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Discourse coalitions for sustainability transformations: Common ground and conflict beyond neoliberalism

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Abstract

A neoliberal capitalist discourse dominates global affairs, with devastating effects for ecological integrity and social justice. Diverse alternative discourses challenge its dominance. This paper reviews alternative discourses to surface discursive common ground and conflicts, arguing that this is an important step towards the formation of discourse coalitions that could rival the political power of neoliberal capitalism. There is common ground in how alternative discourses see the world (systems and networks), their normative relationship with nature (sustainable, regenerative or planetcentric) and with each other (cooperative and entangled), their goals (wellbeing, justice and plurality) and some of the strategies for transformation (participatory governance, a new economic system, prioritizing different human values and participatory knowledge practices). There are also important conflicts that could offer productive sites for agonistic dialogue between plural discourses. These common and conflicting memes may be seeds of the discursive transformation that is essential to support flourishing, sustainable futures.

1 Introduction

Humans are immersed in a discursive landscape that stimulates our imaginations, guides and influences our behaviour, shapes our ideas of what is possible and governs our perceptions of normality. Discourses are invisible webs of meaning that permeate media and culture, underpin economies, institutions, organizations and technological systems, and shape our individual sense of identity and our relationships. They contain stories and narratives that help us to make sense of our complex reality [1].

Discourses offer a shared language and a basis for mutual understanding and practice, but also impose limits on imagination. They can persist long after their original purpose has been achieved, encouraging practices that are maladapted to the present. They can promote interests, goals, and values that benefit a minority and diminish equity and sustainability. Discourses can support or undermine our sense of individual and collective agency and make particular outcomes seem inevitable or right.

A neoliberal capitalist discourse has dominated global affairs for the last four decades [2–4]. Seeking endless economic growth, free markets and small government, it has promoted unconstrained exploitation of people and planet, leading to ecological destruction and human misery. While some argue that this discourse is crumbling, in crisis, or even ‘in ruins’ [3–5], it continues to hold sway over most daily decisions, and no alternative discourse has yet achieved the critical mass to challenge it [3]. Many scholars of sustainability transformations argue that an effective response to sustainability challenges will require not only material transformation of technologies, economies and institutions, but also a ‘psycho-cultural transformation’ [6, p.16] of the values, narratives and discourses that shape our individual and collective consciousness [2,7–11]. These scholars call for new discourses that tell new stories about our relationship to nature and each other [10,12,13].

There is no consensus on how to achieve such a fundamental change in the dominant discourses guiding human affairs. It does seem clear, however, that a political project of this magnitude would benefit from some degree of collective action by those seeking to promote new discourses. The capture of institutional, political and cultural power by neoliberalism was the product of just such collective action by a coalition of actors formed around a common utopian storyline of a pure, perfect market [14]. This ‘discourse coalition’ [15] was, and remains, committed to a set of common ideas and associated institutional practices, such as free markets and trade, small government and endless economic growth. A reasonable starting point for a challenge to neoliberalism is to look for common storylines across alternative discourses that could provide an ideational foundation for a rival discourse coalition.

This review identifies common ground and conflicts across prominent alternatives to the neoliberal capitalist discourse that aim to support flourishing, sustainable futures. The starting point for the review was a set of 47 scholarly articles identified from a systematic search of *Scopus* and *Web of Science* for articles published between 2017 and 2019 with titles that indicated a focus on transformations of environmental discourse. These articles

were reviewed in full to identify prominent alternatives to the neoliberal capitalist discourse and its core memes. Citation searches and additional targeted searches were used to investigate the discursive commitments of these alternatives, bringing the total set of items reviewed to 90.

The article begins by describing its conceptual framework, before documenting the characteristics of neoliberal capitalist discourse. It then reviews sources of alternative discourses and identifies common ground and conflicts across these discourses. A brief conclusion explores the political prospects for discursive transformation and suggests future research agendas.

2 Conceptual framework

Terms used to describe the discursive landscape are diverse and inconsistent. Some authors use terms interchangeably or noncritically [16], while others make varied and conflicting distinctions between those same terms. This section provides a conceptual framework for consistently describing the elements of the discursive landscape, made up of stories, narratives, discourses and memes.

A *discourse* is ‘a web of meanings, ideas, interactions and practices that are expressed or represented in texts (spoken and written language, gesture, and visual imagery), within institutional and everyday settings’ [17, p.129]. Multiple discourses exist and, for those who subscribe to them, constitute ‘a shared way of apprehending the world’ [18, p.9], containing a ‘storyline’ [15] that gives a particular pattern of meaning to social and physical phenomena [19,20]. An important concept for this paper is the ‘discourse coalition’, defined as an ensemble of actors that, for diverse reasons, are attracted to specific storylines and engage in practices that reproduce those storylines [15]. Discourse coalitions are the defenders and perpetuators of particular discourses, such as neoliberalism.

Because discourses contain storylines, many authors discuss stories and narratives when writing about the discursive landscape. A *story* describes a sequence of events, with a recognizable beginning, middle and end [21]. Stories include characters or actors (e.g. heroes, villains, victims and bystanders), a setting in which the story takes place, and a plot – ‘an energy to move the narrative from beginning to end: something, somebody, or some state changes, and this has consequences’ [16,21, p.3,22].

While stories are defined consistently in the literature, definitions of narrative vary along a spectrum. At one end, *narrative* is simply a synonym for story [23,24]. At the other, narrative refers to the broader cultural context within which stories are told, framed and interpreted [25–29]. These broader definitions of narrative overlap with definitions of discourse, which can lead to confusion.

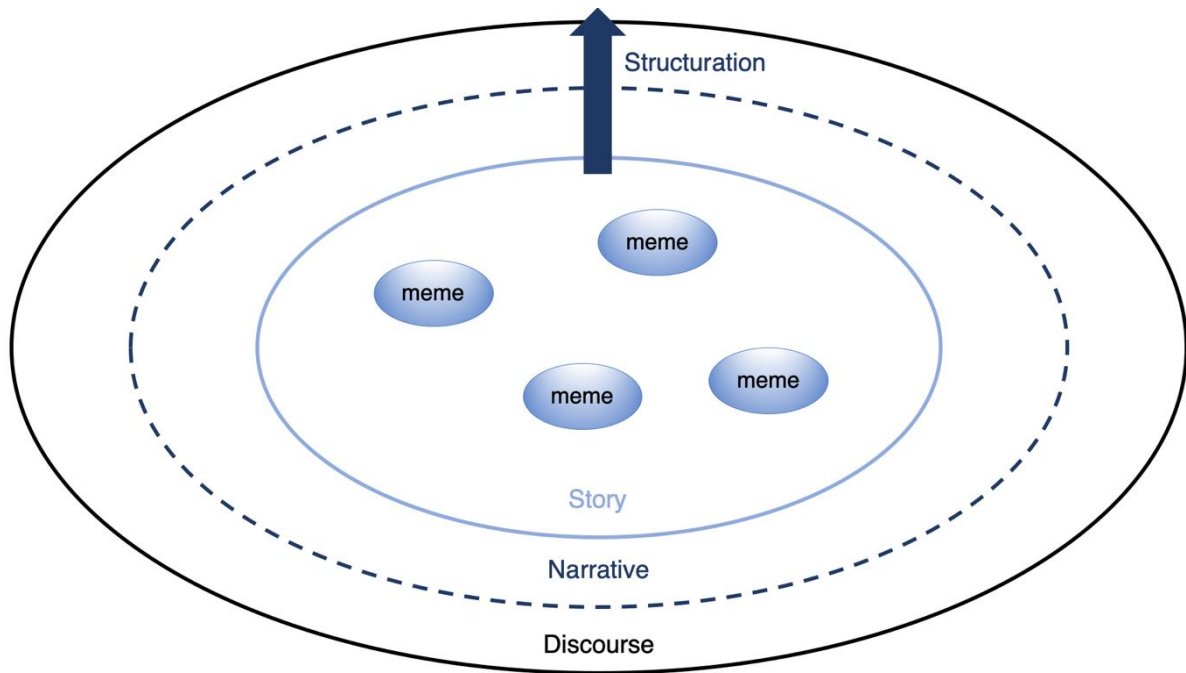
Before addressing this conceptual confusion, one more concept is needed. Stories, narratives and discourses are made up of language and ideas. In this article the term ‘meme’ is used to refer to these building blocks. Originally introduced by Richard Dawkins [30] as a cultural analogy to the gene, a *meme* is a replicable idea that moves from mind to mind, just

as a gene is transmitted from parent to offspring. Memes are core elements of culture, including phrases, words, images, ideas, songs, symbols, brands, artefacts, frames, metaphors, motifs and archetypes [2]. Memes replicate and spread when people use them to think and communicate. As they replicate, they evolve, through accidental or conscious reinterpretation. Memes are the basic meaningful content of discourses, narratives and stories.

The review of the literature suggest that discourses, narratives, stories and memes have a nested relationship, characterized by increasing structuration, as shown in Figure 1. In this framework, memes are the basic meaningful content of discourses, narratives and stories. They are numerous, can circulate rapidly and are constantly evolving. Stories weave together selected memes to tell how particular characters in a specified context experience a sequence of events. Each telling of a story is individual, ephemeral and contextual. Narratives form from the telling of many similar stories, like the tracks left when many people walk the same path. They have the same sequential structure as stories but are more persistent because they express the shared meanings of a particular group. Members of the group continually reproduce narratives through individual storytelling acts that reiterate or revise the meanings expressed in the social narrative of the group [27]. Finally, discourses are shared cultural structures that incorporate one or more narratives but also include assumptions and meanings that are not arranged in the sequential structure of a story or narrative. The use of the term 'discursive landscape' in this paper therefore encompasses memes, stories and narratives, as these are embedded in discourses.

This paper explores the potential for discursive transformation, so discourse is the main concept used in the remainder of the paper. However, as noted above, some authors use narrative in a way that is synonymous with discourse, as indicated by the dashed line in Figure 1. This usage appears to be particularly common in civil society and grey literature. Some translation of terms from the literature to align with the conceptual framework presented here has therefore been made for clarity. While the focus of the paper is at the discursive level, the search for common ground and conflict across discourses also requires attention to the memes that are the building blocks of discourses. Core memes associated with particular discourses are italicized in the remainder of the paper.

Figure 1: The nested relationship between discourse, narrative, stories and memes.



3 Neoliberalism: An unsustainable discourse

This section begins by identifying the core memes and narrative of neoliberalism before briefly considering how it became a dominant discourse in human affairs. Like all discourses [20], *neoliberalism* has many ideological and local variations. As such, it has many labels. It has been called ‘Promethean’ or ‘cornucopian’ discourse in reference to its boundless faith in human ingenuity [18], the growth paradigm [31], ‘growthmanship’ [32], economic rationalism [33], neoclassical economics [34], the ‘conventional world’ [35], the ‘modern worldview’ [36], or simply ‘the old story’ [10].

Despite the diverse labels, the basic storyline and memes that make up neoliberalism are widely agreed – indeed, that is part of its power. In a 2019 TED talk, journalist George Monbiot [37] succinctly summarized the basic neoliberal narrative:

Disorder afflicts the land! Caused by the powerful and nefarious forces of the overmighty state, whose collectivizing tendencies crush freedom and individualism and opportunity. But the hero of the story, the entrepreneur, will fight those powerful forces, roll back the state, and through creating wealth and opportunity, restore harmony to the land.

Some of the core memes of neoliberalism are readily apparent in this story – freedom, individualism, opportunity, entrepreneurship and small government. A more systematic summary follows.

Central to neoliberalism is a commitment to maintaining *growth* – economic growth, financial growth, growth in shareholder value and profits, and growth in consumption [2,6,10,18,31,32,38]. As Dryzek [18, p.53] notes: ‘Today, just about every government sees its first task as promoting economic growth. The entire way in which economic news is reported assumes that growth is good’. Growth is not inherently bad, but neoliberals

specifically seek growth in total economic activity, measured as *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP). GDP makes no distinction between good and bad economic activity and, beyond a certain level, has little connection to human wellbeing and happiness [39]. The neoliberal commitment to growth in GDP drives overconsumption, and exploitation of both nature and people.

To support its pursuit of growth, neoliberalism argues for *individualism* and *freedom* [2,4,6,10]. It assumes that humans are naturally competitive and *competition* between individuals, businesses and nations through unfettered markets leads to the most efficient results, which supposedly benefit all [5,38,40]. Thus, neoliberalism calls for individual choice, free markets, free enterprise and free trade, arguing that this freedom allows price movements to establish balance between supply and demand for any good or service [2–4,40]. It assumes that individuals make economically rational decisions to obtain their best outcome after reviewing the marketplace [34]. This simplistic assumption does not match empirical reality; people make irrational decisions under conditions of imperfect knowledge [41]. As a result, the market provides for some, but not for others, increasing inequality.

Stemming from the assumption that markets will provide, neoliberalism argues for *small government* – that government should get out of the way and allow markets to operate efficiently [4,5,18,40]. There is a related desire for *privatization* and *deregulation* to let business get on with the job of increasing growth [40]. However, unregulated markets ignore negative impacts on the commons, labelling them ‘externalities’, which leads to ecological destruction and social injustice [12].

Neoliberalism is a capitalist discourse and is therefore committed to *private ownership of capital* over collective or state ownership [5]. Some critics of neoliberalism contest all forms of capitalism, arguing for transition to a *post-capitalist society* based on collaborative forms of ownership and production [5]. Others are only critical of the neoliberal form of capitalism, arguing that appropriate reforms can be made to ensure that capitalism respects planetary boundaries and improves human wellbeing [12]. This points to a possible area of tension in alternative discourses, to be discussed in Section 5.6.

Finally, neoliberal discourse incorporates a belief in *separation* over connectedness. Drawing selectively from religious doctrine and Western philosophy, it assumes that mind is separate from matter, and that humanity is separate from, superior to, and dominant over mechanistic nature [6,10,13,18,31,42,43]. This ‘Story of Separation’ [13] allows neoliberalism to frame nature as merely a resource to be mastered and consumed, a commodity to be exploited [10,31].

Neoliberal discourse contributes to inequality, concentration of wealth, financial instability, social injustice, destruction of nature and other commons, and intrusion of market logic into community life [4,44]. It normalizes a ‘life-threatening culture’ when scholars argue we need a ‘life-sustaining one’ [6, p.19]. Critics argue that it has failed to respond to sustainability challenges, reduce inequality, or even empirically deliver on its own economic promises [2–4,18,39]. Yet it remains ‘the operating system on which academia, policy, philanthropy, media, and politics run, and [its] assumptions remain the starting point for

many policy debates' [3, p.12]. It has 'conquered our way of making sense of the world' [4, p.17].

How, then, is discursive transformation possible? It is perhaps instructive to remember that neoliberalism was not always dominant. Its core ideas emerged from a gathering of intellectuals in Mont Pèlerin, Switzerland in 1947. From this common discursive ground grew 'an immense political operation' [14, p.95] to create and maintain institutions that reproduced the core ideas. Proponents formed discourse coalitions that 'poured billions of dollars into promoting [their] systems of thought through schools, academic institutions, think-tanks, corporate control of journalism, advertising, and political contributions' [4, p.21]. As a result, neoliberalism came to dominate Western political and economic discourse by the 1980s [3,4,40] and committed discourse coalitions work to maintain its hegemony today.

Few advocates of sustainability transformations would wish to replicate the strategy by which neoliberalism became dominant. However, this history does demonstrate the utility of identifying a set of core memes around which discourse coalitions can form and engage in political action. Section 4 reviews sources of discursive alternatives to neoliberal capitalism and their key memes as a precursor to looking for common ground and conflicts between discourses.

4 Sources of discursive alternatives to neoliberal capitalism

The ecological destruction wrought by neoliberal capitalism and its predecessors has long been criticized and these environmental critics have proposed alternative narratives. From the 1970s, *survivalist* discourses introduced the idea of ecological *limits to growth* but lacked a strong political strategy for instituting changes [18]. In the 1980s, a reformist *sustainability* discourse took hold, which has dominated environmental discourse ever since [18]. This discourse did not initially seek to overturn neoliberal capitalism. Instead, it sought to reform it through technological and institutional change to deliver *sustainable development*, *ecological modernization* and *green growth* [15,18,20,32,44,45].

Today, sustainability discourse is best understood as a family or spectrum of discourses, united by a commitment to sustain human life on Earth but differing on what is required to do that and how best to achieve it. At one end of the spectrum are reformist versions of sustainability that remain committed to core neoliberal memes such as growth in GDP. At the other are transformative versions of sustainability discourse that reject core neoliberal memes and seek radical social change [7,46,47]. This spectrum is evident in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed by the United Nations [48]. Developed through a large-scale participatory process, the SDGs offer an alluring vision of a transformed world characterized by *social justice*, *human wellbeing* and *ecological integrity*. Yet Goal 8 retains the neoliberal commitment to growth, attempting to rehabilitate it as 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth'. Critics of reformist sustainability discourses argue that neoliberal economic development and ecological protection are incompatible, and that the term sustainable development is oxymoronic [49,50]. This core conflict over what sustainability means is downplayed or hidden in much sustainability

discourse, where loose interpretations of sustainability provide cover for hegemonic actors to reify commitment to neoliberal economic goals [45,50–52]. Reformist versions of sustainability discourse dominate policy-making and political institutions [52], supported by the same discourse coalitions that defend neoliberalism.

This inability to jettison neoliberal ideas arguably explains why sustainability discourse as a whole has delivered ‘meagre results, at best’ [44,52,53]. Critics argue that the discourse is exhausted, ‘categorically unable to deliver any profound structural transformation of capitalist consumer societies’ [52]. Further, the discourse has been criticized for perpetuating a colonial divide between those in the ‘capitalist, rationalist, liberal, secular, patriarchal, white’ world that Escobar labels the One-World World (OWW) and ‘those who insist on other ways of worlding’ [50, p.67]. The OWW insists that all countries should follow the ‘development’ path of the Global North despite the evidence that this results in exploitation of the Global South, worsening inequality and ecological destruction [44]. The ‘development’ meme in sustainable development arguably promotes a development path that is ecologically destructive and perpetuates inequality between North and South [26].

The failure of reformist versions of sustainability discourse to make much headway towards actual sustainability has created fertile ground for discourses advocating *deliberate transformation* towards sustainability [7,46,47,53,54]. The literature on deliberate transformation is diverse [47,54] but focuses attention on the ‘profound and enduring non-linear systemic changes’ [47, p.4] required to achieve sustainability. It argues that sustainability cannot be achieved through reforms of neoliberalism but will require fundamental transformation in ecological, social, economic and cultural domains [11]. While primarily a discourse on how to transform [47], it necessarily includes narratives about the desired post-transformation world. Prominent ideas advocated in the discourse include the need for a *systemic* orientation, a *dialogical* approach, new *participatory and action-oriented approaches to knowledge generation*, new forms of human consciousness, and genuine achievement of the *ecological sustainability* and *social justice* represented by the SDGs, without retaining commitment to their neoliberal baggage [7,46,47,53,54].

Tackling neoliberal capitalism on its own economic turf are diverse discourses promoting *new economics*. These discourses define themselves in opposition to neoliberal capitalism, as evident from labels such as *degrowth* [32,44,55], ‘*agrowth*’ [56] and *post-capitalism* [5], but also include proposals for new forms of political economy, such as ‘*doughnut economics*’ [12], ‘*new progressivism*’ [3], ‘*Statist Progressivism*’ [53], a ‘*Green New Deal*’ [57] and a ‘*wellbeing economy*’ [39]. These discourses could be considered part of the family of sustainability discourses and their proposals span a similar spectrum, from the rehabilitation of neoliberal capitalism to fundamental transformation of economic systems. However, they are distinct in their focus on the design of economic systems. Their common ground is to recognize the economy as a human construct that can and should be deliberately governed to achieve goals that genuinely matter to us, such as *human wellbeing* and *equality*, rather than flawed proxies such as GDP [3,4,32,39,58].

Another discourse challenging the goals of neoliberalism is that of *global ethics*, which advocates for ethical principles that can sustain ‘a dignified human life and a flourishing planet’ [59, p.xiii]. Its goals are expressed in the Earth Charter [60], an ethical framework for

a just, sustainable and peaceful global society created by civil society actors. While naïve in its political approach [38], the Earth Charter remains one of the most coherent expressions of a future narrative for life on Earth based on *justice*, *peace* and *ecological integrity*. More recent movements to enshrine the ‘rights of nature’ [61,62] continue its tradition.

Futurists promote alternative discourses to neoliberalism when they develop visions and scenarios that imagine future worlds shaped by new discourses or narratives. Some focus specifically on economic, post-growth or post-capitalist futures [34,58], while others imagine national or global futures that engage with and depart from neoliberal ideas [35,63]. The work of futurists blends into that of the arts and humanities, which is similarly engaged with imagined futures and alternative worlds [64,65]. Philosophers and literary theorists propose new concepts that move beyond dominant narratives, such as Timothy Morton’s framing of climate change as ‘hyperobject’ [66]. In film and literary fiction [64,67,68], music [11] and visual arts [69], artists imagine alternatives to dominant discourses, taking advantage of art’s potential to explore possibilities in critical, imaginative, open-ended and extra-rational ways [69]. New sub-genres of speculative fiction such as climate fiction [68], ‘solarpunk’ [70] and ‘hopepunk’ [71] play out new narratives at the intimate scale of individual characters experiencing positive or negative global transformation.

Another source of new discourses is scholarship on individual and collective worldviews [36,72–75]. This work traces the historical evolution of worldviews from traditional, through modern and postmodern to an emerging *integrative* or *transmodern* worldview with narrative commitments to *plurality*, *integration* and *reconciliation of the rational with the spiritual* [36,74]. Scholars in this tradition see humanity embodying an evolutionary movement towards greater *inclusion* of other perspectives, human and non-human [6,36,75].

Most of the discursive sources discussed so far have their roots in the Global North and some scholars contend that such discourses will reproduce colonial patterns and ontologies [50,76]. The Global South and indigenous cultures are rich with discourses that have been marginalized by neoliberal capitalism and its fixation on ‘development’ [50]. These diverse *decolonial* and *postdevelopment* discourses include the Andean-Amazonian political project of *Buen Vivir* or ‘good living’ [32,44,50], the Bantu philosophy of *Ubuntu* that sees a ‘human [as] being and becoming in relation to and interdependence with others’ [2,77, p.240], Bhutan’s pursuit of *Gross National Happiness* [78], Arturo Escobar’s ‘*pluriverse*’ [50] and countless indigenous, place-based discourses. *Transmodernism* is an integrative discourse that draws on scholarship from both North and South to propose a new synthesis of the positive aspects of modernism and postmodernism in a *global relational consciousness* [74].

Section 5 draws on the diverse sources outlined above to identify discursive common ground and conflicts.

5 Common and conflicting memes in alternative discourses

The diverse discursive proposals reviewed in Section 4 have not gathered anything like the political support needed to rival the global dominance of neoliberal capitalism. Their diversity is both strength and weakness – a wealth of creative ideas but a splintering of discursive and political power. This section draws on the reviewed literature to identify common and conflicting memes used across the alternative discourses.

Common memes are important to explore because discourse coalitions form when diverse actors coalesce around one or more shared storylines [15]. It is difficult to see how the challenging political project of sustainability transformation can succeed without the formation of discourse coalitions that can work together on the task of dismantling neoliberal ideas, articulating replacements and institutionalizing those ideas. Members of such a discourse coalition do not need to agree on everything but do need to find common memes, woven into a coherent shared storyline that can guide action. Observed common memes point to the possible shape of such a storyline.

Discursive conflicts are also important to explore. Mouffe [79] argues that a vibrant pluralist democracy is characterized by ‘agonistic struggle’ between adversaries. Agreement on everything is unattainable and undesirable – it would flatten plurality and remove productive tensions that, through dialogue, can be sources of creativity and innovation. Conflicting memes, while potentially acting as barriers to formation of discourse coalitions, can also be sites around which productive dialogue can form. Such dialogue between alternatives to neoliberalism remains rare [44]. Identifying tensions and conflicts could point to dialogic opportunities which would, perhaps paradoxically, support the emergence of discourse coalitions.

In what follows, common and conflicting memes identified in the literature review are discussed together under five categories: ontological commitments; the normative human relationship with nature; the normative relationship with each other; desired outcomes or goals of human civilization; and strategies for achieving those goals.

5.1 Ontological memes

Whereas neoliberalism has a mechanistic view of the world that emphasizes separation, most of the alternative discourses reviewed here see reality as made up of *complex nested systems* [11,12] and/or *connected networks* [5,12,80]. These ontologies are complementary and often coincide in the literature [e.g. 12]. Systems can contain networks, and networks can be systems, but each concept prompts a slightly different way of seeing the world.

A complex systems ontology sees the world as a nested *holarchy* of interconnected complex systems, where everything is both whole and part of a larger system [75]. Thus, the alternative discourses aim to take a *holistic* perspective, rather than a reductionist one [6,44,74]. From this perspective, social systems are embedded in and dependent on the Earth’s ecological systems – they are *social-ecological systems* [2,12,80]. Economic systems are likewise embedded in social-ecological systems [12,80]. These complex, dynamic systems exhibit unpredictable, *emergent* behaviour [12,80,81], which conflicts with the neoliberal view of a mechanical, predictable world. They operate in *cycles* where the output of one system is the input to another [36,82], giving rise to an interest in the *circular*

economy in many of these discourses [2,58,83]. They have *resilience* to maintain functionality in response to some degree of change [11,81] but can rapidly shift to a new state when pressures exceed the *limits* of the system's capacity to absorb [12,64]. This means that systems can *collapse* and lose functionality. However, systems can also *evolve and adapt* to new challenges [12].

While less universal than a systems ontology, many of the discourses also refer to a world made up of *connected networks* [5,12,64,80]. They define social systems as containing distributed networks of individuals that share information, interests and social feedback – a *network society* [5,12,74]. They value the ability of global networks to enable *connections* between people everywhere, regardless of physical separation, allowing new kinds of collaborative action, organization and *peer-to-peer exchange* [58,74].

The only point of discursive conflict identified in the literature review is Escobar's [50] critique of the universalizing ontology of the Global North and its attempts to overwrite the plural ontologies of the Global South through its project of development. While this critique is most pertinent to neoliberalism, some alternative discourses may be equally guilty of promoting *their* way of seeing the world as *the* way to see the world.

5.2 The human relationship with nature

Three competing but related memes about the normative human relationship to nature are apparent in the literature: sustainable, regenerative and planetcentric.

Sustainability emerges as a minimum standard in the literature [5,12,32,35,44,60,78]. The implication of the shared ontological position that human society is embedded in the Earth's ecological systems is that those systems must have sufficient *ecological integrity* to sustain our continued existence [44,60]. Discourse proponents argue that human activities are diminishing natural capital and damaging the health of ecological systems [35,78]. They advocate for living 'within the means of our life-giving planet' [12, p.25] and altering social and economic systems so that inputs taken from the Earth and outputs returned to the Earth do not diminish its *capacity to sustain humanity* [55]. Whether sustainability is pursued for instrumental reasons or from an ethic that intrinsically values non-human life, advocates see *reductions in the throughput of natural resources* [32], living within the Earth's *limits* [12,39] and mimicry of the Earth's *circular flows* [6,12,58] as important strategies to achieve it. Many write of the need to achieve dynamic *balance* between humans and the planet [12,36].

While all are committed to sustainability, many of the discourses seek a *regenerative* human relationship with nature [2,4,6,10–13,32,39,70]. There are two distinct reasons for the commitment to regeneration. First, some argue that sustainability is not possible without regeneration [2,6,13]. They point out that damaged natural systems will need to be repaired if they are to continue to sustain humanity. Thus, for utilitarian reasons, the human relationship with nature needs to be *restorative*, restabilizing and regenerative. A second group argues for regeneration on normative grounds, seeking to move beyond mere sustainability to seek a *flourishing, thriving, abundant world* [4,10,12,32,39]. In this view, human social and economic systems should mimic the generative closed loops of nature and

rely on abundant solar energy [70]. Rather than efficiency, humans should aim for redundancy, so that failures in one system do not threaten the interconnected whole [11].

Another large minority advocates for evolution in human worldviews towards intrinsically valuing non-human life and caring for the whole planet [2,6,11,13,35,36,38,50,60,61]. This may be labelled a *planetcentric* worldview. Proponents of this worldview reject the dualistic view of humans as separate from nature; instead, *humans are nature* – part of an evolved Earth community made up of all living beings [74]. They *value all life* intrinsically and aesthetically and feel an ethical or spiritual calling to nurture life on Earth and help it to flourish [2,6,35,36,38,44,64]. Advocates of a planetcentric worldview strive to achieve *balance and harmony* within our entangled planetary community [2,10,44] and seek out opportunities to experience and learn from non-human nature [67]. A key point of difference from the regenerative perspective is a desire to go beyond restoration of ecosystem functionality to support the unfolding *evolutionary potential* of all life on Earth [6,36,74].

The key conflict apparent in the literature is to what degree the human relationship with nature needs rehabilitation for a transformed future. The three possibilities above have a tiered relationship, with all agreeing on the need for a sustainable relationship with nature so that humans survive, many arguing that regeneration of damaged ecosystems is essential to achieve sustainability and a large minority seeking an entirely new planetcentric worldview that rejects dualism and intrinsically values all life.

5.3 Human relationships with each other

The area of strongest common ground across discourses is the idea that humans are *cooperative* social beings as much or more than we are competitors [2,4–6,10–13,32,34,35,39,44,55,60,63,67,70,71,74,77]. The literature points out that humans live in communities and our lives are *entangled* with and *dependent* on each other [12,44,50,67,77]. In another wording, our relationship with each other is one of ‘*interbeing*’ [10,13]. This leads to a series of discursive commitments to pursue transformation in ways that recognize human entanglement. First, the alternative discourses argue that humans need to *collaborate, co-create and share* to face environmental and social challenges together [5,10,39,43]. Second, to do this, they argue that humans need to cultivate ‘*soft skills*’ like empathy, compassion and effective communication [6,71] and ‘*relational goods*’ such as neighbourliness [44,74]. Third, humans need to *respect and care* for each other and find ways to coexist peacefully and convivially despite our differences [2,34,35,55,60]. Finally, humans need to create, nurture and grow our collective *global commons* and our *diverse cultural life* [32,58].

5.4 Goals

Across the alternatives to neoliberal discourse, there is a surprising degree of consensus on the desired endpoint of transformation. Three non-conflicting normative memes are apparent: human dignity and wellbeing; social and economic justice; and plurality. While these are the most prominent goals, there is a normative dimension to all of the non-ontological memes summarized here.

A strong majority of the discourses argue that *human dignity, prosperity and wellbeing for all* should be the goal of our economic system, rather than growth in GDP [2–4,11,12,32,35,44,64,78,80]. This leads to commitments not only to deliver *human rights* for all but also to ensure that all have the opportunity to realize their potential and *thrive* [3,4]. Physical and mental health, and safety, are seen as crucial to wellbeing [39]. The discourses argue that *quality of life* should be improved through reduced working hours, allowing more time for leisure, personal development, self-care and convivial social engagement [32,35,55,58,71,74]. They also agree that wellbeing must be measured directly, not through false proxies such as GDP [2,39,80].

The discourses agree that wellbeing involves living a good life, not necessarily having more possessions [32,35,55,58,71,74]. However, there is apparent conflict over how to deliver human wellbeing. In the context of over-consumption of the Earth's resources, degrowth discourses in particular prioritize reining in consumption by practicing sufficiency – having enough but not too much [32,44]. Others seek an economy that could deliver abundance for all [4,10]. This could be a generative topic for agonistic dialogue between discourses, although in practice the difference may be semantic; sufficiency in material possessions creates space for an abundance of time, meaningful relationships and the other things identified above as crucial to human wellbeing.

Many of the discourses make a strong case that genuine wellbeing for all is only possible in a system that delivers *social and economic justice and fairness* [3,11,12,32,38,39,44,50,55,60,63,74,78]. They seek *equality* of both opportunity and outcome, within and between countries [32,55,63]. Given a highly unequal starting point, they argue that substantial *redistribution* of income and wealth through, for example, progressive taxation and cooperative enterprise, will be essential to achieve social and economic justice [12,38,39,55].

The discourses also agree that equality should not mean homogeneity; *plurality* is essential [11,36,44,67,74,78,84]. They see immense creative and generative potential emerging from different ways of being and knowing and found intrinsic value in the *diverse cultural expressions* of what it means to be human in a particular place [44,50,67,78]. They argue that achieving plurality will require active *intercultural dialogue and agonism*, on equal terms, between hegemonic actors and those whose voices are currently marginalized [11,50,74]. The shared goal is a pluriverse – ‘a world where many worlds fit’ [50, p.16].

5.5 Strategies

While the sections above demonstrate a high level of agreement over ontology and normative goals, the most effective strategies to achieve desired transformations are more contentious. This section starts by describing four strategies that are widely supported, before identifying some key areas of tension.

The discourses share a commitment to *participatory governance*, arguing that all people must have a voice in the decisions that affect them and in civic life [6,10,20,32,35,38,44,55,58,74]. They see a need to rehabilitate democracy and shake it free

of the powerful actors that corrupt it to maintain their power [74]. This will require sweeping reforms to establish *free and equal democratic participation* at a global scale and agree on binding principles for sustainability and social justice [2,32,38,60]. With global guidance in place, alternative discourses agreed that most decisions can be made locally by affected citizens through *participatory and dialogic processes* [11,47,83]. The discourses recognize that hegemonic actors will not cede power easily, so argue that civil society will need to *mobilize from the grassroots* to take it back [80].

The discourses are also united in advocating for *a new economic system* that is at least 'growth agnostic', aiming to deliver human wellbeing within ecological constraints, rather than growth in GDP [10,12,20,32,38,53]. They argue that key economic indicators should reflect these goals and that government and civil society should collaborate to set economic goals and market rules [2,3,39,63,80]. They seek to *reduce physical inputs and outputs* to levels that can be sustained by the Earth's ecological systems and solar energy, which will necessitate *reductions in material consumption* [32,38,44]. Their vision is that *collaborative* forms of economic activity and *commons* goods and services will proliferate [58]. An important area of disagreement that may lead to generative dialogue across alternative discourses is whether transformation is possible within a capitalist framework [12] or requires a post-capitalist economy [5,34]. The question of whether capitalist economies can function without material growth is a fundamental one for alternative discourses to address [32].

There is a widespread view across the discourses that achieving transformation in the outer world will also require inner transformation to prioritize particular *human values* that are not prioritized by neoliberalism [6,10,11,32,34–36,38,44,60,64,66,67,69,71,74,80]. There are, however, diverse ideas about what values are needed, including pursuit of meaning and purpose instead of material goods [35]; creativity and cultural expression [10,11]; community and social relations [32]; empathy [34]; hope and optimism [71]; time for personal endeavours [44]; sufficiency [32,44,58]; cultural diversity and tolerance [11,44]; and wisdom [6]. Some express a normative goal that these values would be reflected in new approaches to learning that teach the ontologies and goals listed above, are open to new forms of sense-making, value reflexivity, and that welcome the whole person, not just the rational self [6,60].

There is also agreement across the discourses that new participatory ways of generating knowledge will be essential to support transformation [6,11,32,44,50,60,74]. The discourses argue for *participatory knowledge practices* [32] that seek *integrative, holistic knowledge* of systems from *multiple perspectives*, valuing experience, practice and indigenous wisdom alongside scientific empiricism and theory [11,44,50,74]. They express a normative commitment to remain open 'to the ambiguities, ambivalences, contradictions and creatively chaotic dimensions of reality, rather than levelling them into a coherent logical system' [11, p.1499], and they call for knowledge to be openly shared in a *knowledge commons* [32,60].

Despite this significant common ground, there is much uncertainty across alternative discourses about how to effectively pursue transformation. The shared ontological recognition of complex systems leads some to question whether deliberate transformation

is even possible, as systems will react to interventions in unpredictable ways, potentially over long timeframes [7]. While the discourses express a strong preference for a strategy of orderly, deliberate transformation, there are those who advocate (non-violent) revolutionary resistance [38] or using the ‘opportunity in crisis’ [85] as possible ways forward. The latter approach has been particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Entangled with these strategic differences is the question of who should lead transformation – government, business, civil society, or all of these in partnership? *Buen Vivir*, for example, is optimistic about the possibility of state leadership [44,82], while others see leadership coming from the grassroots [11,38]. Finally, the discourses are divided on whether transformation requires a return to local community autonomy (relocalization) as sought by Transition Town movements [80], strengthening of global governance [86], or both (a ‘glocal’ approach) [2,3,55]. It seems there is much fertile ground for agonistic dialogue across discourses in relation to strategies for transformation.

6 Conclusion: Seeds of transformation

Neoliberal capitalism retains its position as the dominant discourse guiding human affairs, yet many argue that this is a time of discursive transformation, when old stories are losing their grip, but new ones have not yet taken hold [6,10]. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to the sense that the time is ripe for change. Numerous alternative discourses have emerged to challenge neoliberal capitalism, including a spectrum of reformist to transformative sustainability discourses, new economics discourses, global ethics, the speculative visions of futurists and artists, integrative discourses such as transmodernism, and the diverse ontologies of the Global South.

Individually and collectively, these discourses have not yet gathered the discursive and political power to mount a genuine challenge to the dominance of neoliberalism. This paper argues that the political project of overturning neoliberalism can be furthered if diverse alternative discourses form discourse coalitions around a shared storyline, while maintaining their plurality. As such, the paper explored common ground and conflicts in the memes used by the alternative discourses. Common ground is of interest as a possible basis for a shared storyline and it was evident in the memes that repeat across these discourses. These include: a world made up of complex nested systems and networks; a normative relationship with nature that is at least sustainable, probably regenerative and potentially planetcentric; recognition of our cooperative interbeing and entanglement with each other; goals of human dignity and wellbeing, social and economic justice, and plurality; and agreement that participatory governance, a new economic system, prioritization of different human values and participatory knowledge practices are enablers of transformation.

Conflicting memes were also evident. There was uncertainty about the extent to which the human relationship with nature needs to change, the future of capitalism, whether sufficiency or abundance are appropriate economic goals and, particularly, and how to most effectively pursue deliberate transformation. While these conflicts may act as barriers to the formation of discourse coalitions, they can also act as generative sites for agonistic dialogue across discourses.

Although openings for the formation of more powerful discourse coalitions were evident, we remain in the messy, chaotic stage of discursive transformation [6], a period of turmoil and transition when populist and authoritarian responses seem at least as likely as just and sustainable ones. To help navigate this transformation, sustainability scholars could consider the following action research agenda.

First, there remains much to learn about processes of discursive transformation and the role that human agency plays. Numerous scholarly fields engage with changes in the discursive landscape and few interdisciplinary syntheses yet exist to guide proactive discursive transformation. Scholars could also examine historical narrative shifts, such as the initial rise of neoliberalism, the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women, for hints on how such transformations proceed.

Second, the need to critique and communicate the contradictions and poor outcomes delivered by neoliberal capitalism continues. Although it is under challenge, neoliberal capitalism still has immense power over daily lives. Loosening its grip requires unrelenting critique.

Third, proponents of transformation need to find, strengthen and build on common ground while holding open space for agonistic disagreement. Any discourse or set of discourses that aims to overturn neoliberalism must mobilize huge numbers of people around the world. Such mobilization necessitates ongoing efforts to find and communicate common storylines around which discourse coalitions can grow, without threatening diversity and plurality. Yet the kind of meta-discursive analysis undertaken in this paper remains rare [20]. This review drew on a limited set of recent academic sources. Further research could include meta-analysis of emerging discourses using very large data sets and taking in texts beyond academia, particularly from civil society and 'ordinary people' (possibly via social media analysis). A better understanding of the memes that discourses hold in common and those on which they differ could support processes of strategic dialogue between alternative discourses [44], moving towards discourse coalitions.

Fourth, there is a need to implement, test and evaluate experiments in realizing the ideas embedded in alternative discourses. In particular, new economic proposals must demonstrate their ability to work at scale, outside the growth logic of neoliberal capitalism [32]. Action research approaches are valuable here to start building a compelling new economy within the shell of the old one and test transition pathways that avoid descent into violence.

Fifth, research and practice can prototype desired narratives by pursuing collaboration, diversity and different ways of knowing. In this transitional phase, our practices will shape the narratives that eventually take hold. The discursive agreement on participatory knowledge practices as an enabler for just and sustainable futures offers further impetus to the growing focus on such research inside and outside academia [87]. There is a pressing need for place-based, dialogic action research projects that provide space for participants to co-create their own futures and narratives beyond those provided by neoliberal capitalism.

Finally, it is crucial that there be opportunities for people around the world, all of whom have been affected by neoliberalism, to be represented in emerging discourses. In particular, those who are most marginalized by the discourse of neoliberalism must be genuinely engaged in co-authoring new emerging discourses that can deliver them social justice. Indigenous people, the people of the Global South and others who are marginalized by the hegemonic discourse must have leadership roles in authoring a new discourse. How to find sufficient common ground across these diverse voices to overturn neoliberal capitalism without losing plurality is a key question for research and practice.

The common ground between alternative discourses offers hope that we can find a new shared story to guide humanity towards a just and sustainable future. The shared memes identified here may be seeds of transformation but there is much work to do to nurture them through this time of turmoil and uncertainty.

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