

# LOCAL IMPLEMENTATIONS OF SDG # 11 AND NUA: IDEOLOGIES AND LANGUAGES OF DEPOLITIZATION

Disassembling the text of the neoliberal city:  
(anti)politics, naturalizations, disguises and concealments.  
The construction of discursive traps

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This presentation deals with an unusual object in urban planning:

language

## **Political debates about socio-territorial policies occur in two fields:**

- factual: initiatives, projects, plans, codes, laws, rules and regulations, instruments of intervention and practices in land, public spaces, housing and town policies;
- communicational and discursive: construction of concepts and meanings.

## **The matters addressed by this presentation:**

- meanings and senses of words that appoint, question, identify and define public policies and social interventions upon socio-territorial spaces;
- languages, ways and modes in which diverse social actors construct, transform, appropriate and communicate these meanings and senses.

**Purpose of the presentation:** disassembling the text and grammar of neoliberal city; unveiling disguises, concealments, naturalizations, (anti)politics.

**core of the presentation: construction of *discursive traps***  
**(*what is exactly that we are talking about?*)**

# 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

“We resolve (*estamos resueltos, i.e. we are determined...*), between now and 2030...

- to *end* poverty and hunger everywhere;
- to *combat* inequalities within and among countries;
- to *build* peaceful, just and inclusive societies;
- to *protect* human rights;
- to *promote* gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls;
- and to *ensure* the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources.

We resolve also to *create conditions for* sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account ***different levels of national development and capacities***”.

The Agenda implies a common and universal commitment. ***However, since each country faces specific challenges in its quest for sustainable development, States have full sovereignty over their wealth, resources and economic activity, and each will set its own national goals***”.



# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



NEW  
URBAN  
AGENDA

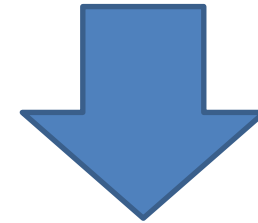
# Circular definitions

- ✦ the principles that guide the **NUA** - compactness, connectivity, inclusiveness, integration, resilience, sustainability - complete a set of *circular* definitions: each concept is enunciated in relation to (and in function of) each of the others (but does not strictly define each one in its own terms and does not explicit *needs* to be covered or *conditions* of its construction)
  - ✦ This *circularity* is reiterated when enunciating all **SDGs** (and SDG 11 (Human habitat) in particular).
  - ✦ Can SDG#11 be conceived independently of (nearly all) other SDG's?
- *a repeated one-dimensional and intensely self-referential tautology.*

# NEOLIBERAL CITY IN LATIN AMERICA

- *Industrial* city turns into a free market, free trade, private property-driven commoditized and financialised *informational* city
- *Corporate – cities* foster the creation of “urban business climate” in order to compete for global investments in the *city markets*
- 21<sup>st</sup> century: Real Estate markets → engines of high-margin investments and capitalist accumulation → who defines “*own natural goals*” (of States)?
- Private ordering of public processes: entrepreneurial modes and actors for urban management → privatizations, deregulations, scrapping the “social” State: S&T, planning, public spaces, housing, social equipment and services, retirement funds  
← some national ministries are held by international corporations’ CEOs
- Urban extractivism and commodification of Nature (“*common goods*” ≠ “*natural capital*”)
- Individualistic culture of differentiated consumerism
- Meritocracy: success or failure are *individual* entrepreneurial virtues or *personal* unfulfillments (*nothing is collective, nothing is structural*)

**How are all these features addressed and communicated?**



**Discursive traps**



## **The order of discourse is the order of the world**

Luis O. Tedesco (2006), "Instrumentos", in Lomas del Mirador. Diccionario temático de voces

**When I use a word - said Humpty Dumpty with a rather disdainful tone - it means *what I choose it* to mean...no more and no less.**

**The question is - said Alice - whether you can make words mean such different things.**

**The question is - said HD - who's in charge...that's all.**

Lewis Carroll (1871), Through the Looking Glass

## **discursive traps:**

not exactly “lies”, “false information”, “fake (or falsified) news”, but ...

- a deliberate disguise, ruse, stratagem, camouflage;
- a deceit, masking, disfigurement, acting, fiction, equivocation, staging, simulation....
- a semantic alteration and emotional invocation that twists meanings and hides or masks purposes, intentions, costs, distributions;
- which leads to → exploitation of a situation of asymmetry deliberately constructed by the trap’s authors.

## discursive traps:

discourses that install, deploy, sustain and/or declare to be the (true and only) meaning of complex, dense and universal concepts and values, aimed at founding and legitimizing consensus around speakers' authority, without making explicit:

- the conditions for the systemic (re) production of the problems declared to be approached or solved,
- the transformations necessary to construct and make viable what the discourse itself enunciates (*“a major surgery without anesthesia”*),
- the strategies and instruments that will be used or the conflicts that these transformations will imply,
- the differential social distribution of benefits and costs.

These discursive traps ride upon the windows and opportunities opened by the combination of (at least) three components of the NAU and SDGs:

(a) the declared "*paradigm shift*" that this 'sustainable urbanization' entails, by explicitly linking the city and its urbanization patterns "to the resolution of *development* problems" (sic);

(b) the circularity and fragmentation of all 17 SDGs - in particular, the postulates and targets of SDG 11, of which the NAU is its operational expression, as well as the 'neutral', 'objective', axiological, timeless, and a-systemic character;

c) stating that each nation-state's own national targets in accomplishing NUA will be based on "the different levels of development and the specific challenges it faces in its pursuit of sustainable development" (**but not *on the ideological and political orientation of its government!***)

Consider SDG # 11: "Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/es/cities/>).

Since (at least) 1930, increasingly irreconcilable visions, development styles and political projects (*i.e. conservative/ neoliberal vs. progressive / 'plebeian'/'populist'*) are systematically confronting each other in almost every Latin American country.

It is in this context that the New Urban Agenda empowers national governments to define their own strategies and general policies in order to produce those 'virtuous' cities by 2030.

It should be clearly obvious that the visions about (and the meaning of) *urban inclusion, safety, resilience and sustainability* conceived from each of these opposing models will be clearly divergent.

This categorical *ideological* gap is *depoliticized*, masked under 'neutral' / 'objective' statements.

Discursive traps act as ideological devices and mechanisms

These traps are built by deploying and combining  
four converging discursive strategies:

(i) depolitization,

(ii) legitimizations, naturalizations,

(iii) disguises, masking,

(iv) concealments.

## Depolitization

- emptying own statements and demands from their ideological and political contents, meanings, references and appearances (because “it is politics that creates the *crevice* that separates us”)
- 'broad consensus', harmony and union ("all together"/ “in this matter we are all equal”, “we think all alike”)  $\leftrightarrow$  disguise of inequalities, invention of homogeneity, reduction or cancellation of conflict .
- ‘governments do not orient processes *ideologically*, they do not defend their constituency’s *interests* or *worldviews*,  $\rightarrow$  *they do what they must do, according to the conditions they face*’ **(NUA itself contains *the mother of all traps* !)**
- So, “what we are "doing (is) *what needs to be done*".
- Corollaries: "what (we, the government) do is neither *ideological* nor *political*: **this is the way these things work, the way these decisions must be taken and the way these actions must be executed**".

## legitimations, naturalizations (i)

“(…) capitalism organizes a common world of its own, *based on* inequality and reproducing (these inequalities) unceasingly.

→ this is (so it is) (…) “the *existing* world“, the *real* world”. (J. Ranciere)

"(…) the right wings conceive inequality as a "natural" fact, consubstantial to the human order → every attempt at social change driven by subaltern groups questions the *natural* order". (E. Hobsbawm)

→ “***we (it is we who) own*** this country and we shall ***recover*** it from ***you***, by hook or crook (either the soft or the hard way)”. (Landowners’ demonstrations, April 2022).



## legitimations, naturalizations (ii)

Three central vectors:

- individuation and individualism - as opposed to what is common, what is shared, what is collective. Only the individual is the protagonist of history;
- inequality among people and human groups is founded on *constitutive, intrinsic, inherent and structural* distinctions and differences;
- asymmetrical and hierarchical structuring of society is founded on inequality of/among groups and on individual achievements, merits and worthiness → asymmetrical allocation of their respective *social* places, *geographical* places, *political* places.

## legitimations, naturalizations (iii)

- Individualization and the (social) responsibility of individuals: M. Thatcher (1987) "*They cast **their problems** on society. And, you know, **there is no such thing as a 'society'**. There are male and female individuals and there are families.*"
- "*they cast*"= (**their**) **problems** i.e. employment, housing, integration, learning, insertion, inclusion, progress) are *of their own* / these are generated / produced by all and each one of them → nothing is *collective*, nothing is *structural*.
- Asymmetrical organizations: '**each one in his own place**' → "(...) there is always (G. Fraga, Thatcher) someone who '*made these people believe*' that they were entitled to things that - according to the place they occupy in the social structure - are *naturally* out of their reach".

## disguises, masking (i)

- Humpty Dumpty effect: capture and appropriation of meanings: *'the way I use a concept is its only (real) meaning'*.
- magical effect of enunciation → 'belief in the magical power of words over things'.
- permanent, immutable, universal values enounced with "adequate vagueness".
- 'epic' (fight against poverty, corruption, CC) or 'moral/ 'ethical' motivations (truth, justice, rationality, liberty, (libertarianism), democracy, freedom, safety, security ← *'treason to homeland'*)
- subjectivizing non-subjects : 'The (sustainable, smart, intelligent, inclusive... etc.) city' cancels the *political orientations* and demands of real political subjects: 'the city' excludes "'citizens' rights, differential interests, values, visions, projects.
- adulteration of meanings: (a) transpose the historical and political basis of *social inequality* to its *physical-spatial* expressions; (b) translate *social inclusion* as *material construction*; (c) shift *the right to the city* to partial improvement of spatial and urban-habitational conditions.

## disguises, masking (ii)

- fragmented data, incomplete evidences;
- *legal* and *judicial* disguise of hegemonic positions, ethnic / class relations, economical, ideological and political conflicts (→*lawfare*);
- *medical* and *psychiatric* disguise ('*psychopathy*', '*Hubris syndrome*'; '*Anosognosy*') of the political confrontations;
- construction of the enemy: a complex, *relational* mechanism: it also constructs the identity of the speaker himself, pretending to universalize his own reference group ('the people');
- production of an accessible, simple, easy, memorable, repeatable synthesis which is vested as **true** while the opposite is **false**.

**The trap:** hiding the fact that what opposing actors sustain or defend are not **truths** (which are noble and virtuous) but **interests** (which are selfish).

## concealments (i)

- dynamics and mechanisms of the (re)production, extension and perpetuation of inequalities, generation of impoverishment, production of poverty (and its habitat)
- conditions, power mechanisms, organizations and management models, procedures and instruments that (re) produce and deepen unsustainability, risks, inequities, exclusions, vulnerabilities and insecurities;
- citizenship rights of 'the poor';
- diversity and heterogeneity of poverty ("*all (its) forms and dimensions*")
- preeminence of the logics of real estate markets, of the privatization of spaces, public goods and services, and of the instruments of monetarization, commodification and financialisation of land, public spaces, territory, the city and the urban life.

## concealments (ii)

- (deliberate) confusion, equivalence, identity between 'value' and 'price';
- political /economic meanings of "fiscal balance", "connection to the world";
- big businessmen and real estate owners appropriating the capital gains that derive from heavy public investments in land production and urbanization;
- systematic and intense links between governments and the dominant logics of 'the (land, real estate, financial, banking) markets';
- alternative concepts, ideas, organizational modes, economies:
  - Right to the City,
  - Social function of land,
  - Social function of property,
  - Social production of habitat,
  - Popular Economy,
  - Social Economy,
  - Other forms and combinations (cooperative, communal, collective) of ownership and property.

**Four dimensions in which these discursive strategies** [ (i) depolitization, (ii) legitimizations, naturalizations, (iii) disguises, masking, (iv) concealments] **operate** :

- **linguistic:** different readings, interpretations and possible uses of polysemic concepts;
  - **social:** differences, disagreements, conflicts among groups' interests;
- **factual:** the roles of commodity and money markets, ethnic or class conflicts, class domination.
  - **political:** speaker's worldview and ideological orientation; defended or represented interests and demands (dressed up as 'best alternative', 'rational way', 'only option', 'only possible way', 'the right thing to do' or, on the limit, **'the truth'**);

## The other side of discursive traps

- “The first who, having fenced a piece of land, discovered the way to say "this belongs to me" and *found people simple enough to believe him*, was the true founder of civil society”. (J.J. Rousseau, (1755), Discourse on the origin and foundations of inequality among men).
- "The language of the settler is a *zoological* language."; “the colonized *believes* the colonizer’s discourse”. (Franz Fanon, Black skin, white mask, 1952; The damned of the earth, 1961).
- The *other (simplest) face* of discursive trap: “lie to me, I like it”



“Words are territories in dispute: they emancipate or they silence, they allow or conceal naming, they repress, they call for silence”.

Lila M. Feldman (2022), Página/12, June 12, page 21

“discourse and that which it engenders and supports  
(drives, affections, rituals or liturgies)  
do not belong to the *superstructure*,  
but constitute a *material force*, as *infrastructural* as the economy”.

J. Alemán,(2019), Capitalism: perfect crime or emancipation

**Thanks for your attention!**

**Q&A**

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