concerns are central to the design of any research process, and in the selection of a research methodology.

Western debates about epistemology traditionally focused on two aspects. The first one was the relation between the subject and the object. This is the case, for example, in disputes that emerged in the seventeenth century between rationalists and empiricists. These two currents of thought disagreed on the best way to construct an adequate relation between the subject and the object. Rationalists proposed that reason was the best means to produce truthful knowledge about reality, whereas empiricists argued that the only source of valid knowledge was the evidence of our senses. Second, they focused on the ability of the subject to produce knowledge. Kant (1998) argued that a set of universal categories in the mind of the subject enabled the production of scientific knowledge about the world. According to Kant, a single subject position existed: since the categories were universal, any observer should be able to reach the same scientific conclusions about the world. Foucault (2002) reacted to this idea suggesting instead that these allegedly universal categories were historically constructed under the influence of a culturally defined general framework—i.e., the *episteme*. According to Foucault, in the construction of knowledge, there is no single but many and diverse subject positions. Indeed, this is the main contribution of post-development to development debates: modernisation theories assumed that quantitative and economic methodologies were the best way to produce universal knowledge about development issues; whereas post-development claimed that such a universalist stance systematically excluded other subject positions.

However, epistemological debates do not focus on the third element—the object—because that is the task of ontology. While epistemology asks what is knowledge, ontology asks what is being: why do we say that an object *is*? What are the conditions we put to accept that it *is*? These abstract questions lead to complex philosophical debates such that ‘ontology’ and its relation to epistemology has been understood variously by different philosophical traditions (Benton & Craib, 2010, p. 5). For the argument in this chapter, I draw on the work of Martin Heidegger—one of the most influential philosophers in the twentieth century. Heidegger (1962) differentiated between three levels of ontological critique. First, the ontical research, which implies the empirical study of a particular domain of objects. Ontical research in development studies, for example, is the enumeration and the analysis of ‘objects’ that form the field of development. These objects include, among others, countries, poverty, international relations, hunger, markets, and governments. To ask what poverty is, for example, is an ontical question. In general terms, the ontical critique is what, explicitly or implicitly, every development researcher does whenever they analyse development issues: they empirically study a domain of objects, which are assumed to exist. Second, the ontological research (also known as regional ontology) analyses the conditions of possibility of ontical objects. Ontological research goes a bit deeper than the ontical critique. For example, if we assume that countries, poverty, international relations, hunger, markets, and governments exist, ontological research looks for the nature of their existence. In this case, we do not ask ‘what is poverty?’, but ‘what are we assuming about the nature and the existence of social, economic and political issues to define poverty in such and such way?’ Therefore, ontological research focuses on *the conditions of possibility* of the existence of an object. Finally, fundamental ontology, which is more primordial and asks for the meaning of being in general (Heidegger, 1962, p. 31). It is purely philosophical and transcends the specific interests of my argument in this chapter.

The ontological reflection that addresses the conditions of possibility of development studies is important in this chapter because it complements and takes further the insights of political and epistemological critiques (Telleria, 2021a). Development studies started as a problem-oriented approach intended to transform underdeveloped societies. The political critique focused on the power structures that hindered the development of former colonies. The epistemological critique analysed the knowledge–power dynamics resulting from the way development knowledge was

produced. However, none of these critical approaches analysed the way development studies understood its object—i.e., societies and their transformation. That is to say, the critical analysis of development logics lacks first, a research that exposes the most basic ontological assumptions that sustain the field of development, and second, a reflection about how these assumptions condition the way development issues are conceptualised in theory and tackled in practice (Telleria, 2021b). Hence, the two questions I address in the following sections: (1) What does development studies assume about the processes of change and transformation of human societies? (2) How these assumptions shape the way development studies tackle—in theory and in practice—global political, social, and economic issues?

To address these two rather general questions I focus on the most influential problem-oriented development strategy in the present: the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As explained, the aim is to show what an ontological critique of development would look like, and how it could complement political and epistemological critiques.

THREE ONTOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Development discourses traditionally relied on three implicit assumptions:

Essentialism: The most important assumption concerns the existence of a human essence. This essence has traditionally been conceptualised as a list of characteristics or attributes that make human beings what they are. For example, rationality, rights, dignity, freedom, etc. From an essentialist perspective, it is assumed that these attributes can measure basic human conditions in a person's life. Accordingly, development is generally understood as the process that makes these essential characteristics more present.

Theoretical individualism: Development discourses traditionally assumed that human essence was present in each person. That is, this essence is something that every individual has. Accordingly, development has been generally understood as a process that happens at the individual level: it is the person who is developed, not society. I reflect on this idea further in a later analysis of the 2030 Agenda.

Universalism: The essentialist perspective assumes that human essence is universal, and thus present in every single human being. The logic here is that if we remove the culturally, historically, and

geographically contingent characteristics that make human beings diverse, we find a basic set of traits shared by all humans.

It is important to highlight that these three ontological assumptions are metaphysical. There is no way to demonstrate empirically and scientifically that dignity, rationality, or freedom make us humans. Conversely, the choice of these traits results from historical reflections and debates that we can accept or refute, but which we cannot prove. In other words, the assumption that a human essence exists is a metaphysical premise that precedes the theorisation of anthropological, sociological, economic, and political issues.

The assumption that a human essence exists sets the conditions of possibility for development thinking. However, it also imposes implicit limitations to the way development and global economic, social, and political issues are understood. To answer the second question above, in the sections below I analyse the 2030 Agenda and show the limitations that its ontological assumptions create. They are basically two: an excessive focus on the individual, at the expense of the group, and the elimination of the political debate between different ways of understanding economic, political, and social issues.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The individual plays a central role within the essentialist ontological framework. It is bestowed an ontological and explanatory privilege, at the expense of the group—i.e., society. This means that in essentialist approaches to social issues, the individual is ontologically constituted first—its existence and characteristics are defined—, and then, the existence of society is theorised in accordance with the characteristics of the individual. In this context, ‘first’ and ‘then’ do not have a temporal sense, but a theoretical one: the individual person and the group coexist—indeed, the group is formed by individuals; however, the individual person and its essential characteristics have a theoretical priority in the conceptualisation of the whole framework. As pointed out above, within this perspective development takes place at the individual level.

The ontological privilege of the individual is the keystone of the narration of the 2030 Agenda. However, since it is a policy document, and not an anthropological or sociological theoretical essay, this privilege is implicit, not explicit. To find it, we must focus on the first pages of the

document, where the 2030 Agenda explains its fundamental assumptions as ‘Our shared principles and commitments’ (United Nations, 2015, paragraph 4). The document does not develop a theorisation of the individual person, but it states that the agenda is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proposes a very succinct but meaningful conceptualisation of human beings:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. (United Nations, 1948, article 1)

This reproduces the essentialist approach presented above, and the ontological privilege of the individual. The article focuses first on the individual person and mentions the characteristics that, according to the UN, form its essence: freedom, dignity, and rights. The fact that the article says ‘all human beings’ implies that these characteristics are assumed to be universal. Moreover, the article refers to birth, which represents the instant when a pre-social being starts its life. This is not a minor aspect of this quote as the birth is portrayed as the moment when the contingent elements of life, cultural, geographical, historical, have not yet touched the individual; thus, the birth represents the essential constituent ontological moment. Then, only after the individual is ontologically constituted, does the article add the social by explaining what the attitude of the individual should be towards others, that is, the rest of society. The rest of the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights set a normative framework to guide these relations between individuals to preserve and properly unfold the essence of human beings.

Such an individualistic framework results in development understood in the UN’s 2030 Agenda as the full realisation of the human essence. This is an idea that is repeated many times in the document, always referring to dignity, freedom, and rights—the essential elements of human life. In the Preamble, the agenda explains that it aims to ensure that ‘*all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity*’ (United Nations, 2015, Preamble, emphasis added); in Paragraph 8 the text says that it envisages ‘a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity (...) and of equal opportunity permitting *the full realization of human potential*’ (United Nations, 2015, paragraph 8, emphasis added); in Paragraph 20 it insists that ‘the achievement of *full human potential* and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be

denied its full human rights and opportunities' (United Nations, 2015, paragraph 20, emphasis added). The agenda concludes:

We resolve to build a better future for all people, including the millions who have been denied the chance to lead decent, dignified and rewarding lives and to *achieve their full human potential*. (United Nations, 2015, paragraph 50, emphasis added)

The most important consequence of the ontological privilege of the individual is that society is granted a secondary ontological role. In theoretical terms, society is conceptualised as the environment in which the (already constituted) individual person is inserted. Within this perspective, a developed society is a society that provides the proper environment for human essence to unfold. For example, a faithful religious community for those who assume that the soul is the human essence; a perfectly organised and efficient society for those who believe that reason is the essence; or a purely liberal community for those who say that freedom is the essence. The role of society then is simply to provide opportunities or impose limitations for the realisation of the human individual essence. From this perspective, the purpose of a development project, strategy, or agenda is to create an environment where individuals can fully realise their human essence, by increasing the opportunities and reducing the limitations. At the end of the process, an ideal society is one that generates innumerable opportunities for the realisation of the human essence.

The 2030 Agenda explicitly aims to build a better future, which is directly related to the secondary role that society is granted. The agenda explains that a global development strategy is necessary because the current environment in which the human essence should unfold is not adequate. Under 'Our world today', the agenda describes rising inequalities, enormous disparities, unemployment, global health threats, natural disasters, violent extremism, terrorism, humanitarian crises, forced displacements, environmental degradation, and freshwater scarcity (United Nations, 2015, paragraph 14). Within this environment, freedom, dignity, and rights cannot thrive. That is why, the aim of the agenda is to 'Transform our world'. Under 'Our vision', the agenda presents an ideal future in which there are no conflicts or economic, political, cultural, or social constraints to hinder the realisation of the full human potential. The agenda envisions a world free of poverty, hunger, disease, and want, free of fear and violence: a just, equitable, tolerant,

open, and socially inclusive world where human rights and human dignity are fully respected (United Nations, 2015, paragraphs 7, 8 and 9). In both cases—when the unsatisfactory present is described, and the ideal future is envisioned—the agenda grants society a secondary role and conceptualises it as the environment where the human essence can (or cannot) be realised.

DEVELOPMENT IS INHERENTLY GOOD

The ontological assumptions exposed above generate two important political limitations to development thinking. First, the essentialist perspective assumes that any practice that helps in realising the human essence is beneficial for everyone: a win-win way of action that does not harm anyone. In this way, the human essence provides an allegedly common and universal ground for the construction of political projects which, from an essentialist perspective, do not need any further debate or reflection. The 2030 Agenda is a plain example of this limitation. It assumes that the universal human essence creates a basic common ground of shared essential principles and values that enable the construction of a universal political project to transform the world (United Nations, 2015, preamble). The agenda finds its legitimacy in the conviction that the 17 goals and the 169 targets are a ‘win-win’ agreement for the benefit of all that will leave no one behind (United Nations, 2015, preamble and paragraph 18). According to the 2030 Agenda, the 17 goals are inherently positive and will benefit everyone:

As we embark on this great *collective* journey, we pledge that *no one will be left behind*. Recognising that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met *for all* nations and peoples and *for all* segments of society. (United Nations, 2015, article 4, emphasis added)

The second political limitation regards the teleological schema that the essentialist perspective implicitly imposes. As shown above, the UN’s 2030 Agenda envisions a future where the constraints for the realisation of the human essence disappear. It is a virtual stage where people coexist in peace and harmony, economic and political conflicts are rationally solved, and society is managed in a sustainable way. Such an ideal

future is central for the articulation of a teleological and normative understanding of history. From an essentialist perspective, history is the process that should take humankind to this ideal future where the human essence is fully realised.

The problem with the essentialist approach to global issues is that it imposes a very narrow understanding of the transformation of human societies and of economic, political, and social issues. Every problem is inserted into a linear schema, where countries are ranked according to their (lack of) ability to create the right conditions for the full realisation of the human essence. The focus is not on the problem itself—i.e., on its causes and on the power dynamics that derive from it—but on how this problem can be explained in terms of (lack of) development and inserted within the linear schema. As explained above, the 2030 Agenda is a good example: it explains the present in terms of the lack of ability to create the right context for the realisation of the human essence. In this sense, the 17 goals and 169 targets would be the means for the transformation of human societies in a way that they enable the full realisation of the human potential.

Overall, the essentialist perspective avoids an open debate about global issues. Once it is assumed that a human essence exists, and once its specific content is defined—there is no open debate about this—the teleological and normative schema is already built and working. From this perspective, there is no need for political debate: it is assumed that the realisation of the human essence is a self-evident and legitimate aim that no one would rationally oppose.

CONCLUSION

This chapter opened with the reflection of Basile and Baud about a critical moment in development studies. They emphasise that complexity is a major feature of the present world:

[Complexity] is the outcome of the nexus between unexpected and diverse factors, and of chaotic and unpredictable behaviour where simplification is simply not possible (...). Complexity is further increased by the interplay of economic, political, and environmental processes, with a large number of subjects and systems involved, each with their own interests and needs. (Basile & Baud, 2019, p. 8)

For decades, development thinking implicitly accepted an important simplification: that, at the most basic level, every human being has the same (universal) interests and needs. Based on this simplification, development studies adopted an essentialist ontology and implicitly accepted that the human essence was the common and universal ground for the construction of global political projects. In other words, development studies implicitly answered to the question ‘what is society and societal change?’ in an essentialist way: first, society is the interplay of essentially equal individuals; second, very specific institutions and practices enable the construction of a stable and harmonious society where the human essence would be fully realised. For example, as pointed out above, for the UN, the 2030 Agenda sets the way for the realisation of these institutions and practices, and, in the long term, for the materialisation of a global society where everyone’s basic interests and needs are fulfilled. The 2030 Agenda is presented as a self-evident political project whose legitimacy is based on the idea that it benefits all.

However, this is a simplistic assumption that does not help in managing the complex global issues of the present world. The large number of subjects involved in global issues ‘generate(s) multiple, often conflicting, perspectives regarding development problems and their analysis’ (Basile & Baud, 2019, p. 11). The essentialist perspective forecloses, rather than opens, the debate about the global future we want. Hence, the question: how to overcome the limitations of the essentialist ontology? Overcoming these limitations is not an easy task. The essentialist schema has a long history and pervades the way that most important social institutions such as schools, universities, governments, social sciences, law, and international organisations understand and deal with reality. The construction of an alternative ontological framework requires changing the most basic assumptions of the essentialist ontology. For example, rather than relying on the assumption that a human *essence* exists, an alternative framework should emphasise that *difference and diversity* is the most basic characteristic of society as such; rather than assuming that some specific institutions and practices are necessary for the realisation of the human essence, an alternative framework could accept that any social agreement is *contingent* and, accordingly, changeable through time. Finally, rather than aiming for the development of the human essence, an alternative framework should focus on how to ensure the *coexistence* of different and diverse subjects in a contingent and changeable environment.

Some might argue that a framework that relies on difference, diversity, and contingency might fall into moral and political relativism. This is a common reaction, for the roots of the essentialist perspective are deep and difficult to challenge. A non-essentialist perspective does not summon a relativistic world where anything is acceptable in moral and political terms. Rather, a non-essentialist framework understands that any global agreement is not the materialisation of a universal truth, but the contingent and changeable agreement by different and diverse subjects with different and diverse interests and aims. A non-essentialist approach to reality does not assume that such and such institutions and practices—e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—are self-evident and necessary. On the contrary, it realises that they are contingent constructions intended to make a peaceful coexistence possible, and that we have to care about them, and adapt them to new realities, if we really want to make such a coexistence possible. Overall, a non-essentialist perspective contributes with a flexible framework that makes room for diversity and complexity. From this perspective, societal change is not a matter of realising the universal human essence, but a matter of critically, reflectively, and responsibly managing diversity and difference in a contingent and changing environment, in order to enable the coexistence of different political projects. Certainly, not an easy task.

Acknowledgements This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the Spanish State Research Agency (MCIN/AEI/<https://doi.org/10.13039/501100011033>) [grant number PID2020-114279RB-I00], and the Vice-rectorate for Research of the University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU [grant number GIU21/063].

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