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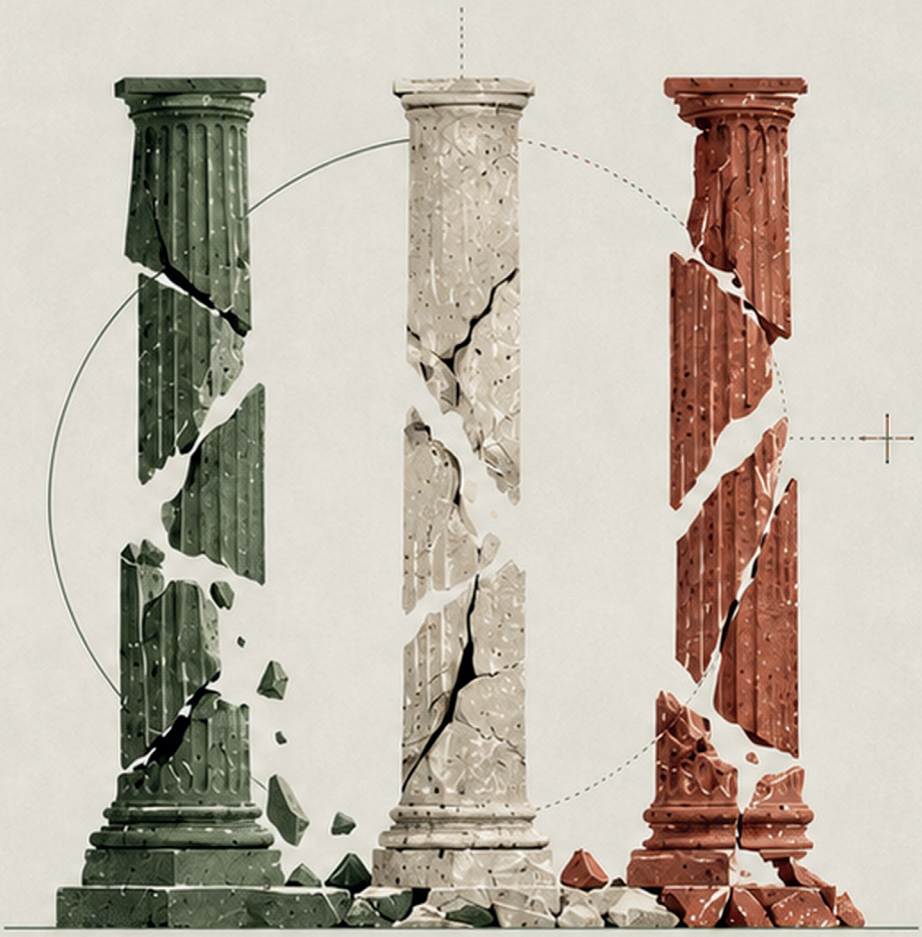
EVERYTHING, ANYTHING, ALL AT ONCE



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E.D. MARTINEZ AGUILAR

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~~SUSTAINABILITIES~~

Everything, Anything, All At Once

Elizabeth Deborah Martínez Aguilar

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according to the decision of the Doctorate Board

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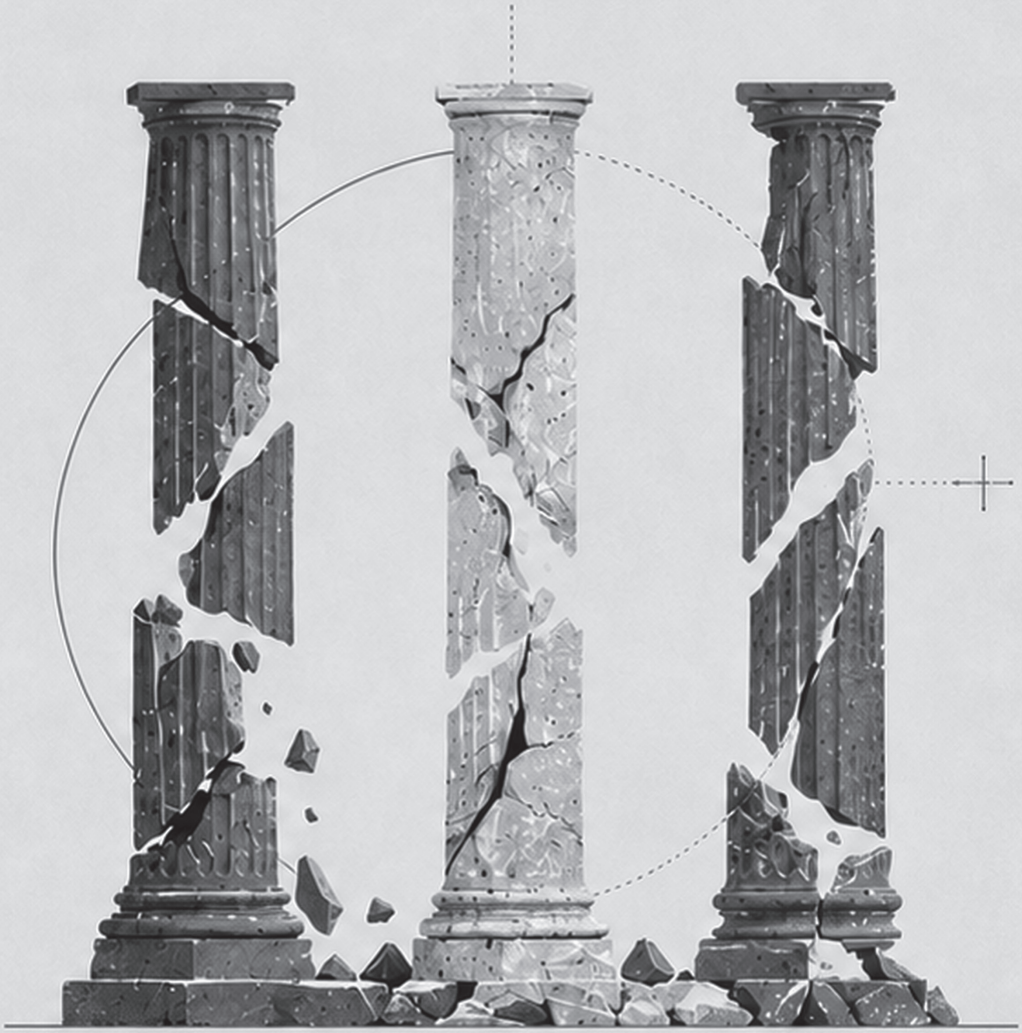
CONTENT

Chapter 1:	Introduction	11
Chapter 2:	Deconstruction as a Research Strategy for Discourse Studies: An Aporetic and Iterable Model for Opening Discourses	23
Chapter 3:	Backcasting Sustainability: How Envisioned Futures, Present Diagnoses, and Prognostic Pathways Structure Discourse	47
Chapter 4:	Opening Closures: Organizational Arrangements and Moral Articulations in Institutional Global Hegemonic and Local Counter-hegemonic Sustainability Discourses	73
Chapter 5:	Everything, Anything, All at Once: How Populist Logic Defies Binary Mappings of Sustainability	97
Chapter 6:	Reinterpreting sustainability discourses around the globe	121
Chapter 7:	Discussion & Conclusion	131
References		151
Appendices		171
A1	List of figures and tables	173
A2	Chapter Appendices	174
	A2.1 Approaches to Deconstruction as a Reading Strategy	175
	A3.1 Envisioned Future Frame	177
	A3.2 Present Diagnosis Frame	178
	A3.3 Prognostic Pathway Frame	180
	A5.1 Sample of Javier Milei Speeches	182
	A5.2 Sample of Claudia Sheinbaum Speeches	183
A3	Data Management Statement	186
A4	Dutch Summary	187
A5	English Summary	191
A6	Spanish Summary	195
A7	Acknowledgments	200
A8	List of Publications, Conferences, Grants & Other Activities	203
A9	About the Author	205



Chapter 1

Introduction

This dissertation originated in a question that appeared simple at first glance, but, rather than yielding an immediate answer, opened the door to multiple lines of inquiry: *What is sustainability?*

The term has become so widespread and so frequently used that, by virtue of the conventionality into which it has fallen, it is often assumed to be a self-evident and stable concept (Dunlap & Catton, 1994; Nagoda, 2015), one capable of reflecting a common reality or a set of supposedly universal promises (Arora-Jonsson, 2023). We use it to refer to corporate strategies (Bowen, 2013; Elkington, 1994; Raworth, 2018) and political agendas ((WCED), 1987; UN, 2015), as much as to norms that regulate individual attitudes and behaviors (Francis, 2015; Yamada et al., 2022), and even to gauge our affective attachments to our own species and to the planet (Di Gregorio et al., 2017; Stavrakakis, 2007). Yet what does it mean, and how to practice sustainability?

In its most influential formulation, advanced by the United Nations, sustainability is presented as an interdependent relationship between the economic, social, and environmental dimensions, oriented toward meeting the needs of present generations without compromising those of future ones, while ensuring inclusive global prosperity in a context of peace ((WCED), 1987; UN, 2015). Read in this way, sustainability appears coherent and directional, grounded in a balanced three-dimensional architecture and a shared horizon. Yet, although this definition provides a general orientation regarding what sustainability seeks to address, its apparent intelligibility is misleading. Rather than fixing meaning, sustainability disperses it in multiple directions (Tellería, 2025), giving rise to a multitude of unresolved questions: What economic model does it promote? What conception of human development does it presuppose? What future does it envision? Who is authorized to act, and who is held responsible? Which needs are prioritized? These questions do not lead to greater definitional precision. Instead, they open sustainability to a field of articulation.

It is within this sea of possibilities that sustainability can refer to prosperity framed through capitalism as well as socialism (Ng et al., 2025; Pepper, 2002); to well-being conceived from a Western worldview or from non-hegemonic ways of life (Escobar, 2014; Quijano, 2000); and to the continued exploitation of resources, but through the language of planetary limits (Rockström et al., 2009), as well as to ethically grounded forms of care and well-being for all planetary inhabitants and ecosystems (Tronto, 1993). This signifying breadth does not result in synthesis, but rather in the superposition of meanings that coexist without resolution (Ainsworth, 2020; Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2021). Sustainability has thus been described as an open signifier, a term whose meaning is never fixed to a single signified but remains available for shifting articulations (Ainsworth, 2020; Brown, 2015; Kögl & Kurze, 2013). Due to its capacity to accommodate divergent significations, the term has been situated within what has been characterized as an ontological void (Ainsworth, 2020; Atkins, 2017; Brown, 2015), that is, the absence of a fixed, essential, or inherent meaning. Consequently, sustainability does not carry a pre-defined or intrinsic meaning; instead, its significance is produced within a contested discursive field, where competing

actors attempt to signify it. What emerges is not semantic stability, but a concept that remains highly malleable, continually redefined, appropriated, and disputed.

Yet, as sustainability accumulates and detaches from signifiers that any structure or logic can organize, it becomes a site where oxymoronic (Redclift, 2005), ambiguous (Bastos Lima & Da Costa, 2021; Pesqueux, 2009), and paradoxical (Argento et al., 2022; Salas Zapata & Ortiz Muñoz, 2018) meanings reside together without resolving into a coherent unity. This gives rise to exclusions, hierarchies, and tensions that the term never resolves: capitalist and socialist, human and animal, peace and war, growth and stagnation, or rural and urban (Fritsch et al., 2018). This dynamic evidences how the very openness of the term generates pressure toward closure: the attempt to stabilize its boundaries and restrict it to a singular interpretation. This is achieved through a play of equivalences and differences, where meanings are treated as if they mean the same thing, for example, equating economic growth with environmental health, to create an illusion of coherence. Simultaneously, a logic of difference is used to distinguish these "acceptable" meanings from what sustainability "should" mean, thereby marginalizing "opposing" interpretations, such as degrowth. By creating these boundaries, actors forced the stabilization of what sustainability is allowed to signify, in an attempt to close the term's meaning.

This interplay between openness and closure reveals sustainability's *undecidable* character (Derrida, 1981a), as it is neither purely open nor fully closed but exists as both without resolution, in a space where meaning is continuously negotiated through contested struggles to impose a hegemonic signification. This logic thus suggests that the problem of sustainability does not lie in the absence of a more precise definition, but in the very conditions through which it is thought, named, and legitimized (Leff, 2008; Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2025). Treating sustainability as a singular, neutral, transparent, or universally shared concept obscures the power relations, epistemic hierarchies, and histories of exclusion that permeate its circulation and use. While reducing it only to its openness, obscures the contested dynamics and the pursual for fixation. For this reason, a purely technical or normative reading proves insufficient to account for the complexity and tensions the term condenses.

From this perspective, the initial question, *what is sustainability?*, began to lose its centrality in our research. What became urgent was no longer to define the term, but to interrogate *how it is articulated*, to understand what these articulations construct as sustainable and under what conditions such meanings become possible.

Well before this study, a wide range of scholars had already engaged with these same questions, particularly from critical (Jacobsson, 2019; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Ribadeneira Aroca, 2020), postcolonial (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 1995; Leff, 2019), and poststructural perspectives (Fritsch et al., 2018; Mouffe, 2023; Palmer, 2003; Stavrakakis, 2007). These studies have examined the power relations, strategic uses, silences, and impositions that run through sustainability discourses, as well as the ideologies and ethical frameworks that configure them and their historical and identitarian functions. They have also exposed the Western and imperial biases embedded in these discourses and their social effects, while continuing

to analyze their architectures, internal logics, and the epistemic hierarchies they deploy. Together, these works demonstrate that sustainability is not a concept that can be understood in isolation. On the contrary, it is intrinsically bound to the historical, power-laden, contextual, authorial, and epistemic positions that shape both its articulation and its mobilization.

From this dense theoretical background, a highly diverse methodological range has germinated: from dialectical-relational (Zigon, 2024), material (Jiménez-Sánchez, 2025; Leff, 2019), functional (Tahvilzadeh et al., 2017), and multimodal analysis (Guenther et al., 2021), to framing studies (Dimmelmeier, 2021; Dutta, 2023), sociocognitive approaches (Leff, 2012; Nightingale, 2015), and linguistic-computational analysis (Aubakirov et al., 2025). Furthermore, approaches that engage with Foucault and genealogy (Palmer, 2003), the psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan (Ley, 2008; Tolis, 2023), or Luhmann's systems theory (Valentinov, 2013) have become well-established. While these contributions are fundamental for understanding the conditions under which sustainability acquires meaning, legitimacy, and authority, much of this literature tends to halt at the critique of contents, uses, effects, or contexts shaping it, or at the reconstruction of meanings that have already been articulated. And even when attention is given to sustainability's structures, logics, and mechanisms (Escobar, 2014; Jiménez-Sánchez, 2025; Leff, 2019; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Stavrakakis, 2007), these approaches often operate within the very limits set by the discourses they study.

This gives rise to a new challenge, no longer ontological, but epistemological: *how can sustainability be read without becoming trapped within its own closures?*

Answering this question required a pause. The issue exceeded the object of our study and the mode of analysis itself. It demanded another question: *for what purpose?* Beyond the *what* and the *how*, what is the aim of this research? Only by addressing this purpose could an appropriate mode of reading be selected. Since we are dealing with a term that presents itself as self-evident yet constantly shifts, fragments, and stabilizes only contingently, approaches focused on critique, conceptual debate, or the identification of tensions and exclusions prove insufficient. What becomes necessary, then, is a strategy that does not merely analyze and problematize these elements, but displaces them from within their own structure, transcending the very limits that organize their coherence. The objective is not to replace one open discourse with a closed one, nor one exclusion with an inclusion, nor one hegemony with another. Rather, the aim is to interrupt the mechanisms that allow certain articulations of sustainability to appear natural, universally necessary, and beyond question.

From this exigency, the thesis opts to deconstruct sustainability. This choice does not abandon critical, postcolonial, or poststructural perspectives, but rather assumes them jointly and pushes them to their limits. As to deconstruct sustainability is to attend to the operations that organize the discourses through which it is articulated (Derrida, 1967): the inclusions and exclusions that sustain them, the power relations that grant them authority, and the tensions that traverse their apparent coherence. It is in the play between presence and absence, openness and closure, that both the limits of these

articulations and their possibilities are revealed (Derrida, 1988; Kakoliris, 2022b). To disrupt this space is to open sustainability to what it is and is not, to what has been and has not been named as such, without any promise of resolution.

As Jacques Derrida insists, deconstruction is not a method applied from the outside, but an event that occurs where it takes place, within a specific time, context, and positionality, always leaving open the possibility that texts may signify otherwise (Derrida, 1985). Recognizing deconstruction in this light sparked a further concern: how can a reading be enacted that resists both the rigidity of scientific methodology and the logocentric impulse to stabilize meaning? The challenge, therefore, was to find a way to read deconstructively without betraying deconstruction's openness.

Over time, scholars have responded to this dilemma through strategies that, far from being uniform, map out a terrain of methodological tensions. The proposals most faithful to Derrida's own framing have approached deconstruction as a philosophical exercise (Fritsch et al., 2018; Man, 1979); as a strategy of double reading (Kakoliris, 2022b; Rasiński, 2011a); or as an ethical practice (Critchley, 2014). Other authors have opted to mobilize specific Derridean concepts within discursive analysis, such as *aporia* (Gordon, 2019), *différance* (Vitale, 2023), *iterability* (Incurvati, 2025), or *pharmakon* (Cellard et al., 2025). In other cases, deconstruction has been incorporated as a mode of reading within discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Macleod, 2002a), as a form of linguistic analysis (Schleifer, 1987), or as a critical approach aimed at dismantling power relations, ideologies, and identities (Butler, 2025; Feola et al., 2021; Leff, 2019). There are even studies that offer more peripheral engagements, focused on destabilizing conventions without fully committing to the strategies and concepts of deconstruction (Kilduff & Kelemen, 2004a; Macleod, 2002a), as well as attempts to render deconstruction more systematic by proposing sequences, steps, roles, or quasi-scientific procedures for its application (Balkin, 1987; Gnanasekaran, 2015a; Griffin, 2013b; Thomassen, 2010b). Faced with this plurality of approaches, this thesis understands deconstruction as a situated, open, and always singular practice of reading. One that may at times draw on philosophical reflection and at others on discourse theory, depending on the demands of the moment and the text. It is, therefore, a commitment to the plasticity of reading over the rigidity of the logocentric method.

From this understanding, this research finds the space to deconstruct sustainability, focusing not only on how it has been signified, as originally proposed, but also on what has been excluded from that signification: its limits, its openings, and the conditions that enable certain discourses to shape our understanding of the sustainable.

Once the problem, the objective, and the strategy of reading have been clarified, this research opens with a **first chapter** dedicated, precisely, to deconstruction. Far from attempting to formalize it or reduce it to a rigid methodological process, this space seeks to familiarize the reader with the movements and concepts that will give shape to the rest of the dissertation. The chapter introduces deconstruction as a strategy of double reading (Kakoliris, 2022b; Rasiński, 2011a) that is both aporetic

and iterable (Griffin, 2013b; Thomassen, 2010b); in doing so, it proposes a minimal model designed to orient the deconstructive exercise without foreclosing its inherent possibilities (Sartori, 2009). To achieve this, it discusses the academic debates surrounding deconstructive practice and illustrates the diverse forms it can adopt, trajectories to which the thesis will constantly recur. Thus, this initial chapter serves as a gateway to the reading practice through which the discourses of sustainability will be studied in the following chapters.

With our reading strategy established, the **second chapter** shifts focus from the epistemic to the phenomenon itself. The chapter begins by recognizing sustainability as a discursive construct (Escobar, 1996; Fritsch et al., 2018; Stavrakakis, 2007) that has managed to remain relevant and legitimate over time—not due to internal coherence or ontological stability, but through a discursive architecture that extends beyond the thematic dimensions (Dalampira & Nastis 2020; Purvis et al., 2018), frameworks of agency (Kortetmäki & Huttunen, 2023; Luo et al., 2021), or solution structures (Frank, 2016; Puttock et al., 2025) through which it has traditionally been studied. The chapter examines ten public texts—ranging from the Brundtland Report ((WCED), 1987), through a papal encyclical (Francis, 2015), and culminating in a feminist-oriented speech from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2022)—to demonstrate how sustainability is articulated through desired futures, diagnoses of the present, and pathways of action that link both moments. We identify that this mode of articulation aligns with the logic of Backcasting (Bibri, 2018; Holmberg, 1998), which we recast into a discursive architecture (Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1988) capable of orchestrating a facade of coherence and directing meaning. By operating in this manner, this architecture simultaneously delimits the boundaries of the thinkable and the sayable, authorizing specific identities, actions, and goals. Through this analysis, the chapter reveals that the tendency of conventional sustainability discourses is toward closure and the self-evident. This occurs even as its own architecture operates on the boundaries between inside and outside, the inclusive and the exclusive, thereby relegating the openness that characterizes sustainability as a floating and empty signifier.

Building on this finding, the **third chapter** focuses on interrogating how the closures identified in sustainability discourses operate, stabilize, and, under what conditions, become naturalized. The analysis departs from the corroboration that these discourses are neither neutral nor spontaneous expressions, but rather artificial structures conditioned by specific historical contexts, frameworks of knowledge, and authorial biases. These conditions do not merely influence the content, but structure the very power relations through which sustainability is contested. This is evidenced by the patterns observed in the previously analyzed texts, specifically the divergence between global hegemonic discourses and local counter-hegemonic ones (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018), a distinction that operates not only through the internal logics that organize these texts but also through the ethical frameworks that articulate them (Burkhardt, 1989; Yamada et al., 2022). On this basis, the chapter returns to two of the previously analyzed texts: the United Nations 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), as an expression of a global hegemonic discourse, and ECLAC's feminist report (ECLAC, 2022), as a representation of a local counter-hegemonic discourse. The reading investigates the organizational arrangements (OAS) and moral

articulations (MAs) that shape these discourses. To achieve this, we turn once again to deconstruction, but this time as an ethical reading practice (Critchley, 2014), that is, a reading committed to exposing what has been silenced, what remains absent, the internal logics that operate implicitly, and what inhabits the space beyond and at the margins of discursive structures. The study shows that, even though they emerge from distinct contexts and rest on divergent ontologies and moral constructions, both discourses reproduce a persistent tendency toward closure. This closure enables them to authorize and legitimize their own interpretations of what counts as sustainable, even at the cost of imposing hierarchies, deferring otherness, and masking the internal tensions and contradictions they ostensibly seek to resolve.

Having observed throughout the preceding chapters that sustainability repeatedly appears less as a discourse oriented toward openness and more as one inclined toward resolution, authority, and control, that is, inclined towards logocentrism, we began to wonder whether other forms of articulation capable of enabling a different signification existed within the public forum of discussion. The purpose was no longer to investigate how sustainability has been signified, as shown in the second chapter, nor how closures operate within sustainability discourses and what their structures and logics differ and defer, as evidenced in the third chapter. Rather, the intent was to explore in what other ways it might come to be signified, and whether a discursive architecture is possible that does not necessarily lead to closure, or that at least operates at its very limits.

At this point, holistic discourses that draw upon indigenous knowledge or spiritual cosmologies appeared as a primary avenue of exploration (Marchand et al., 2013; Mulindwa, 2020; Shumba, 2011). However, the investigation encountered significant limits regarding translation and transferability, stemming both from the type of reading adopted here and from the profound cultural, ontological, and analytical differences from which these discourses are articulated. Therefore, and without diminishing their relevance, these approaches were left open for future research. It was in the search for other alternative voices that we encountered populism.

Populism can be understood as an articulatory logic through which "the people" and "their will" are constructed in opposition to a vertical "antagonistic other", typically "the elite" or "the establishment" (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Katsambekis, 2020; Laclau, 2005b). While scholars often categorize it as either a skeptical rejection of sustainability (Huber et al., 2022; Lockwood, 2018), or an emancipatory response to its demands (Davies, 2020; Mouffe, 2023), populism does more than merely threaten or correct the concept (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2022). Evidence suggests that populism has managed to exploit sustainability precisely at its points of closure (Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2022; Duina & Zhou, 2024; Fu, 2025). It does so either by framing sustainability as an elitist agenda that excludes the interests of "the people" (Davies, 2020; Mouffe, 2023), or by challenging climate measures perceived as incompatible with the capacities of broad social sectors (Huber, 2020; Rodrik, 2021). Populism thus traverses sustainability's boundaries and leans upon the

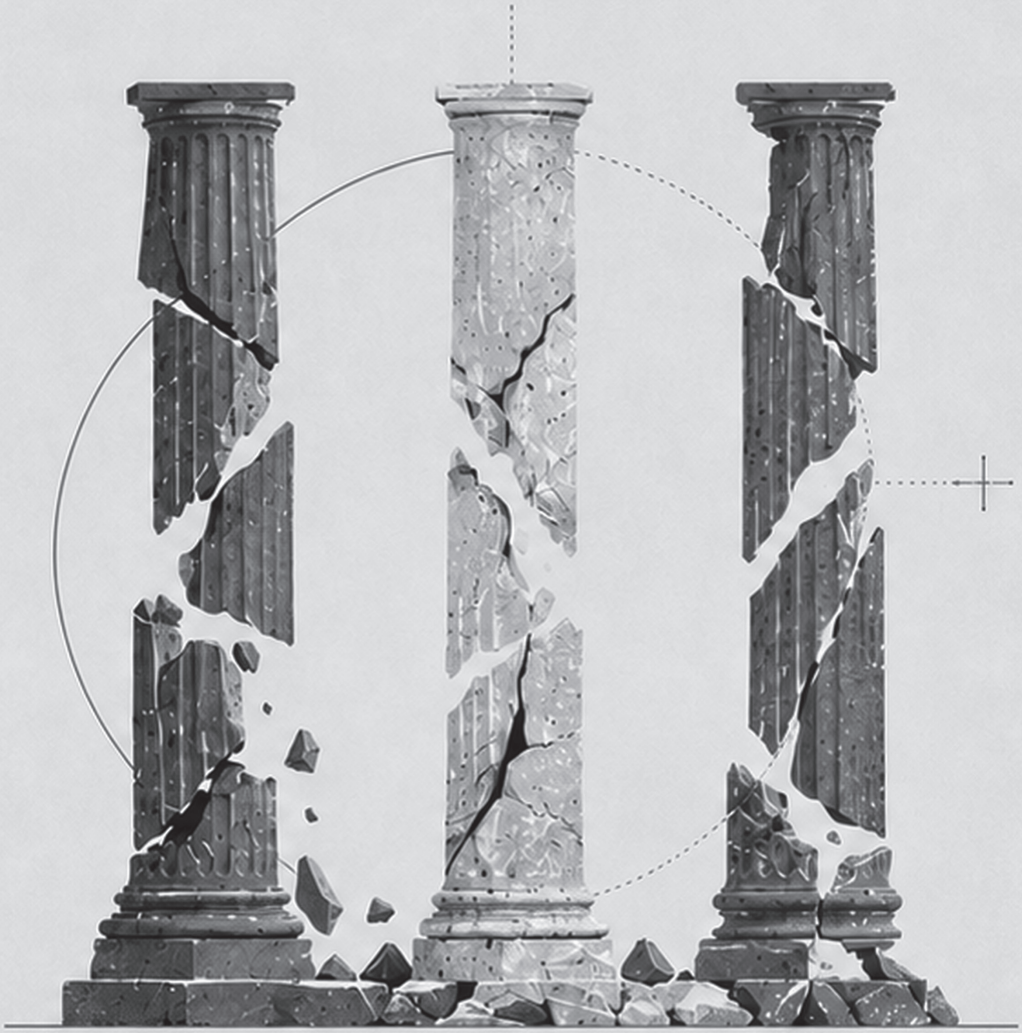
absent, the implicit, and the tensions and contradictions of the logocentric discourses. It does so not merely to open it up without further purpose, but to create tensions from within. It is in this way that populism is incorporated into this dissertation as a discourse of inflection, where sustainability begins to be signified in a different way, opening a new question: how, and to what extent?

It is from this concern that the **fourth chapter** focuses on analyzing how two populist leaders from Latin America—a key region for sustainability, due to both the magnitude of its natural resources and its long history of populist regimes—articulate sustainability in their public discourse. The analyzed speeches belong to Claudia Sheinbaum, President of Mexico, and Javier Milei, President of Argentina. Both cases are analysed as figures who operate in the public debate as representatives of projects commonly associated with the Left and the Right (Granados Ceja, 2025; Narvaja de Arnoux, 2025). This choice does not seek to reaffirm these classifications, but rather to challenge the stability of the binary ideological mappings through which the relationship between populism and sustainability has traditionally been addressed (Chazel & Dain, 2023; Davies, 2020; Jett et al., 2024; Lockwood, 2018; Rodrik, 2021). This is because, drawing from a Derridean concept: *undecidability*, we argue that populists articulate sustainability as a discourse that neither stabilizes nor closes, but constantly and simultaneously shifts between what it is and what it is not, between what it promises and what it denies, between the remedy and the poison (Derrida, 1967; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Luhmann, 1995). Derrida explains this logic through the term *pharmakon*: that which heals and harms at the same time, which is everything and nothing at once (Derrida, 1981a). By bringing sustainability into the realm of undecidability, the chapter expose how populist rhetoric deliberately maintains it in a state of indeterminacy. To this end, the analysis combines elements of deconstruction theory (Derrida, 1967, 1981a), systems theory (Luhmann, 1995), and Essex School theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Zicman de Barros, 2025) to reveal how populism exploits precisely what logocentric discourses have attempted to fix, all while ignoring the internal tensions and that which their own meaning defers and differs. In this way, populism gives rise to another way of reading and articulating sustainability, one that operates between closure and openness and, therefore, can be simultaneously emancipatory and regressive, inclusive and exclusive. This is not because it constitutes a failure of discourse, but because it recognizes and exploits the contingency and the contested, saturated, and empty character of the discursive environment in which sustainability inhabits.

The **fifth chapter** serves as a closing reflection, situating the insights of this dissertation within a broader scholarly conversation. In the form of an editorial for a Special Issue on sustainability discourses, it expands the scope of the thesis beyond the specific analyses conducted in the preceding chapters and reflects on how sustainability is being reinterpreted across diverse geographical, political, and epistemic contexts. Rather than introducing a new empirical case, the chapter synthesizes the central concerns of the dissertation, discursive plurality, contestation, and the instability of meaning, and places them in dialogue with emerging global debates on sustainability scholarship. In doing so, it revisits

the initial question that motivated this research and underscores the need to read sustainability as a contested discursive field rather than a stable concept.

The thesis therefore unfolds as a series of readings that deliberately refrain from closing the meaning of sustainability. The pages that follow do not seek to offer a definitive answer to the initial question; rather, they aim to complicate it, to put it under tension, and to return it to the reader transformed. The inquiries the concept may generate to the reader do not necessarily stem from its ambiguities, contradictions, or exclusions, but from the impossibility of closing it. To read sustainability otherwise may, perhaps, require accepting that such tensions and incoherences cannot be resolved, but must instead become the very ground from which sustainability is thought and signified.



Chapter 2

Deconstruction as a Research Strategy for Discourse Studies: An Aporetic and Iterable Model for Opening Discourses

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ABSTRACT

Nearly sixty years after its introduction by Jacques Derrida, deconstruction remains difficult to apply, due to its resistance to being reduced to a method, analysis, or critique. This resistance stems from its opposition to logocentrism and epistemic closures. Nevertheless, deconstruction must be applied to exist, posing an inherent paradox. Although existing scholarships have proposed various ways to apply deconstruction, many either fail to align with it or are too vague in outlining practical applications. Acknowledging these challenges, this study proposes a minimal model for applying deconstruction in research. The model conceives deconstruction as an aporetic and iterable *double-reading* strategy, offering an approach that can guide future applications. Unlike other discourse methods that focus on causes, effects, or ideological functions shaping reality, power, identity, or knowledge, deconstruction interrogates the very conditions that make discourse possible. To this end, the proposed model draws on Derrida's notion of *double-reading*, comprising two parallel and iterable readings: *Double Commentary* and *Disruptive Reading*, which focus on exposing and destabilizing the binary logic embedded in discourses to disrupt their structures of meaning and open them to supplementary interpretations and undecidables, interpretations that resist closure and fixation. By presenting a model with an open and flexible strategy, this study contributes to making deconstruction more accessible as a research practice for Discourse Studies while remaining aligned to deconstruction.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Populism, Discourse Studies, Jacques Derrida

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The study of discourse has evolved into a diverse and interdisciplinary field, encompassing various approaches that seek to understand how language constructs and reflects reality. Structuralist approaches, influenced by Saussurean linguistics, initially conceptualized discourse as a stable system governed by internal rules that generate fixed meanings (F. Saussure, 1959). This approach was later challenged by post-structuralist approaches, which emphasize the fluidity and contingency of meaning, recognizing that discourse is shaped by historical, political, and ideological contexts (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Foucault, 1972; Laclau, 1996; van Dijk, 1990; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). While these approaches critique the notion of discursive stability, they often assume that meaning can be temporarily fixed through hegemonic articulations, institutional power structures, or ideological formations.

Within this evolving landscape, deconstruction, introduced by Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1967), provides an alternative reading strategy that resists the fixation of meaning and disrupts the hierarchical structures that sustain discursive authority. Unlike post-structuralist approaches that analyze how discourses are constructed and construct knowledge (Foucault, 1970), social reality (Wodak & Meyer, 2015), power dynamics (Fairclough, 1992; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), behaviors and practices (van Dijk, 1990), as well as culture and identity (Lacan, 1966; Laclau, 2005a; Stavrakakis, 2007), deconstruction focuses on the conditions that allow meaning to appear coherent and stable in the first place (Derrida, 1967). By exposing the exclusions, contradictions, and deferrals inherent in signification, deconstruction reveals that meaning is never fully present but is continuously deferred through an interplay of binary oppositions (Derrida, 1978). This is what Derrida calls *différance*, which challenges the coherence and rationality of discursive formations by demonstrating that their stability relies on the exclusion of alternative meanings, contradictions, and tensions (Derrida, 1988).

While it is undoubtedly difficult to understand Derrida's writing, it is up to the idea of deconstruction not to be understood but to be done, to happen, which is why its implementation is necessary(Derrida, 1985). Nevertheless, its application in Discourse Studies has been limited to a philosophical exercise, a conceptual element within discourse theory, as a form of analysis and critique, and as a reinterpretative reading strategy for social change, leaving behind its capability to function as a research strategy. This can be explained by deconstruction's resistance to methodological standardization and its rejection of fixed and close interpretations, which have raised questions about its reproducibility and analytical rigor (Atkins, 2003; Bornedal, 2019; Cornell, 1992; Posselt & Seitz, 2019; Searle, 1977). However, this does not preclude deconstruction from being employed in Discourse Studies. On the contrary, Derrida himself recognized deconstruction as a strategy, asserting that it must "take place" to exist (Derrida, 1985). We build on this recognition by recognizing deconstruction as a *double-reading* strategy (Derrida, 1988) which engages with discourse structures to expose their internal logic while simultaneously disrupting them, thereby opening them to supplementary readings and inherent undecidability.

Based on this, the research question guiding this paper is *how deconstruction can be applied as a research strategy in Discourse Studies*. To address this, we develop an aporetic and iterable model for applying deconstruction that preserves its openness and resistance to closure. The model is based on Derrida's *double-reading*, which consists of two readings: *Double Commentary* and *Disrupting Reading*. The model adopts a minimal interpretation of the strategy to facilitate its reproducibility. To prove our model's strategy and show its alignment with deconstruction, we present an example of how to apply it by retrieving Derrida´s reading of law (Derrida, 1992).

The structure of this paper is as follows: **Section 2** contextualizes deconstruction within Discourse Studies, outlining its theoretical distinctions from post-structuralist approaches. **Section 3** elaborates on deconstruction's *double-reading* strategy, detailing its role in unveiling and disrupting discursive structures. Section 4 presents the proposed model, explaining its components and demonstrating its applicability through a case study. Finally, **Section 4** reflects on the contributions and limitations of deconstruction as a research strategy, considering its implications for discourse analysis and future research directions. By introducing a model with a deconstructive strategy directed to Discourse Studies, this paper aims to provide a means of unsettling stable and hegemonic discourses.

1.2 DECONSTRUCTION & DISCOURSE STUDIES

The study of discourse as an academic field is relatively recent, emerging in the last century (van Dijk, 1988). However, Discourse Studies have evolved from early structuralist approaches to become an interdisciplinary and diverse field of research (Akerstrom Andersen, 2003) that examines how language is articulated, constructed, and interpreted, and how it reflects, is shaped by, and shapes reality (Keller, 2013). Early approaches, influenced by Saussurean linguistics (F. Saussure), see discourses as essential (Heidegger, 1962) and stable structures governed by internal rules that determine universal, transcendental, and fixed meanings through differential relationships (F. Saussure, 1959, p. 58). This perspective shifted with the emergence of post-structuralist approaches in the latter half of the 20th century, including Foucault's Archeology of Knowledge (Foucault, 1972), the theory of discourse of the School of Essex (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 2007), Functional Discourse Analysis (van Dijk, 1990), or Critical Discourse Studies (van Dijk, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

Post-structuralist approaches understand discourse as a dynamic and contingent social construction that both shapes and is shaped by language (Halliday, 1985; van Dijk, 1990), knowledge (Foucault, 1972), power dynamics and structures (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; van Dijk, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2015), and culture and identity (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Lacan, 1966). Post-structuralist approaches reject fixed or essential meanings, emphasizing instead the instability of signification and the political struggles involved in meaning-making. Rejecting universal, fixed, or essential meanings, these approaches emphasize the contextual and contingent nature of discourse, diverging from structuralist thought by

arguing that meaning is not natural or absolute, but rather constructed within contested terrains where dominant interpretations marginalize alternative discourses (Groszewski, 2015; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Slemon, 2025). For example, Foucault's notion of power/knowledge illustrates how discourse legitimizes particular forms of knowledge through institutionalized practices and historically situated formations (Foucault, 1972). Similarly, the Essex School (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) theorizes discourse as a field of hegemonic articulations, where competing political forces struggle to fix meaning around nodal points within contingent and antagonistic contexts. In contrast, Functional Discourse Analysis examines how language functions to enact social meanings through patterned choices that reflect cultural and communicative contexts (Halliday, 1985; van Dijk, 1990). Meanwhile, Critical Discourse Studies approach discourse as an ideological mechanism through which dominant social groups construct and circulate meanings that sustain social hierarchies and marginalize dissenting voices (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

Among the approaches to discourse that challenge structuralism is deconstruction, introduced by the French thinker Jacques Derrida (Derrida). Like other post-structuralist approaches, deconstruction rejects the assertion that discourses can have logocentric and transcendental meanings with rational, universal, inherent, and absolute signification (Johnson, 1981, pp. viii–ix). Instead, deconstruction considers discourses as unstable due to the contradictions, exclusions, and tensions of their signifying structures (Derrida, 1967, p. 41). Similarly, as poststructuralism, deconstruction highlights that this instability arises from how meanings gain authority and legitimacy in a competitive space where different interpretations vie for dominance. Yet the focus here shifts as deconstruction posits that the hegemony is gained in an interplay of binary oppositions, where certain discourses impose themselves over others (Derrida, 1967, p. 23).

Therefore, for deconstruction, meanings are never fully present, essential, or ultimate, as there are always repressed elements beyond the margins of any assumed stable structure, creating a binary logic between present/absent and dominant/repressed meanings, wherein the former assumes hegemony (Derrida, 1978). This contrasts with other post-structuralist approaches, which, despite emphasizing contingency and rejecting rigid structures, often retain an explicit or implicit assumption of discursive stability. For instance, Foucauldian discourse analysis assumes discursive stability within historically bounded (Foucault, 1972). Similarly, the Essex School treats meaning as temporarily fixable through hegemonic articulations and chains of equivalence that structure political identities (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Functional Discourse Analysis presumes that meaning can be systematically mapped through recurring linguistic patterns that serve communicative functions (Halliday, 1985; van Dijk, 1990). Meanwhile, Critical Discourse Studies, despite its critical stance, often operate under the assumption that meaning can be identified and extracted through analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

Deconstruction, in contrast, opposes any fixation, recognizing that the understanding of meaning only occurs at the moment it is interpreted and by whom it is interpreted (Derrida, 1967, p. 293). As Derrida asserts, "deconstruction takes place everywhere it [ça] takes place, where there is something" (Derrida, 1985, p. 3). This means that discourses gain significance according to textual, authorial, and the reader's intentions (*vouloir dire*), and contexts, cultures, and languages(Derrida, 1967, pp. 209–210), while being continuously reconstituted through history, being reproduced differently every time (Derrida, 1967, p. 130). Thus, deconstruction's rejection of transcendental signification and stabilization keeps discourses open-ended, which is the central objective of deconstruction.

Unlike other discourse-analytical approaches, such as Foucauldian discourse theory (Foucault, 1972; Khan & MacEachen, 2021), Functional Discourse Analysis (Halliday, 1985; van Dijk, 1990), Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2015), or the Essex School discourse theory (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), deconstruction does not study discourse by analyzing how it produces social realities, legitimizes power relations, or performs communicative functions. While these approaches focus on how discourse operates to shape ideologies, institutions, or interpersonal meanings, whether through hegemonic articulation, historical contingency, or grammatical systems, deconstruction concerns itself with the structures of signification that make such operations thinkable in the first place. It does not aim to critique ideology, trace causal effects, or interpret communicative intent. Instead, it interrogates the binary oppositions, exclusions, and metaphysical hierarchies that stabilize meaning, revealing how discourse is always already (*toujours déjà*) in flux, evolving, adaptable, and polysemous, lacking inherent logocentric significance (Derrida, 1967, p. 89).

In other words, deconstruction seeks to unveil and disrupt the assumed discourses by exposing and opening the structures that grant them stabilization and hegemony (Derrida, 1967, p. 40). It does it by unveiling and disrupting their structures, through a force called *différance*, the disruption of the different and deferral of meanings that, through a hierarchical binary logic, gives them coherence and authority (Derrida, 1978, p. 161). This disruption leads to the opening of discourses to iterable interpretations called *supplements (Derrida, 1967, p. 157)*, as they add a new meaning to now the recognized incomplete discourse. Deconstruction also uncovers *undecidables* (Derrida, 1995, p. 147) or meanings that simultaneously embody presence/absence, dominance/repression.

The open, adaptable, and fluid nature of deconstruction contributes to another mode of reading for Discourse Studies, positioning itself as a means of unsettling stable and hegemonic discourses. It also serves to challenge foundational assumptions, unveil binary oppositions, expose tensions in discursive constructions, and critically reflect on dominant and repressed meanings. Moreover, deconstruction introduces concepts such as *différance* that can be further applied in Discourse Studies, expanding the theoretical tools available for analyzing meaning and its deferral. However, its openness and fluidity raise questions regarding its practical application, while also attracting criticism for its perceived

subjectivity, ambiguity, inconsistency, and nihilistic tendencies (Atkins, 2003; Bornedal, 2019; Cornell, 1992; Posselt & Seitz, 2019; Searle, 1977). Nevertheless, deconstruction has and continues to be applied in Discourse Studies, proving its adaptability and potential for reproduction, provided that its inherent contradictions and indeterminate nature are acknowledged and engaged with.

1.3.1 Deconstruction's Applications in Discourse Studies

Deconstruction has primarily been associated with textual analysis, as Derrida centers on texts in most of his early works (Derrida, 1967, 1978, 1981b, 1982). However, deconstruction extends to all systems of signification. As Derrida explains, "what I call 'text' implies all the structures called 'real,' 'economic,' 'historical,' socio-institutional, in short: all possible (meaning) referents" (Derrida, 1988, p. 148). This broader conceptualization allows deconstruction to be applied for Discourse Studies, engaging not only with written language but with the structures that produce meaning across various domains.

From a deconstructive perspective, discourse is not a fixed system of meaning but a contested space where meaning is continuously created and articulated through *différance*, deferring meaning and preventing it from ever being fully stabilized (Derrida, 1995). In contrast to post-structural Discourse Studies, which analyze how hegemonic discourses structure knowledge (Foucault, 1972), power (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), social practices and functions (van Dijk, 2009; van Dijk, 1990; Van Leeuwen, 2016), ideology (Wodak, 2015a), as well as identity (Lacan, 1966; Mouffe, 2023; Stavrakakis, 2007), deconstruction disrupts these formations by exposing the dominant and repressed articulations that sustain them, demonstrating that meaning is never fully present and that its coherence is an illusion supported by hierarchical binary logic (Derrida, 1967).

Previous applications of deconstruction vary. Some scholars approach it philosophically without formalizing concrete forms of application, in alignment with deconstruction's resistance to being reduced to a method or analysis. De Man (1983), for instance, applies deconstruction to literary studies, introducing the concepts of blindness and insight to highlight textual contradictions. Fritsch et al. (Fritsch et al.) extend it to ecological thought, introducing eco-deconstruction as a new mode of reading that interrogates how exclusions and oppositions structure dominant discourses about nature. These engagements with deconstructions contribute to expanding its use as a philosophical exercise but pose challenges to putting it into practice beyond constant inquiries.

From a discursive approach, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of Discourse (1985) incorporates deconstructive elements like undecidability to demonstrate how hegemony functions, thus selectively applying deconstruction. However, their engagement with deconstruction remains partial, as they reject the notion of infinite deferral of meaning, arguing instead that meaning can achieve temporary fixation through hegemonic articulations. Additionally, while they acknowledge that meaning is shaped by oppositions, they contend that it is not necessarily structured through single binaries but rather through chains of equivalences and differences (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 63), thus diverging from the

concept of *différance*. Their use of deconstruction, therefore, serves as a reference, rather than a full engagement, to develop their discourse theory.

Similarly, though with an analytical and critical purpose, other scholars have retrieved some elements of deconstruction to propose their applications. Nancy (1991) pioneered in employing deconstruction to analyze the assumed stability of political and social organizations, such as the community, introducing the concept of *désœuvrement* (Nancy, 1991, p. 154). Kennedy (1991) introduced it in Critical Legal Studies to critique the assumed neutrality of legal reasoning and doctrine, introducing the concept of argument-bites, which aligns with deconstruction's critique of binary logic (Kennedy, 1991, p. 327). Meanwhile, Munslow (2006) applied deconstruction in historiography, critiquing the metaphysics of presence to argue that history is not an objective reconstruction of the past but a discursive construction shaped by language, discourse, and textual mediation (Munslow, 2006, pp. 39–41). Although they provide new applications of deconstruction and expand it by proposing new concepts, they fail to engage with it as they do not fully embrace its radical undecidability, nor do they resist the impulse to reconstruct or stabilize meaning, which deconstruction persistently opposes.

As a form of social reinterpretation, other scholars have used deconstruction to propose radical changes in social systems. For example, Butler (1999) pioneered in applying it to feminism and queer studies, utilizing binary logic to demonstrate that gender is discursively constructed and performative (Butler, 1999, p. 25). However, her approach departs from deconstruction, as she ultimately seeks to resignify gender categories for strategic political intervention rather than indefinitely defer their meanings. Similarly, Leff (2019) uses deconstruction as a tool for social change, proposing a new discourse on environmental rationality as an alternative to the dominant capitalist paradigm (Leff, 2019, p. 37). His approach, however, seeks to replace one discursive construction with another, whereas deconstruction resists the substitution of meanings.

Recent studies have applied deconstruction in similar ways to those described, whether as a philosophical exercise, as proposed by de Man (de Man) and Fritsch et al. (Fritsch et al.), or by incorporating deconstructive concepts such as *aporia* (Charteris, 2014; Wang, 2005), *différance (Vinolo, 2025)*, iterability (Ayuto, 2015; Peterson, 2024), *pharmakon* (Tormey, 2018), or Derrida's *ghost* interpretation (Hodkinson, 2021) into discourse analysis. As a conceptual element within discourse theory, as introduced by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), deconstruction has been explored in studies examining its role in expanding ethical and rational choices (Robb, 2024), or enabling the simultaneous openings of two discursive structures (Portá Caballé, 2023). Similarly, deconstruction has been used as an analysis and critique (Kennedy, 1991; Munslow, 2006; Nancy, 1991), including applications in geography (Persaud, 2019), political studies (Haynes & Hietanen, 2023; Olivas Osuna, 2021), and economics (Ordem, 2021). It has also been used as a reinterpretative reading strategy for social change (Butler, 1999; Leff, 2019), as seen in feminist and gender research (Jacobs & Andrews, 2021), on environmental research (Clark & Lynes, 2023), and on studies deconstructing economic models and practices (Céspedes 2020).

Despite its multiple engagements, the introduction of reproducible strategies to apply deconstruction remains distant in all these uses. This can be attributed to their partial engagement with deconstruction, as well as their contradictory or selective applications that focus on analysis, critique, or reinterpretation. This limited application as strategy, however, can also be explained due to deconstruction's inherent resistance to methodological structuring (Derrida, 1985, pp. 2–3), its dynamic, open, and evolving nature, and its openness that raises questions about its replicability and rigor (Derrida, 1978, p. 26). However, deconstruction can only exist through its application (Derrida, 1985, p. 3). For this reason, Derrida rather understood deconstruction as a "strategy" (Derrida, 1988), recognizing the limitations that prevent its application.

1.3 DECONSTRUCTION: AN APORETIC AND ITERABLE DOUBLE-READING STRATEGY

Previous studies have laid the groundwork for a reproducible application of deconstruction, as shown in *Appendix A2.1*. Yet these approaches have yet to fully engage with their theoretical foundations. Critchley (2014), for example, reinterprets deconstruction as an ethical practice, for it aims to open to marginalized and excluded meanings. While he does not privilege one way of applying deconstruction, he nevertheless thinks that his implementation is indispensable. The approach of deconstruction as a practice is also evident in Balkin's (1987) work, in which he insists on employing deconstruction as an analytical tool to identify elements that are present and absent, as well as differences, supplements, and dominant interpretations in the field of Legal Studies. Yet he offers little concrete guidance on how to apply it, instead advocating analyses that yield substitutive reinterpretations, an approach at odds with deconstruction's aim to unsettle rather than replace prevailing meanings. A similar partial engagement with deconstruction is found in Kilduff and Kelemen's (2004b) approach to reading organizational discourse. They propose to produce readings to unveil absent elements, rhetorical strategies, hierarchical binary oppositions, and contradictions. However, they are not detailed on how, nor do they engage with key deconstruction concepts such as iterability, or *vouloir dire,* thereby limiting their alignment with deconstruction, rather focusing on its potential outcomes.

From a systematic and quasi-scientific approach, various scholars outline specific readings, moves, gestures, or roles to conduct the deconstructive reading. Macleod (2002b), for example, proposes unveiling binary oppositions to arrive at undecidability, incorporating discursive techniques such as coding to expose discursive structures. However, she does not fully acknowledge or integrate deconstruction's inherent resistance to being employed as a structured research strategy. Thomassen (2010a) and Griffin (2013a) recognize these limitations, describing their strategies as aporetic and non-methodological while still providing standard and systematic moves to apply deconstruction. Their approaches include preparatory readings to contextualize discourse (Thomassen, 2010a) and a

concluding analysis after the deconstructive reading to situate findings within broader social contexts (Griffin, 2013a), aligning with discourse techniques and methods.

In an attempt to diverge from traditional methods and sequential procedures, Gnanasekaran (2015b) proposes that researchers adopt multiple roles when conducting deconstructive readings. These roles, such as reader, decipherer, or investigator, include analytical and critical functions, not aligning with deconstruction's non-prescriptive resistance. Rasiński (2011b) and Kakoliris (2022a) remain closer to Derridean deconstruction by retrieving Derrida's concept of *double-reading*, emphasizing its two readings while resisting the inclination to prescribe specific strategies for its application, not solving the question of how to apply deconstruction. The following sections delve into this question by presenting deconstruction as a *double-reading* strategy that can be applied through two readings, addressing the challenges of its implementation by recognizing its aporetic implementation and iterability.

1.4.2 Deconstruction as a Double-Reading Strategy

Deconstruction can be understood as a dynamic and iterative strategy that necessitates application to exist, while simultaneously resisting logocentric closure and stability (Derrida, 1985, pp. 2–3). Derrida asserts that deconstruction must be enacted through a *double-reading*, which involves "two texts, two hands, two visions, two ways of listening (*écoutes*). Together at once and separately" (Derrida, 1982, p. 65), however, he did not provide a concrete strategy to apply it. Kakoliris (2022a), in recognizing deconstruction as a *double-reading*, argues that it should be conducted through two distinct readings, each with its own elements, which he carefully delineates. However, in alignment with deconstruction's resistance to prescriptive methods, he refrains from introducing specific steps or a fixed route for their application.

This paper aligns with the recognition of deconstruction as a *double-reading* strategy in various ways. It is a double strategy in the terms Derrida highlights as it operates both within and beyond the structure of texts, engaging with the absent/present, and dominant/repressed discourses. It is also double because it engages with the double intentions of discourses, or in deconstruction's terms, with the *vouloir dire*, the intentions of the text and the author, as well as those arising from the reader's interpretation (Derrida, 1988, pp. 5,8). Likewise, it is a *double-reading* because it involves two readings. One that Derrida identifies as *Double Commentary* (Derrida, 1988, p. 143) and another one that we recognized as *Disruptive Reading* based on its objective (Caputo & Derrida, 1997, p. 80). These readings are also dual, not by the frequency or order of their application, but because they represent distinct but interconnected readings that should be conducted in parallel and independently, thus diverging from the systematic and standardized procedures of traditional methodologies.

The *Double Commentary* (Derrida, 1988, p. 143) seeks to reproduce the *vouloir dire* of discourses both within and beyond their margins. To achieve this, the reading exposes the dominant and hegemonic meaning structures that govern them—the explicit layer of discourse that asserts itself as authoritative

and self-evident. However, while engaging with presence and dominance, the reading simultaneously reveals absence and repression, uncovering the implicit elements that remain concealed or marginalized within the discourse. This results not only in the unveiling of hegemonic discourses but also brings forth the ones that have been suppressed. The *Double Commentary*, however, is not neutral, but as its name indicates, it is double, in the sense that it reflects the textual and authorial intentionality shaping the discourse through the interpretation of the reader. Therefore, rather than simply replicating the discourse's meaning, this reading reproduces. As Derrida states, "'Doubling commentary' is not a moment of simple reflexive recording that would transcribe the original and true layer of a text's intentional meaning... No, this commentary is already an interpretation" (Derrida, 1988, pp. 143–144). Thus, the *Double Commentary* destabilizes the illusion of determinacy, rational coherence, and transcendentalism of discourses, exposing how the discourse is founded and functions according to its own present/dominant and absent/repressed logic.

The *Disruptive Reading*, for its part, focuses on disrupting the reproduced structure (Caputo & Derrida, 1997, p. 80). To do so, it identifies hierarchical binary oppositions and displaces them through *différances*, the force that unsettles and defers the oppositions (Derrida, 1978). This displacement does not seek to merely invert the hierarchy or replace one dominant meaning with another. Instead, it exerts pressure on the contradictions, tensions, and omissions within oppositional structures, thereby unsettling their assumed coherence. As Derrida explains, "What disrupts the totality is the condition for the relation to the other. The privilege granted to unity, to totality" (Caputo & Derrida, 1997, p. 12). This reading, therefore, does not aim to substitute fixed meanings by reinverting the binary hierarchy but rather to reveal the conditions through which meaning is constructed, opening it to supplementary interpretations and *undecidables*.

This *double-reading* is what this study recognizes as the strategy to apply deconstruction. However, applying it in scientific research still presents some challenges, as its openness and anti-logocentrism can be perceived as vague, inconsistent, or lacking rigor. Moreover, its reliance on context, language, culture, intentions, and temporality prevents standardization and full replicability. Nevertheless, deconstruction can and should be employed as a reproducible *double-reading* strategy, albeit with necessary adjustments to account for these nuances. This *double-reading* does not seek to negate or destroy meaning but rather to expand the field of interpretation, where meaning remains provisional, contingent, and subject to continual revision (Caputo & Derrida, 1997).

1.4.3 Deconstruction: An Aporetic and Iterable Strategy

Although recognizing deconstruction as a research strategy enables its application, it contradicts the aversion of deconstruction to be reduced to a set of procedures and an ordered, systematic, and rational logic to be applied. This is because if deconstruction were reduced to a fixed methodology, it would cease to be deconstruction. Nevertheless, deconstruction paradoxically must be put into practice to exist. As Derrida explains: "Deconstruction does not exist somewhere, pure, proper, self-

identical, outside of its inscriptions in conflictual and differentiated contexts; it 'is' only what it does and what is done with it, there where it takes place," (Derrida, 1972, p. 141).

To address these tensions, we align with the recognition of deconstruction as aporetic (Thomassen, 2010a). This means that there exists no stable or predetermined set of procedures ordered for its application, as deconstruction remains perpetually open to reinterpretation. Instead, its enactment is dynamic and contingent, resisting systematicity, universality, or consistency (Derrida, 1967, p. 157). Likewise, it entails recognizing that as a strategy, deconstruction is not aimed at analyzing, critiquing, or examining discourses but rather actively intervenes in their structures to disrupt them, opening discourses to supplementary readings, including those yet to come (*á venir*) (Caputo & Derrida, 1997, p. 42). Consequently, deconstruction does not yield definitive or regular outcomes; rather, it exposes the inherent fluidity and openness of discourses, thereby averting any final closure (Derrida, 1967, p. 92). Therefore, deconstruction does not presuppose absolute foundations or fixed judgments, foregrounding instead the undecidability of discourses (Derrida, 1988, p. 111) given that its application necessitates embracing its contradictions and *undecidability*, understood as the impossibility of final closure.

The aporetic understanding of deconstruction also necessitates its recognition as iterable. That is, deconstruction cannot be replicated consistently as a method but is instead reproduced with variations, or in Derridean terms, it is *iterable*. This entails that each application takes a different form depending on its context, temporality, intention, culture, and language (Derrida, 1988, p. 53). By embracing iterability, the *double-reading* never remains identical, thus circumventing the strict rigor and methodological consistency expected in scientific studies (Catalano & Waugh 2020; Derrida, 1967, p. 157; Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; van Dijk, 1997). Instead, its application is flexible, adaptable, and subject to reinterpretation in response to the contingencies shaping its deployment. As a result, its outcomes are never uniform but rather singular, as each iteration generates new supplements and underscores the undecidability of meaning, ensuring that discourses remain perpetually open to further readings and interventions (Derrida, 1967, p. 316).

By recognizing deconstruction as an aporetic, iterable *double-reading* strategy, we contend that it can be applied and reproduced in Discourse Studies without contradicting it. This characterization, however, may raise concerns regarding rigor, replicability, validity, and consistency, criteria typically expected in discourse research (Catalano & Waugh 2020; van Dijk, 1997). Yet deconstruction resists such theoretical determination (Derrida, 1988, p. 9) and far from constituting a limitation, we see this resistance as deconstruction's principal contribution to Discourse Studies.

1.4 INTRODUCING THE MODEL

To address the question of how to apply deconstruction in Discourse Studies while acknowledging its resistance to structured methodologies, we develop a model for applying it, grounded in a *double-reading* strategy (see Model 1). The model is based on the contributions of Derrida (Derrida, 1967, 1978, 1981b, 1982, 1988), incorporating elements from other scholars (Griffin, 2013a; Kakoliris, 2022a; Macleod, 2002b; Thomassen, 2010a). This model does not aim to meet scientific expectations (Catalano & Waugh 2020; Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; van Dijk, 1997), but it can help provide some degree of certainty and transparency by presenting a reading strategy that, although aporetic and iterable, can be reproduced. This aligns with the deconstruction's objective of not seeking to produce consistent, universal, and closed outcomes, but to facilitate its reproduction, ensuring that every reading remains unique, contingent, and open to transformation.

To achieve this, the model adopts a minimal strategy to *double-reading* (G. Sartori, 2009), which means that it only includes the readings that can allow deconstruction, integrating the necessary additional terms and secondary concepts as much as possible. With this broad and general approach, we aim to ensure that our model can be iteratively applied, allowing for variations and adaptations introduced by external factors, the *double-readings* themselves, and the readers, thus broadening its potential uses. Moreover, maintaining a minimal model can also serve to respond to the scientific expectations of discursive methods by presenting a reproducible strategy (Catalano & Waugh 2020; Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; van Dijk, 1997).

The decision to present a model for applying deconstruction as a research strategy arises from the need to balance its inherent resistance to becoming a method with the necessity of providing a reproducible application. Rather than relying on steps (Griffin, 2013a; Macleod, 2002b), guidelines (Balkin, 1987; Kilduff & Kelemen, 2004b), moves (Thomassen, 2010a), roles (Gnanasekaran, 2015b), or a dual reading(Kakoliris, 2022a; Rasiński, 2011b), the model offers a way to reflect the dynamic, open-ended, and parallel readings of deconstruction, integrating other important elements while avoiding ordered procedures, standardization, and rigid applications. Our model also serves to retrieve the complexity of deconstruction (Kakoliris, 2022a) and simplify it for discourse research, providing a clear understanding of how to apply it, maintaining its minimal necessary elements intact. Our model thus facilitates an aporetic and iterable engagement with the *double-reading* strategy, allowing researchers to explore how discourses both construct and deconstruct their meanings (Caputo & Derrida, 1997).

1.5.4 Explaining the model

At the core of the model lies **Discourse Structure**, as its unveiling and disruption constitute deconstruction's principal contribution to Discourse Studies. Its central placement reflects the dual function of discourse, as both the space where meanings are stabilized and the site of their deconstruction. By positioning the Discourse Structure centrally, the model highlights that discourse is never fixed but is always in a state of tension between consolidation and destabilization.

Next to the Discourse Structure lies in a parallel position, the *double-readings* of deconstruction: **Double Commentary** and **Disruptive Reading**. This disposition was chosen to reflect the simultaneous and dynamic application of both readings, resisting sequential and closed-end procedures. The readings are based on deconstruction's *double-reading* strategy. The **Double Commentary** (Left) centers on unveiling the hegemonic structure by unveiling both the **Dominant/Present** and by defect the **Marginalized/Absent Meanings & Vouloir Dire** of discourses. This reading does not challenge the discourse directly but instead reproduces the structure and how it operates. **Disruptive Reading** (Wright) engages with the **Hierarchical Binary Oppositions** that emerged from the *Double Commentary* and disrupts them through the force of *différances*, which unsettles, dismantles, and defers the binaries by pressuring their contradictions and tensions. This reading produces **Supplements**, or additional readings, and sometimes **Undecidables**. They both destabilize the dominant discursive structure, opening its fix and rigid closure.

Our model provides a discursive turn to deconstruction by focusing on discourses as the central object of the readings, in alignment with deconstruction application to all units of signification. It also incorporates **Discourse Techniques & Tools** positioned at the periphery of the model. Their marginal placement signals their optional application, available for scholars who seek a degree of structure, rigor, validity, and reliability (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014) while recognizing that deconstruction ultimately operates beyond these logocentric constraints. The model does not propose specific techniques or tools, leaving it open to researchers to decide which ones to apply, if they do not contradict or interfere with the deconstructive readings.

The model is open, non-linear, and dynamic, as it does not impose a fixed number of readings, avoids presenting sequential steps, rigid movements, or ordered procedures that culminate in replicable and consistent research outcomes, nor does it prescribe an endpoint to interpretation. This is visually represented by the circularity of the model, and the parallel positioning of the readings, as well as in the distanced placement of the expected outcomes, positioned in hexagons up and down Hierarchical Binary Opposition. This was done to place focus on the Discourse Structure. The dotted arrows reinforce the openness and continuous movement of the model, illustrating how deconstruction disrupts fixed margins and rejects rigid borders, thus remaining open to constant application.

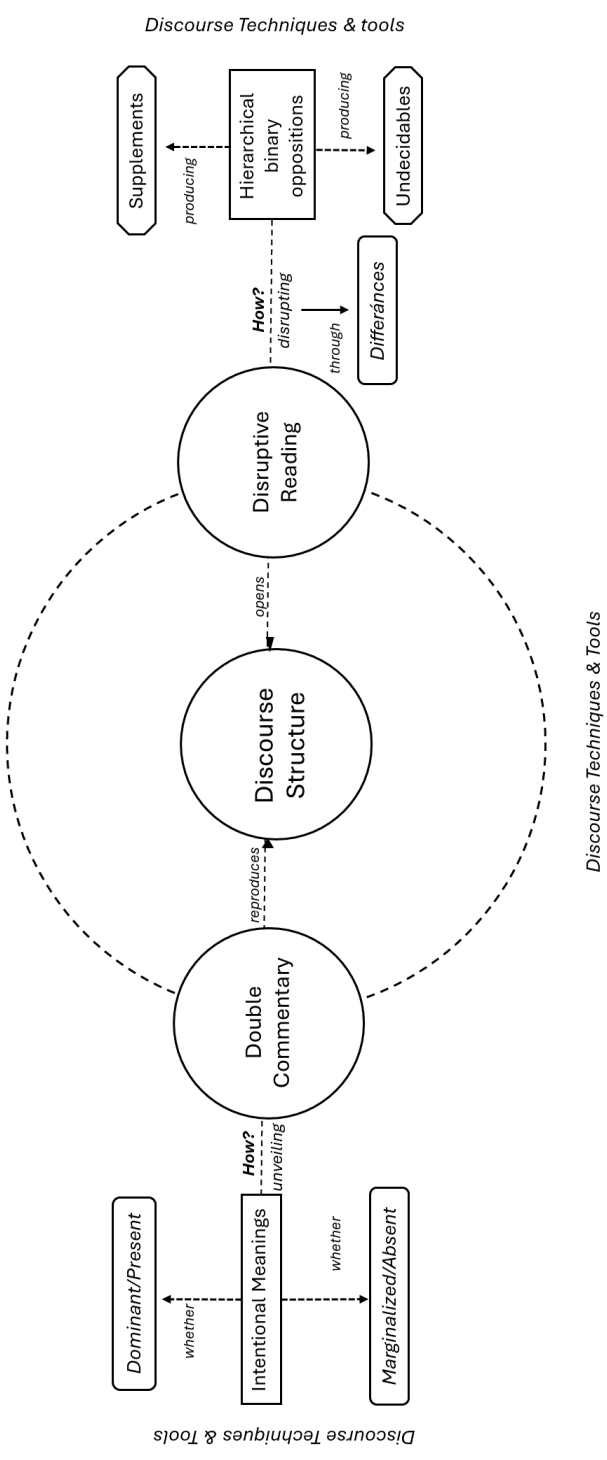


Figure 2.1. Reading Strategy for Discourse Studies

1.5.5 The Model & Derrida: Deconstruction of Law

To exemplify how the model aligns with deconstruction, but also to show its applicability, we used it in Derrida's text Force of Law, where he engages with how law sustains itself through a discourse structure that presents authority as self-justified (Derrida, 1992, p. 7). Our proposed model, which places the discourse structure at the center of deconstruction, mirrors Derrida's recognition of the legal system, which he claims constructs itself as a domain of reason, necessity, and legitimacy, concealing the underlying performative force that grants it authority. Derrida articulates this through the concept of the *mystical foundation of authority*, emphasizing that the law's legitimacy does not rest on an external ground but on its performative enactment: "Simple reason tells us that nothing is just in itself; everything crumbles with time. Custom is the sole basis for equity, for the simple reason that it is received; it is the mystical foundation of its authority. Whoever traces it to its source annihilates it" (Derrida, 1992, p. 12).

In opposition to traditional methods, Derrida does not analyze, critique, or reject the law's claims but instead reproduces its logic, exposing how it sustains itself. This aligns with our model's **Double Commentary**, which engages with the **dominant/present** and **marginalized/absent meanings** in discourse to reveal how it gains authority. Derrida follows this reading when he posits that law has been constructed as an embodiment of justice: "If justice is not necessarily law (*droit*) or the law, it cannot become justice legitimately or de jure except by withholding force or rather by appealing to force from its first moment" (Derrida, 1992, p. 10). By foregrounding the law's internal claims, Derrida makes visible the mechanisms that legitimize law through justice, which he claims are done by authority and violence.

To disrupt the **Hierarchical Binary Opposition** of law/justice, Derrida applies the force of ***différances***, aligning with our model's **Disruptive Reading**. Derrida destabilizes the binary by showing that while law operates within a framework of codified norms, justice is an elusive, incalculable demand that always exceeds the law. He argues that "justice is not necessarily law *(droit)*" (Derrida, 1992, p. 10) and that law is *deconstructible*, but justice is not because law is a system of rules that can be interpreted, revised, and critiqued, whereas justice remains an infinite, aporetic ideal (Derrida, 1992, pp. 14–15). He explains that justice, unlike law, is never fully present; it is always deferred, existing only as an evolutionary concept that continuously shapes and is shaped by discourse (Derrida, 1992, p. 15). Derrida exemplifies this with divine justice and moral justice, both of which function as aspirational yet unattainable ideals that exist outside of legal frameworks. Divine justice, he explains, is often conceived as absolute and transcendent, yet it remains inaccessible within human institutions(Derrida, 1992, p. 42). Similarly, moral justice is historically invoked to ground law in universal principles, yet it, too, is contingent on interpretation and lacks any fixed presence (Derrida, 1992, p. 49). Because justice is always to come (*à venir*), it resists deconstruction, not because it is stable or foundational, but precisely because it never fully manifests as an object that can be deconstructed (Derrida, 1992, p. 27).

Law, by contrast, is always subject to deconstruction because it derives its authority from a foundational violence that cannot be fully justified, what Derrida calls *the mystical foundation of authority*: "There is no law without enforceability, and no enforceability of the law without force," (Derrida, 1992, p. 6). However, this force is neither fully legitimate nor illegitimate, exposing the inherent instability of the law's authority. The tension between law and justice manifests in **undecidability**, where law should be performed, yet no rule can fully determine what is just because, in sum, laws are structured and general, whereas justice demands singularity. This **undecidability** opens the logocentric stability of law, as by relying on an opposition that is permanently *à venir* and relies on interpretations and contexts, the performance of law cannot be fixed, universal, or rational. This becomes evident in judicial decisions, where each case that comes before a judge is unique and cannot be resolved through the mere application of a pre-existing rule. Instead, the very act of applying the law transforms it, as the decision is shaped by the judge's interpretation, the specifics of the case, the temporal context, and the language in which it is articulated. Every court ruling is therefore a paradoxical act: it simultaneously enforces the law while reinterpreting it, introducing a **supplementary** meaning that alters its trajectory and sets a new precedent. This is why justice remains "the experience of the impossible," an ***undecidable*** that is never fully realized but always deferred.

Derrida's reading of law exemplifies the application of the *double-reading* strategy outlined in our model, demonstrating how the strategy can be reproduced. Through this example, we illustrated that deconstruction cannot be procedural, as it continuously engages with both readings simultaneously. *Double Commentary* serves as the mechanism for *Disruptive Reading*, while the very act of exposing the structure already initiates a destabilization, thereby engaging with *Disruptive Reading*. However, these readings remain independent, each serving distinct objectives: one focuses on uncovering the dominant/present and repressed/absent structures of discourses, while the other actively disrupts them. Moreover, the reading outcomes, where the discourse of law is disrupted into supplements and undecidability, reflect deconstruction's emphasis on opening closed structures to future meanings, breaking away from the logic of logocentric and transcendental discourses. The model, therefore, provides an aporetic and iterable strategy for applying deconstruction in discourse analysis.

However, the example presented does not illustrate how **discourse techniques or tools** can be incorporated into the deconstruction of discourse, as Derrida resisted using rigid methodologies. Nevertheless, if readers wish to apply them, they can do so in several ways. In the deconstruction of law, for instance, binaries can be mapped and charted to facilitate the readings. An intertextual analysis can also be conducted to trace how legal concepts, such as justice, force, and enforceability, shift in meaning across different texts. Similarly, a mapping of contradictions can be conducted to pinpoint moments where legal reasoning collapses under its logic. Meanwhile, a keyword analysis could also be conducted to identify rhetorical patterns such as paradoxes, double meanings, or ambiguous formulations. The door remains open to other techniques and tools, provided they do not compromise

the deconstructive reading but rather enhance its application and its focus on opening closed logocentric and transcendental discursive constructions.

1.5 DISCUSSION

This chapter has examined how deconstruction can be applied as a research strategy in Discourse Studies while maintaining its resistance to transcendental and logocentric fixation. To address this question, we have drawn on Derrida's *double-reading* (Derrida, 1982, p. 65) to present a model that adopts an aporetic and iterable strategy, guiding researchers in applying deconstruction without reducing it to an analysis, critique, or method (Derrida, 1985, p. 3). This is particularly relevant given that Discourse Studies often equate methodological rigor and validity with systematicity and replicability (Catalano & Waugh 2020; Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014), assumptions that deconstruction challenges. In contrast, our model, by centering on a minimal interpretation of double reading, provides a flexible and adaptable strategy that can be applied by readers every time and everywhere they apply it (Derrida, 1985, p. 3).

Our model aligns with existing literature (Butler, 1999; de Man, 1983; Fritsch et al., 2018; Kennedy, 1991; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Leff, 2019; Munslow, 2006; Nancy, 1991) by demonstrating that deconstruction can extend beyond its textual origins to Discourse Studies, adhering to Derrida's understanding of texts as encompassing all units of signification (Derrida, 1988, p. 148). Furthermore, it reinforces this discursive turn by incorporating techniques and tools from Discourse Studies. However, these elements remain peripheral, ensuring that they do not compromise the integrity of deconstruction but instead serve as supplementary aspects.

By recognizing deconstruction as a research strategy, our model surpasses its existing uses in Discourse Studies where it has been applied as a philosophical exercise and approach (de Man, 1983; Fritsch et al., 2018), as a conceptual element for discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), as a form of analysis and critique (Kennedy, 1991; Munslow, 2006; Nancy, 1991), and as a reinterpretative reading for social change (Butler, 1999; Leff, 2019). Therefore, providing a way to reproduce it to read and open discourses.

Our recognition of deconstruction as a research strategy is not exceptional; Derrida himself called it a "moving strategy" (Derrida, 1985, p. 2), highlighting that it has to "take place" to exist (Derrida, 1985, p. 3). Previous scholarship has also recognized that deconstruction has to be applied either as an analysis (Balkin, 1987; Macleod, 2002b), practice and process(Kilduff & Kelemen, 2004b), aporetic method (Thomassen, 2010a), non-method(Griffin, 2013a), hypothesis(Gnanasekaran, 2015b), or double-readings (Kakoliris, 2022a; Rasiński, 2011b), yet their lack of a concrete strategy or limited engagement with deconstructive concepts, along with tendencies toward rigid procedures and systematization, have complicated its reproducibility and, at times, contradicted deconstruction itself.

Our model addresses these challenges by providing a way to apply deconstruction while remaining aligned with it. It does so by (1) recognizing deconstruction as an aporetic reading strategy, (2) employing a *double-reading* strategy, and (3) ensuring that its reproducibility remains iterable. Our model acknowledges the paradox of needing to apply deconstruction while resisting its reduction to a structured method. This recognition led us to develop a model rather than a prescriptive set of steps, processes, or guidelines, as a visual representation better reflects the openness, adaptability, and dynamism of deconstruction. The model avoids sequential, universal, or systematic applications, instead employing circular, parallel, and interactive readings. The model's circular design, as well as its use of dotted lines and its parallel construction, emphasizes this, allowing readers to adapt the strategy and to keep it open to future readings.

Our contribution to existing research is further reinforced by our reliance on a double-reading strategy. While *double-reading* has been previously addressed in previous research (Derrida, 1982; Kakoliris, 2022a; Rasiński, 2011b), our approach differs as it focuses on discourses and takes a minimal approach, while recognizing deconstruction's complexity. Our model reflects this by centering on Discourse Structures, linked to *Double Commentary* and *Disruptive Reading*, and their necessary elements to be conducted. Our model's broad and general approach reinforces the openness and iterability of the *double-reading* strategy, enabling readers to integrate other elements and concepts of deconstruction or to incorporate other discursive techniques and tools. Likewise, the centrality of our strategy in Discourse Structures further highlights this adaptability, as deconstruction focus relies on its exposure, disruption, and opening, regardless of the readings or elements that might be involved with it, thus leaving the door open to further reinterpretations of our model, in alignment with deconstruction aversion to closure.

In this regard, the centrality of our model in Discourse Structures, also highlights deconstruction's main contribution to Discourse Studies, not only because it explicitly engages with discourses, but because in comparison to previous approaches and methods, deconstruction does not engage with how discourses are shaped and shape knowledge (Foucault, 1970), social reality (Wodak & Meyer, 2015), power dynamics (Fairclough, 1992; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), behaviors and practices(van Dijk, 1990), or culture and identity (Lacan, 1966; Laclau, 2005a; Stavrakakis, 2007), but rather it delves in how discourses construct and sustain themselves by delving in their very structure (Derrida, 1967). Not with the focus of analyzing, criticizing, or examining it, not to reinvert its hegemony logic, change or influence social reality, or build new reinterpretations (Derrida, 1985) but to open up their transcendental and logocentric construction to allow future readings *á venir* (Caputo & Derrida, 1997, p. 42), neutralizing the binary logic that provides them coherence and authority by applying *différance* (Derrida, 1978, p. 161).

Finally, by recognizing the *double-reading* strategy as iterable, the model highlights that its application is always influenced by language, context, intentions, and temporality (Derrida, 1967, p. 293). This means that the application of the model is not consistent, but rather it changes each time, everywhere, and for every reader when applied. This is because our proposed model does not seek to stabilize

discourses, instead, it aims to foreground the impossibility of final discursive constructions, revealing the exclusions, contradictions, and tensions that sustain them and offering an iterative reading strategy that can be continually reproduced (Derrida, 1988, p. 53). This resolves the tension between replicability/reproducibility and closure/openness of previous applications of deconstruction as a research strategy by illustrating that while each deconstructive reading is unique, it can still follow a minimal approach through a *double-reading* strategy that is iterable.

Despite the contributions of our model, we acknowledge potential criticisms and limitations. Deconstruction scholars may argue that any attempt to systematize deconstruction contradicts its anti-structural stance and resistance to logocentrism. However, we contend that deconstruction, while resisting rigid methodology, must still be applied in some form to exist (Derrida, 1988, p. 9), so although relying on a strategy, our model attempts to maintain its alignment with deconstruction by maintaining our strategy open, adaptable, and minimal, only providing the elements that can allow its reproducibility, without compromising its flexibility and future reinterpretations. Deconstructive scholars might also argue that Derrida and other scholars (Kakoliris, 2022a; Rasiński, 2011b) have sufficiently addressed the *double-reading*. We recognized this, however, our study aims to take deconstruction to Discourse Studies, providing a way to apply it in that field, which uses it as a research strategy, remains limited, taking a minimal approach that can simplify deconstruction complexity for it to be reproducible.

For their part, discourse scholars might raise questions about existing approaches that already account for contingency and instability (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Foucault, 1972; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), as well as binary logic (Lacan, 1966), and hegemonic constructions (Foucault, 1972; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). We recognize this, however, while post-structuralist approaches recognize contingency, their focus is not strictly limited to opening discursive structures, as deconstruction is, and they still assume some form of temporary discursive stability, whether in the form of hegemonic articulations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 2007)), regimes of truth (Foucault, 1972), or ideological formations (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). In contrast, deconstruction rejects even provisional stability (Derrida, 1967, p. 23), and it is not centered on how hegemonic constructions and binary logic affect and reflect societal reality but on how they stabilize discourses.

Additionally, our model may also raise questions about its subjectivity, apparent relativism, and iterability, as it keeps its application open, intentional, adaptable, and inconsistent. We acknowledge that our model does not conform to conventional expectations of methodological rigor, replicability, or validation (Catalano & Waugh 2020; Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; van Dijk, 1997), because deconstruction is not identical, nor universal, nor can it be systematically applied. Deconstruction varies every time, everywhere, and by whom it is applied (Derrida, 1985, p. 3). Our model, however, provides a strategy that can guide readers in applying deconstruction, which can help to provide more transparency and certainty to deconstruction. Likewise, by integrating discursive techniques and tools, as proposed by previous research and our model (Griffin, 2013a; Macleod, 2002b), readers can respond to the expected

scientific rigor while conducting their readings, as long as they do not interfere with deconstruction. The model, thus, can help respond to some extent to the logocentric doubts, however, it cannot fully address them because it is precisely deconstruction's rejection of traditional methods and scientific constraints that make the *double-reading* what it is and the whole purpose of conducting it. So instead of limitations, they should be recognized as contributions.

Future research could refine the model to align with specific objectives, contexts, and intentions, as it allows for tailored applications. Additionally, as this paper was merely methodological, applying the model in empirical multidisciplinary studies can enhance its practicality and empirical approach, further strengthening our model's contributions to Discourse Studies. Incorporating more detailed discursive techniques and tools could also improve the model's specific application in the field, but that will depend on each reader and should not interfere with deconstruction. Meanwhile, integrating other deconstruction elements and concepts can further reinforce the application of the model, enabling scholars to better disrupt and open discourses.

1.6 CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the application of deconstruction (Derrida, 1967) as a research strategy in Discourse Studies, emphasizing its potential to unsettle and open discursive structures while resisting closure, stabilization, and logocentrism. Recognizing the historical challenges associated with applying deconstruction as a systematic research approach, this study has sought to bridge the gap between deconstruction's theoretical complexity and its practical applicability. By developing a model for an aporetic and iterable *double-reading* strategy, this study offers a way to engage with deconstruction while maintaining its open-ended and dynamic nature.

The model introduced in this paper builds on Derrida's concept of *double-reading* (Derrida, 1982), providing a structured yet flexible approach that aligns with deconstruction's theoretical premises. The *Double Commentary* engages with the present/dominant and absent/repressed meanings within a discourse, while the *Disruptive Reading* applies *différance* (Derrida, 1978) to destabilize hierarchical binary oppositions, generating supplements and undecidables that prevent the fixation of meaning. Through this dual approach, the model does not analyze, critique, or reinterpret discourse; instead, it reveals its underlying logic and disrupts its assumed stability, ensuring its perpetual openness to future readings and interpretations.

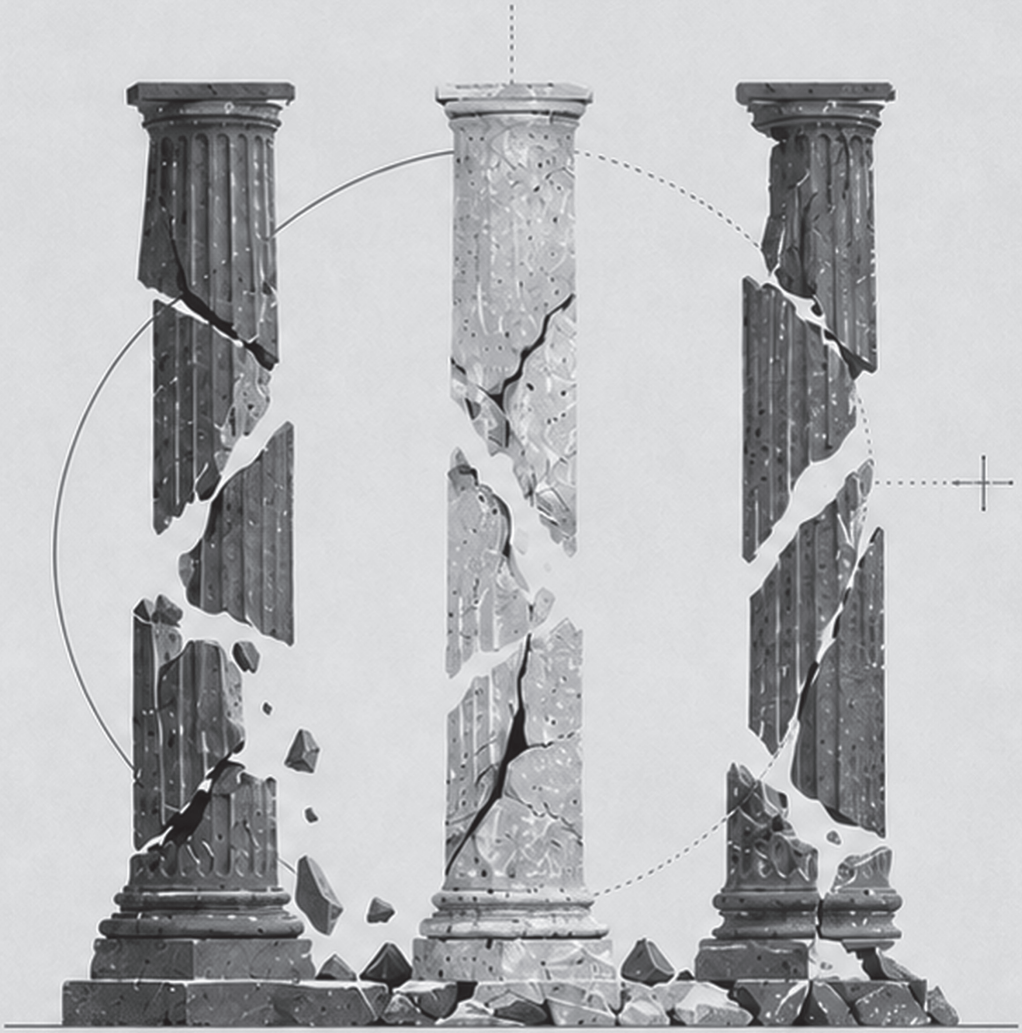
This study contributes to Discourse Studies by demonstrating the significance of applying deconstruction, as it facilitates an understanding of how discourses are structured and articulated within binary logic. Deconstruction also serves as a critical tool for challenging hegemonic and established assumptions, revealing and reproducing absent or repressed discourses, and prompting

reflection on how dominant discourses acquire authority and legitimacy. Since deconstruction engages not only with meaning but also with vouloir dire—the explicit and implicit authorial and textual intentions as interpreted by the reader—it enables an intentional reading of discourses. Furthermore, by introducing *différance* as a force that defers and transgresses the logocentric construction of discourse, deconstruction disrupts coherence by exposing contradictions, exclusions, and tensions. In doing so, it opens discourses to continual reinterpretation and signification, producing supplementary readings and undecidables. This leads to a *différance*-oriented reading that extends beyond closed, transcendental, and universalist discourses.

Unlike post-structuralist approaches that still assume provisional stability in discourse—whether through hegemonic articulations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), ideological formations (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2015), or regimes of truth (Foucault, 1972)—deconstruction resists such assumptions by focusing on the inherent instability and iterability of meaning (Derrida, 1988). The model introduced in this study provides a way to apply deconstruction iteratively, acknowledging that every application of the *double-reading* is shaped by its context, language, and the reader's interpretation, thus ensuring its continued adaptation and relevance.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several challenges. Deconstruction scholars may critique any attempt to formalize or systematize deconstruction as contradictory to its resistance to structured methodologies (Derrida, 1985). However, as Derrida himself emphasized, deconstruction must "take place" to exist (Derrida, 1985), necessitating some form of strategic application. The model developed here seeks to strike a balance by offering a minimal, adaptable framework that allows deconstruction to be applied while preserving its aporetic and iterable nature. Meanwhile, discourse scholars may question whether the model meets expectations of methodological rigor, reproducibility, and validity (Catalano & Waugh 2020; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014). This study contends that deconstruction does not conform to conventional methodological constraints but offers a distinct approach that prioritizes openness, adaptability, and the exposure of discursive structures.

Future research can refine and expand the model by integrating additional deconstructive elements or adapting it to specific contexts within Discourse Studies. Empirical applications across various disciplines could further illustrate its potential, while interdisciplinary engagements may enhance its theoretical depth. Ultimately, this study underscores the value of deconstruction as a research strategy, highlighting its capacity to reveal and disrupt discursive structures, challenge hegemonic assumptions, and ensure that meaning remains open to continual reinterpretation.



Chapter 3

Backcasting Sustainability: How Envisioned Futures, Present Diagnoses, and Prognostic Pathways Structure Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Although sustainability has occupied political and governance agendas for nearly four decades, it continues to operate within a contested and "fuzzy" discursive field. This raises the question of how a concept lacking semantic consensus nonetheless acquires durability, expansion, and political relevance across diverse contexts and temporalities. While existing scholarship has characterized sustainability as a floating or empty signifier, less attention has been paid to the discursive architectures through which it gains coherence despite semantic instability. This study addresses this gap by recasting backcasting from a transition-planning methodology into a futuring discursive frame. It argues that sustainability is consistently articulated through three: Envisioned Futures, Present Diagnoses, and Prognostic Pathways. Drawing on qualitative, corpus-based analysis, the study examines ten influential political texts published between 1987 and 2022, selected for their global reach, temporal breadth, geographic diversity, and varied authorship. The findings show that, despite variation in political orientation and content, sustainability discourse is organized through a shared futuring architecture that links normative horizons, diagnoses of present crises, and authorized pathways of intervention. This architecture produces performative coherence and stability through relational temporal ordering that structures how futures are imagined, justified, and governed in the present. In doing so, the article shows how future-oriented articulations enable sustainability's political expansion while constraining which futures become imaginable and legitimate, revealing how discursive architectures operate as mechanisms of both coordination and exclusion in global environmental governance and epistemologies. In doing so, it highlights how futures are not neutral planning objects but structured outcomes of discursive practice.

Keywords: Sustainability, Future Studies; Backcasting; Frame analysis

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Over nearly four decades, sustainability has gained political prominence while remaining embedded in a contested and often "fuzzy" discursive field (Shi et al., 2019). Since the publication of *Our Common Future* ((WCED), 1987), sustainability has been mobilized across an expanding range of political agendas, institutions, and geographic contexts, that expand from post-colonial critiques (Escobar, 1995) or the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1994) to planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009), political ecology (Leff, 2019), and recent resilience and care-centered frameworks (Ferguson & Wollersheim, 2022; Zigon, 2024). This proliferation has enabled sustainability to travel widely across contexts and disciplines, yet it has also fractured its meaning, prompting recurring claims that sustainability functions as a "floating" or "empty" signifier (Ainsworth, 2020; Brown, 2015; Kögl & Kurze, 2013), capable of attaching to heterogeneous and sometimes incompatible political projects while masking underlying tensions and exclusions.

These debates have generated extensive inquiry into what sustainability is. Whether it should be understood as an objective condition (Dunlap & Catton, 1994; Nagoda, 2015), a social construction (Banerjee, 2003; Leff, 2008), a hegemonic or ideological discourse (Escobar, 1995, 2014; Stavrakakis, 2007), or a political project (Mota Díaz & Sandoval Forero, 2016; Mouffe, 2023). Yet such definitional approaches have not resolved sustainability's fundamental contestation, largely because they presuppose the possibility of stable, universal signification (Tellería, 2025). This study intervenes differently, as rather than seeking to pin down sustainability's meaning, it examines the discursive architecture through which sustainability attains provisional coherence and political traction despite persistent semantic instability. After all, sustainability does not merely describe environmental or social challenges; it actively organizes relationships between present conditions, imagined futures, and legitimate pathways of intervention (Duygan, 2025).

Drawing on the Essex School discourse theory (De Cleen et al., 2021; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), we approach sustainability not as a stable concept but as a discursive construction whose meaning is temporarily fixed through structural arrangements. From this approach, sustainability's openness is not a weakness but a condition of its political operability, enabling it to be mobilized across divergent contexts while remaining recognizable as "sustainability" (Ainsworth, 2020; Tellería, 2025). Coherence, therefore, does not arise from semantic consensus but from shared modes of articulation that organize how sustainability is envisioned, problematized, and acted upon.

Existing scholarship has identified several discursive structures, including thematic pillars or dimensions (Dalampira & Nastis 2020; Khan, 1995; Purvis et al., 2018), agency models (Kortetmäki & Huttunen, 2023; Luo et al., 2021; Middlemiss, 2014), solution structures (Frank, 2016; Puttock et al., 2025); and frameworks examining normative assemblies (Amantova-Salmane, 2015; Burkhardt, 1989; Yamada et al., 2022). While valuable, these structures have tended to isolate specific components of sustainability discourse,

overlooking the broader temporal logic that links futures, diagnoses, and interventions into a coherent political discourse. This limitation has been noted in scholarship emphasizing sustainability's orientation toward transition, governance, and implementation, where temporal ordering plays a constitutive role in shaping political meaning and action (Dryzek, 2010; Hay, 1999; Taylor, 2018; Thoms & Blasko, 2011). Building on this recognition, we argue that sustainability has been consistently articulated through a futuring architecture that frames it as a manageable transition from an unsatisfactory present toward a desired end-state in the future.

Futures, political, and management studies have long examined the interconnection between current crises, transition pathways, and desired futures through a range of conceptualizations, including visioning (Willow, 2022), roadmapping (Camarinha-Matos, 2004), forecasting (Hughes, 2016; Strand, 1999), scenario thinking and building (Barbanente et al., 2002; Burt & van der Heijden, 2003) or transition management (Loorbach, 2007; Martens & Rotmans, 2005). Yet we align with backcasting (Holmberg, 1998; Robinson, 1982), as unlike the previous conceptualizations, which tend to extrapolate from current trends, plan incremental change forward, or explore multiple contingent futures, backcasting begins from a normatively defined desired future and works backward to identify the present conditions, constraints, and interventions required to achieve it. In doing so, it explicitly links future aspirations, present diagnoses, and authorized actions within a single temporal logic.

Despite the wide use of backcasting in the formulation, critique, and evaluation of strategies, policies, and governance arrangements (Abadian & Russell, 2024; Budiharta et al., 2018; Duygan, 2025; van der Steen, 2022), discourse studies have not leveraged backcasting to examine how it co-produces the articulation of sustainability itself. Instead, discourse-oriented research has tended to address the futuring elements of sustainability either in isolation or in partial combinations: the future as a device to mobilize consensus, establish temporal contrasts, and define goals or horizons (Arora, 2023; Blythe et al., 2018; Dryzek, 2013; Seefried, 2015); the present as a diagnostic narrative that identifies constraints, traces causal responsibility, and exposes relations of power and ideology (Carant, 2017; Hay, 1999; Jacobsson, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2010); and pathways as designed processes whose agency and power effects are never neutral (Feola et al., 2021; Hirons, 2020; Lencucha et al., 2023; Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2021; Vandenhole et al., 2025). What remains underexplored is how these elements operate together as a structured discursive architecture.

To address this gap, this study recasts backcasting as a discursive futuring frame for examining how sustainability discourse is structured. We do so by abstracting backcasting's methodological steps (Bibri, 2018; Holmberg, 1998) and transforming them into three frames for discourse analysis (Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1988): (1) Envisioned Futures, (2) Present Diagnoses, and (3) Prognostic Pathways. These frames are applied through a qualitative, corpus-based analysis of ten influential political texts published between 1987 and 2022, selected for their diversity of political authorship, documented global influence, temporal breadth, and geographically balanced representation. Our analysis traces how

the frames operate both individually and in their interrelated configuration to structure sustainability discourse, thereby showing how sustainability attains discursive coherence and political traction across heterogeneous contexts, authorships, and temporal periods, despite discursive fragmentation.

1.2 BACKCASTING AS A FRAME FOR ANALYZING THE STRUCTURE OF SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSES

This paper acknowledges that sustainability operates within a contested discursive field in which meaning is never fully secured but only provisionally stabilized through articulatory practices (Kølvraa, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Following the Essex School discourse theory (De Cleen et al., 2021; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), we recognize that meanings do not precede discourse but are produced through relations among signifiers that temporarily fix interpretation while remaining open to contestation. Accordingly, sustainability is approached here as a discursive construction whose meaning and relevance are not secured by inherent properties, ontological coherence, or discursive consensus, but are generated through the discursive structures that organize its articulation.

This positioning aligns with scholarship that characterizes sustainability as a "floating" or "empty" signifier (Ainsworth, 2020; Atkins, 2017; Brown, 2015; Kögl & Kurze, 2013), which have highlighted how the signification of sustainability varies within discourses, as a result of its fragmentation, contestation and expansion. Yet we expand these approximations by arguing that sustainability's discursive construction has nevertheless remained coherent and politically relevant because it is organized through an open yet consistent structural form that allows heterogeneous significations to be provisionally and temporally attached. Because of this, sustainability's noted "fuzziness" (Shi et al., 2019) should not be understood as a conceptual flaw to be resolved, but as a constitutive condition that enables its adaptability and mobilization across contextual, institutional, and ideological settings.

While the Essex School focuses on chains of equivalence and difference as the primary structure through which discursive formations are constituted (De Cleen et al., 2021; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), this study adopts a broader approach. By recognizing discursive structures as the architectonic arrangements through which signifiers are ordered, related, positioned and partially stabilized, we approach sustainability not through relational linkage alone, but through the broader structure that holds discursive elements together. This understanding resonates with, yet differs from, existing sustainability scholarship that has identified structures such as pillars or dimensions (Dalampira & Nastis ; Purvis et al., 2018), agency models (Kortetmäki & Huttunen, 2023; Middlemiss, 2014), types of responses (Frank, 2016; Puttock et al., 2025), or normative assemblies (Burkhardt, 1989; Yamada et al., 2022). Yet, we differ from them by adopting a futuring architecture: a backcasting frame, which we claim has consistently been used to articulate sustainability.

1.3.1 Sustainability: A Backcasting Construction

Sustainability can be understood as a managerial construction, insofar as it is routinely articulated as a problem of coordination, implementation, and transformation rather than as a primarily political or ethical question (Banerjee, 2003; Tellería, 2025). Across policy, governance, and organizational scholarship, sustainability has been framed as a managerial endeavor in which societal and environmental challenges are rendered governable through strategic intervention (Elkington, 1994; Leff, 2008; Raworth, 2018). This construction typically involves the definition of normative goals or target states (Shi et al., 2019; Thoms & Blasko, 2011), the assessment of current conditions, capacities, and constraints (Hay, 1999; Toft & Hansen, 2025), and the planning and design of policies, strategies, and instruments intended to guide transformation toward a desired end-state (Fedkiw, 2004; Redclift, 2002).

Previous scholarship has noticed this futuring architecture linking the present with pathways and future scenarios. Visioning approaches emphasize the articulation of desirable futures to orient collective action (Willow, 2022); roadmapping focuses on sequencing steps toward predefined goals (Camarinha-Matos, 2004); forecasting extrapolates future developments from existing trends (Hughes, 2016; Strand, 1999); scenario thinking and building explore multiple plausible futures to inform decision-making (Barbanente et al., 2002; Burt & van der Heijden, 2003); and transition management emphasizes the coordination of long-term systemic change through iterative governance processes (Loorbach, 2007; Martens & Rotmans, 2005). However, among these conceptualizations, backcasting offers the clearest articulation of the present-pathway-future logic.

Backcasting originated in energy futures policy analysis (Lovins, 1976; Robinson, 1982) and has since been established within management, futures, and sustainability studies for designing transition strategies, policies, and even agency models (Holmberg & Robèrt, 2000; van der Steen, 2022). Unlike the aforementioned approaches that extrapolate forward from present conditions, prioritize strategic management processes, or explore multiple contingent futures, backcasting begins by defining a normatively desired end-state and then reasons backward to identify the conditions, constraints, and pathways required to reach that future. In doing so, it places equal analytical emphasis on future visions, present diagnoses, and pathways of transformation, organizing them within a coherent futuring logic.

This logic aligns closely with how we argue sustainability has been constructed in sustainability discourses, where normative future visions are mobilized to diagnose the present and to authorize specific pathways of intervention. Read in this way, backcasting can be understood not merely for its structural-discursive capacity, but as an articulatory architecture through which sustainability is rendered actionable and governable. This capacity has been widely recognized for enabling coordinated responses to complex crises, including efforts aimed at supporting vulnerable populations (Walker et al., 2004; Wilson & John, 2025), guiding countries and organizations toward more sustainable models and practices (Schöggl et al., 2020), enhancing collaboration (Luo et al., 2021), and strengthening

accountability through monitoring and reporting practices (Gilgan et al., 2025; Ng et al., 2025). Yet, at the same time, recognizing backcasting as a discursive structure also foregrounds its limitations.

Critical scholarship has long argued that approaching sustainability as a managerial project anchored in a normatively defined futuring architecture can produce forms of closure and exclusion. These include the imposition of asymmetrical and utopian metrics of progress that obscure contextual differences and uneven capacities (Malik, 2025; Mazutis et al., 2020); the reproduction of capitalist and Western rationalities that marginalize local, cultural, and place-based forms of knowledge and existence (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 1995; Feola et al., 2021; Jacobsson, 2019); the facilitation of symbolic or strategic appropriation by powerful actors seeking legitimacy rather than transformation (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Todaro & Torelli, 2024; Toft & Hansen, 2025); and the reduction of complex socio-ecological relations to quantifiable indicators and managerial targets (Haberl et al., 2019; Leff, 2019). Moreover, the persistent orientation toward futures that are continuously deferred risks sustaining sustainability as a project of anticipation rather than realization (Tellería, 2025).

Sustainability discourse, therefore, does not simply describe possible futures; it actively structures how futures are anticipated, stabilized, and rendered actionable (Bibri, 2018), which invites a closer examination of backcasting not only as a planning methodology but as a discursive and futuring architecture that shapes the political production of sustainability itself.

1.3.2 Backcasting as a Discursive Futuring Frame

Backcasting has been widely employed as an approach (Dreborg, 1996; Wübbelmann & Kabisch, 2025), a conceptual framework (Wilson et al., 2006), a planning tool (Abadian & Russell, 2024; Geurs & Van Wee, 2010), and a design framework (Kishita et al., 2024). Within this literature, it is primarily treated as a means of supporting strategic decision-making by aligning present actions with desired future outcomes. We approach backcasting as a dominant futuring logic that structures how futures are made intelligible, legitimate, and actionable (Duygan, 2025), shifting the attention from methodological application to the discursive architecture through which sustainability futures are ordered and governed.

To address this gap, we draw on framing theory (Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1988) to recast backcasting's procedural steps as a discursive futuring frame, that is, textual schemata that select and emphasize aspects of reality to guide interpretation, legitimize particular understandings, and orient action.

This translation is grounded in a theoretical parallelism between framing functions and backcasting. Entman (1993) conceptualizes frames as schemata for defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral evaluations, and proposing remedies, while Snow and Benford (1988) highlight their diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational functions. These functions closely align with the procedural logic of principle-based backcasting approaches, such as The Natural Step (Bibri, 2018; Holmberg, 1998), which

begin by defining sustainability normative criteria, assessing present conditions, and developing strategies to bridge the gap between present and future states. Similar to frames, thus, backcasting anchors legitimacy and motivation through a normative future-oriented horizon, diagnoses the current situation and the causes impeding that future, and authorizes specific instruments, agents, and pathways of action, providing a remedy to the present and a motivation to act for the future. This shows that as a frame, backcasting does more than use a futuring architecture to organize discourse around desirable end-states, but it governs how futures are made thinkable, legitimate, and actionable.

We rely on TNS rather than alternative backcasting variants (Höjer & Mattsson, 2000; Holmberg & Robèrt, 2000; Robinson, 1982; Wieliczko, 2017) not only due to its parallelism with framing theory but because it articulates explicit, principle-based criteria that provide a clear normative anchor, while specifying steps at a conceptual level rather than prescribing implementation details suited to policy and strategy design. However, our adaptation differs from the original TNS in two respects. First, although TNS includes four steps, we abstract three frames and exclude scenario development (step 3) as it involves exploring multiple alternative futures, a process more suited to transition planning, where futures remain open questions. And second, we do not follow the TNS sequential approach, as we do not aim to formulate or to operationalize strategies, but rather position backcasting as a discursive futuring frame that supplies content and signification to sustainability.

We also depart from framing theory in two respects. First, we do not treat causality as a separate analytical step (Entman, 1993). Although backcasting studies recognize the relevance of identifying past structural constraints and causalities (Bendor et al., 2021), we integrate only those elements whose effects are presented as operative in the present, aligning with Snow and Benford's diagnostic function (Snow & Benford). This reflects our aim of not tracing the evolution of sustainability discourse or conducting a longitudinal analysis, but to examine how sustainability becomes meaningful through the backcasting architecture. Second, we do not search for moral-evaluative articulations, as proposed by Entman (Entman). Instead, we treat sustainability criteria as performing the normative and evaluating function of sustainability discourses, insofar as they specify the horizon against which problems, responsibilities, and interventions become intelligible.

Based on this, we propose three interlinked frames for analyzing sustainability discourses as backcasting constructs (Table 3.1). Each frame comprises an **element**, an **operation**, and a **function**. By element, we refer to the frame's content, those selected and salient aspects of reality that the discourse highlights (Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1988). By function, we mean the role the frame performs in structuring meaning and shaping interpretation (Entman, 1993, pp. 52–53). While by discursive operation, we refer to the processes through which the frame performs this function, such as selection, emphasis, linkage, or exclusion (Entman, 1993, pp. 52–55; Snow & Benford, 1988, pp. 614–617).

Table 3.1. Backcasting Frame

Frame	Element	Operation	Function
Envisioned Future	Endpoint criteria	Defines what counts as sustainability by specifying the desired end-state of the transition.	Normative; Legitimation; and Motivation
Present Diagnosis	Causes and Problems	Assesses current conditions relative to the envisioned future, identifying barriers and causal explanations.	Problem Definition and Diagnosis
Prognostic Pathway	Transition Strategies	Articulates solutions, processes, and responsibilities to bridge present and future states.	Remedy identification; authorization of instruments and roles

Taken together, these frames form a futuring architecture that affords sustainability discursive coherence, both individually and in their interrelation, thereby recasting backcasting from a transition planning method into a discursive structure through which sustainability is built.

1.3 RESEARCH STRATEGY

We adopt a qualitative, corpus-based frame analysis to trace how sustainability is articulated across heterogeneous political texts published between 1987 and 2022 (Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1988). This temporal breadth and diversity enable us to identify the discursive architecture that gives coherence to sustainability despite semantic "fuzziness" (Ainsworth, 2020; Kögl & Kurze, 2013; Shi et al., 2019). Following Table 3.1, we read each text independently to identify how the proposed backcasting frames are articulated. Our approach is integrative and synchronic (F. d. Saussure, 1959), as we do not analyze each text to compare or assess them against each other or per frame, nor do we analyze them longitudinally and evolutionarily. Instead, we map each frame within each text and synthesize them at the corpus level to demonstrate (1) the recurrent presence and consistency of the backcasting frame in sustainability discourses, and (2) how that architecture articulates sustainability.

1.4.3 Corpus of Analysis

The corpus comprises ten political texts (Table 2), defined as public documents authored by political actors to articulate sustainability in the public sphere (van Dijk, 1998). This definition extends beyond state sources to include diverse voices and document types, in alignment with our claim that, despite heterogeneity and variation, sustainability is consistently signified through a backcasting structure.

Guided by this conceptualization and our integrative and synchronic approach (F. d. Saussure, 1959), selection followed four criteria:

1) Documented global influence. Texts that have demonstrably shaped international sustainability discourse through formal adoption, implementation, conceptual innovation, or agenda-setting;

2) Temporal coverage. The corpus spans from the entry of sustainability into institutional political discourse ((WCED), 1987) to recent articulations (ECLAC, 2022) that are currently in operation such Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015) or the European Green Deal (EU, 2019);

3) Geographically breadth. The corpus includes Global North and Global South perspectives to counter persistent geographic bias and the prioritization of Western institutions and epistemologies (Escobar, 2014; Jacobsson, 2019; Mulindwa, 2020);

4) Diversity of political authors. The authors go from multilateral organizations (OCF, A2030, PA), national governments (B2020), regional bodies and organisms (NEPAD, EGD, CS), to religious institutions (LS), individual political leaders (AIT), and corporate entities (V2050).

Table 3.2. Corpus of Analysis

Year	Text	ID	Author	Geography	Type of Author
1987	Our Common Future	OCF	World Commission on Environment and Development	Global	Multilateral Organization
1999	Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity & Happiness	BT2020	Planning Commission of the Royal Government of Bhutan	Bhutan	Local Government
2003	New Partnership for Africa's Development	NEPAD	African Union	Africa Union	Regional Organization
2006	An Inconvenient Truth	AIT	Al Gore	United States	Political Leader
2015	Laudato Si	LS	Pope Francis	Global	Religious Organization, Political Leader
2015	Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	A2030	United Nations	Global	Multilateral Organization
2015	Paris Agreement	PA	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change	Global	Multilateral Organization
2019	The European Green Deal	EGD	European Union	European Union	Regional Organization
2021	Vision 2050: Time to Transform (2ed)	V2050	World Business Council for Sustainable Development	Global	Business Association
2022	The Care Society: A Horizon for Sustainable Recovery with Gender Equality	CS	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean	Latin America & the Caribbean	Regional Organism

The selected texts capture the heterogeneity of sustainability discourse in terms of context, authorship, and temporality, thereby providing an appropriate corpus to test our argument. The texts are presented chronologically to situate each discourse within its publication context and policy cycle, offering contextual orientation for cross-text comparison. Yet this sequencing is expository and does not amount to a longitudinal analysis (F. d. Saussure, 1959). Most texts were either originally published in English or released in official English editions; accordingly, no translations were required.

1.4.4 Research Strategy

The research strategy follows a four-stage analysis. First, we read each text to identify the elements that populate the three predefined frames of Table 3.1. We achieve this by collecting textual evidence that highlights the salient aspects per frame and text. Second, we organize and synthesize this evidence into a frame profile per document, specifying the frame's elements. Third, we integrate the profiles to determine how, within each text, the three frames interrelate, using iterative coding to refine the identification of operations and functions both within and across frames. Finally, we synthesize the profiles at the corpus level to show how the backcasting architecture articulates sustainability, independently within each frame and in their interrelation. The outcome of our analysis is a diagram (section 5.4) that shows how sustainability is articulated through the interaction of elements, operations, and functions.

1.4 FINDINGS

Our analysis reveals that, across our sample, sustainability does gain meaning through the consistent articulation of a backcasting frame. We present our per-frame starting with Envisioned Future, followed by Present Diagnostic and Prognostic Pathway, before demonstrating how their interlinked operation produces coherence.

1.5.5 Envisioned Future Frame

The Envisioned Future frame signifies sustainability by specifying endpoint criteria that define what counts as a sustainable end-state, as seen *Appendix A3.1*. Across the corpus, futures range from universal prosperity, justice, and security ((WCED), 1987, p. 11), culturally sovereign modernization rooted in Buddhist identity (Bhutan, 1999, p. 109), continental African emancipation (African-Union, 2001, p. 17), human survival through climate collective action (Gore, 2006, p. 11), and spiritual-ecological reconciliation (Francis, 2015, p. 159) to a free, prosperous, and just world, eradicating poverty and environmental decline (UN, 2015, pp. 5–7), achieving climate stability within a 2-1.5 °C target (UNFCCC, 2015, p. 4), a climate-neutral, just, and competitive circular Europe (EU, 2019, p. 2); a business-led society living well within planetary boundaries (WBCSD, 2021, p. 8); and a feminist, care-centered horizon that interlinks humans and planet survival at the heart of development (ECLAC, 2022, p. 12).

Despite the elements' diversity, the Envisioned Futures work bidirectionally to define sustainability forward while marking unsustainability backward, thereby creating the evaluative standards, which dictate the normative function against which all present conditions and proposed solutions are judged. This is achieved through varied normative criteria: moral imperatives such as "happiness," "leaving no one behind," or "just transitions" (BT2020, A2030, EGD); technocratic thresholds like a consistent 7% growth target (NEPAD); ideological-cultural aims like ending androcentrism (CS); or practical milestones like practicing dialogue and ecological citizenship (LS). What matters is not the specific content of these

criteria but their structural positioning as predetermined endpoints that simultaneously authorize what must be achieved and exclude what must be abandoned. For instance, when AIT roots its envisioned future in participatory democracy, it sets civic mobilization as the evaluative standard: "Now it is up to us to use our democracy… and make moral choices to change the policies and behaviors…" (Gore, 2006, p. 296), thereby disqualifying political inaction and skepticism as incompatible with sustainability. Similarly, when PA specifies a temperature target of 1.5-2°C, it renders current emission trajectories unsustainable by definition, making certain climate strategies necessary and others insufficient.

Futuring architecture further constitutes this operation. Several texts employ calendrical targets: BT2020 fixes 2020; NEPAD synchronizes with 2015 agendas; A2030 sets 2030; PA anchors mid-century neutrality; EGD specifies 2030/2050 milestones; and V2050 projects to 2050. These construct sustainability as a deliverable outcome through measurable accountability. By contrast, OCF advances a "twenty-first-century" quest "beyond 2000" ((WCED), 1987, p. 5); AIT centers on everyday action; LS calls for conversion "here and now" while orienting hope "beyond the sun" (Francis, 2015, p. 119); and CS pairs "immediate action" tied to the UN 2030 Agenda (ECLAC, 2022, p. 11) with a "medium- and long-term" structural vision (ECLAC, 2022, p. 30). This temporal openness signifies sustainability differently, as ongoing moral transformation transcending individual lifetimes rather than measurable goals. This divergence demonstrates that even futuring architecture is not a neutral description but a meaning-constitutive framing that shapes whether sustainability appears as technical management or civilizational transformation.

Based on this evidence, we found that the Envisioned Future functions as the normative-ontological anchor by establishing what sustainability is authorized to mean in each discourse. It likewise provides the normative foundation that legitimates the transition and motivates action by operating bidirectionally, as by determining what sustainability should be, it determines what is unsustainable, thereby authorizing the necessity for transformation.

1.5.6 Present Diagnosis Frame

Across all texts, the present is diagnosed as a collection of interconnected crises that require multidimensional responses rather than discrete problem-solving, as referred to in *Appendix A3.2*. OCF inaugurates this pattern by declaring that "these are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a development crisis, an energy crisis. They are all one," ((WCED), 1987). Subsequent texts retain this multi-crisis framing while refracting it through distinct contexts and moments: BT2020 adds cultural erosion and sovereignty anxieties (Bhutan, 1999, pp. 7–8); AIT stresses political polarization, ethical failure, and communicative distortion (Gore, 2006, pp. 10–12); LS casts a civilizational crisis based on religious–spiritual decline under a "technocratic paradigm" (Francis, 2015); A2030 enumerates multidimensional crises, including inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation (UN, 2015, p. 8); PA foregrounds unambitious targets and implementation deficits around transparency and finance (UNFCCC, 2015, pp. 4–5); EGD diagnoses structurally "linear" economies alongside, unjust transitions, and accelerating

biodiversity loss (EU, 2019, p. 2); V2050 points at high costs, disinterest, and short-termism by firms, investors, policymakers, and individuals (WBCSD, 2021, p. 92); while CS highlights the androcentric development model as a systemic driver of ecological and social breakdown (ECLAC, 2022, p. 23).

The frame selects specific causes and attributes responsibility, constructing sustainability as a critical situation caused by specific elements and actors. Causal attributions include: immediate governance failures like lack of interlinked vision or slow responses (OCF, BT2020, AIT); historical-structural roots including colonial legacies (NEPAD, CS), cultural patterns like "rapidification" (BT2020, AIT, LS), patriarchal norms (CS), longstanding governance deficits (A2030, PA, EGD, V2050, CS), asymmetries (NEPAD, LS, A2030, EGD, V2050, CS), and capitalist failures (LS, A2030, EGD, V2050, CS), and long-term anthropocentric environmental impacts (OCF; AIT, LS, A2030, V2050, CS). Meanwhile, responsibility attributions vary: some texts emphasize individual behavior (AIT, LS); others political-institutional failures (OCF, A2030, PA); external national drivers (BT2020, NEPAD, CS); social-cultural-spiritual collective decline (BT2020, AIT, LS, CS); or economic actors and behaviors (EGD, V2050, CS).

The frame operates by constructing problems as irresolvable without fundamental transformation through narratives of the incapacity of current models. For example, when AIT names individual denial and communicative distortion as causes of a "planetary emergency" (Gore, 2006, p. 12), it appeals to individual conduct and moral persuasion. Likewise, when V2050 points to short-termism and value extraction, sustainability is cast as a necessary business-model change and system-level reform that needs to be acted "now" (WBCSD, 2021, p. 4). This evidences how the frame also employs a critical and urgent tone to compel immediate action. OCF identifies nuclear war as "the greatest threat to the Earth's environment," while A2030 names "the tyranny of poverty and want". This critical and urgency operation converts perceived failures into prescribed action.

Accordingly, the Present Diagnosis functions as the existential imperative generator, rendering the present unacceptable and sustainability necessary. By exposing current models' incapacity through critical-urgent narratives, the frame constructs transformation not as an optional improvement but as an existential necessity. This imperative is contextually situated rather than universal. OCF addresses late Cold War anxieties; BT2020 resists globalization's homogenizing pressures; NEPAD names "colonialism" and "the workings of the international economic system" as structural constraints (African-Union, 2001, p. 5). AIT confronts climate skepticism and communicative distortion in times of a presidential election (Gore, 2006, p. 260). Post-2008 financial crisis texts (LS, PA, A2030) diagnose moral decadence, "the tyranny of poverty and want" (UN, 2015, p. 5), unassimilated economic lessons (Francis, 2015, p. 81), and inadequate financial flows (UNFCCC, 2015). EGD positions Europe as a sustainability leader, emphasizing "time to act together"(EU, 2019, p. 22). Post-pandemic texts (V2050, CS) diagnose structural vulnerabilities surfaced by COVID-19, particularly around economic models and care organization (ECLAC, 2022, p. 17; WBCSD, 2021, p. 18). This makes the historical moment and geographical location determine the constitutive problems of sustainability, revealing the concept as a situated political

discourse. Yet across this variation, the frame consistently generates an existential imperative by demonstrating why sustainability must be adopted, thereby legitimizing the Prognostic Pathway.

1.5.7 Prognostic Pathway Frame

The Prognostic Pathway frame signifies sustainability by articulating transition strategies that specify how to bridge the temporal gap between the diagnosed present and the predetermined future, *Appendix A3.3*. Each text proposes multi-dimensional solutions: OCF introduces "sustainable development" via seven strategic imperatives and institutional change; BT2020 proposes the "Gross National Happiness Index" with twelve foundational assets; NEPAD advances an "African-led Action Partnership" with preconditions, goals, and sectoral priorities; AIT advocates "Climate Action through Awareness" via lifestyle changes and ethical transformation; LS proposes "Integral Ecology" combining cultural, spiritual, and educational shifts; A2030 establishes 17 "Sustainable Development Goals" (SDGs) with 169 targets; PA creates an "International Climate Agreement" through National Determine Contributions (NDCs) and transparency and financing frameworks; EGD presents a "European Green Deal" via eight initiatives and governance priorities; V2050 advances "Business-led Systems Transformation" through nine pathways and three mindset shifts; while CS proposes "Sustainability of Life" through four types of care and co-responsibility.

The pathways specify concurrent interventions across domains. Most translate change through institutional instruments: quantifiable goals like NEPAD's maternal mortality reduction targets; comprehensive frameworks like A2030's 169 targets; policy innovations like EGD's Climate Law; or evaluative tools like BT2020's Happiness Index and PA's NDCs. Others emphasize normative transformations: reconnecting with Buddhist beliefs (BT2020), modifying daily practices (AIT), achieving spiritual-ecological "conversion" (LS), shifting thinking systems (V2050), or deconstructing patriarchal roles (CS). The depth of change varies from reformist, such as strengthening existing institutions in OCF, NEPAD, PA, to transformative, like BT2020's civilizational transformation through Gross National Happiness; LS's integral "ecological conversion"; or CS's contestation of the capital-accumulation model by "prioritizing the sustainability of life over the accumulation of capital".-

The Prognostic Pathways frame operates by bridging present and future, functioning as a disciplinary mechanism that constrains action within the boundaries established by the other two frames. Pathways are delimited by the motivations generated through Present Diagnosis and the evaluative criteria established by Envisioned Future. For instance, when aspiring toward a net-zero society, climate warming is foregrounded as the principal challenge, thereby authorizing emissions management interventions while simultaneously circumscribing the scope of legitimate action (PA, EGD). This interrelated operation shapes how sustainability itself is signified. When texts prioritize institutional instruments (OCF, A2030, PA), sustainability becomes a technocratic agenda; when they emphasize normative transformation (AIT, LA, V2050, CS), it becomes a moral obligation, a behavioral-cultural shift, or a cultural movement.

This operation also works in agency attribution, which further determines who is authorized to act. Some texts emphasize governmental action through institutional capacity and regulatory frameworks (OCF, BT2020, NEPAD, PA, EGD). Others focus on cultural change and citizen action (AIT, LS): "each one of us can make choices to change that" (Gore, 2006); "what they all need is an 'ecological conversion'" (Francis, 2015). Others follow multi-stakeholder approaches (A2030, CS): "the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society" (UN, 2015). While V2050 leverages businesses: "Business Action can drive the key transformations needed" (WBCSD, 2021). These divergent attributions reveal content disagreements over who holds legitimate power to enact change. Yet structurally, they operate in the same way: by designating authorized actors, they simultaneously legitimize certain forms of agency while foreclosing and excluding others.

Overall, the Prognostic Pathway functions as the gatekeeping device that specifies how the temporal gap between deficient present and predetermined future is to be bridged. This gatekeeping operates by authorizing what counts as legitimate action while excluding alternatives as insufficient or irrelevant. Pathways are authorized only insofar as their remedies align with the future's evaluative criteria and demonstrably address the diagnosed deficits. So when BT2020 envisions happiness-centered development and diagnoses GDP-dependence and cultural erosion, only pathways that introduce Gross National Happiness and preserve Buddhist identity are authorized as legitimate. Similarly, when CS envisions a care society and diagnoses androcentrism, only pathways that deconstruct patriarchal norms and prioritize care are rendered legitimate. Conversely, when pathways fail to meet these conditions, when they do not address diagnosed causes or achieve envisioned criteria, they become not merely misaligned but illegible, systematically excluded from consideration. The frame thus completes sustainability's discourse by making the future appear attainable through specific, disciplined interventions.

1.5.8 Interlinked Operation: Constructing Discursive Coherence

Beyond the analysis of individual frames, our study reveals that sustainability's discursive coherence emerges through the relational architecture connecting all three frames. Figure 3.1 visualizes this construction by positioning each frame according to its function within the backcasting structure. The Envisioned Future (right) operates as the **normative-motivational** anchor by establishing **endpoint criteria** that **define what sustainability should be**, both qualitatively through values, principles, or visions, and quantitatively through targets, thresholds, or metrics. The Present Diagnosis (left) functions as the **existential imperative generator** by populating the frame with **causes, problems, and responsible** actors, operating through narratives that portray **current models as inadequate** while adopting a **critical and urgent tone** to justify transformation. For its part, the Prognostic Pathway (bottom) serves as the **gatekeeping device** that **bridges present and future** through specified **strategies and agency** attributions.

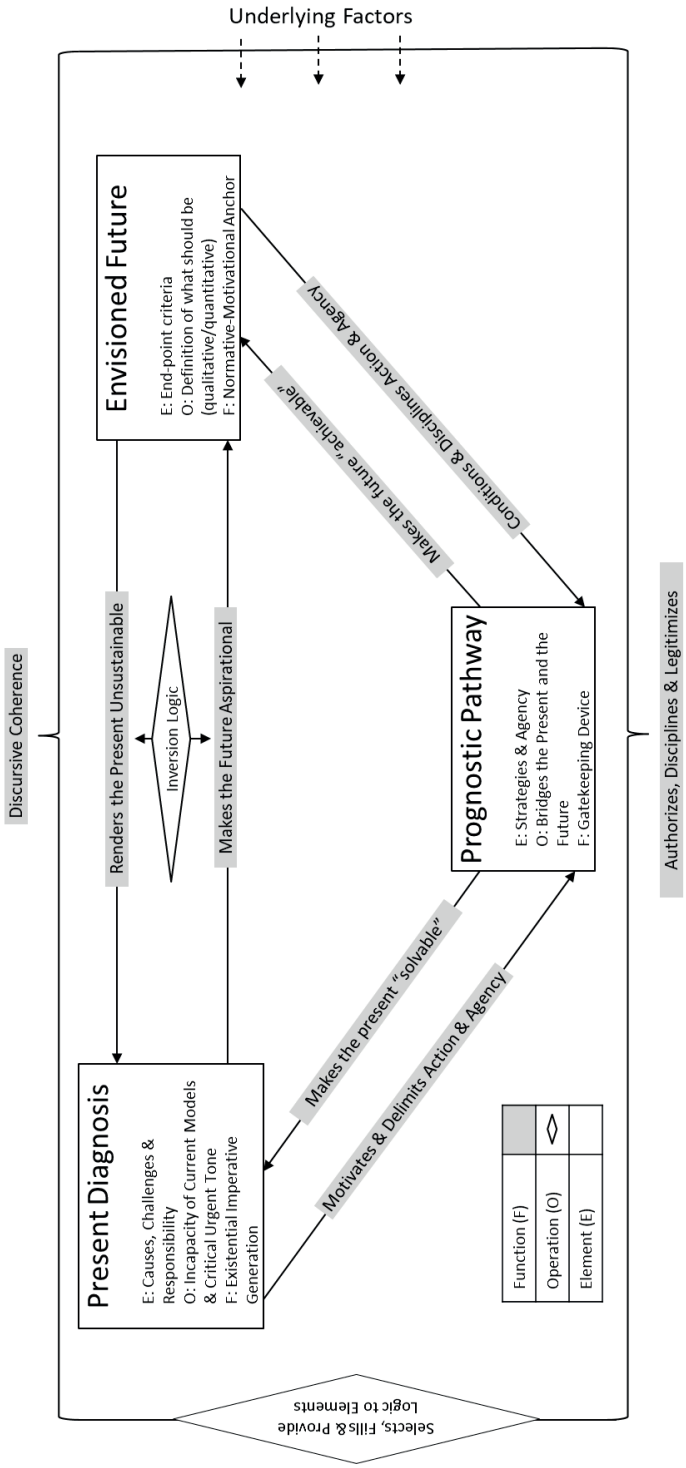


Figure 3.1. Backcasting Frame

In terms of their interrelated operation, the **inversion logic** connecting the Envisioned Future and Present Diagnosis reflects how these frames mutually constitute one another through bidirectional influence. The future's predefined criteria retrospectively construct the present as its negation, authorizing which aspects of current reality count as **unsustainable**. For example, where the future envisions a circular economy, the diagnosis identifies linear production (EGD); or where the future envisions a care society, the diagnosis identifies androcentrism (CS). The future thus **norms** the diagnosis by determining what becomes visible as a crisis. Conversely, the Present Diagnosis transforms the Envisioned Future by converting it into a demanded horizon rather than a distant vision through **critical-urgent tones** that emphasize **current models' incapacity**. This makes the future appear not merely desirable but required for survival (AIT), justice (A2030, EGD, CS), or morality (LS), thereby **motivating** action. This bidirectional coupling means neither frame can function independently: the diagnosis requires the future's criteria to identify what counts as unsustainable, while the future requires the diagnosis's imperative to appear necessary rather than arbitrary, thereby motivating action.

This is why the Prognostic Pathway plays a key role between these frames, as it determines which actions are legitimate and who is authorized to act, thereby converting abstract diagnosis and distant horizon into concrete interventions. Yet pathways are authorized only when they satisfy two simultaneous conditions: (1) they must address the causes, problems, and responsibilities identified in the Present Diagnosis, making the present appear manageable, and therefore, **solvable**, and (2) they must align with the endpoint criteria of the Envisioned Future, making the future appear achievable rather than merely aspirational. So when V2050 diagnoses short-termism, pathways introduce long-term value thinking to make regenerative capitalism seem feasible, showing how pathways' bridging function is **conditional** on alignment with both frames. This dual **constraint** explains the frame's position at the diagram's base, as it simultaneously shapes and is constrained by the other frames, **motivating action and agency** while being **delimited** by them. This bridging function, however, also reveals why pathways failing either condition are excluded; as alternatives outside the frame's interrelated operation are **disciplined** by the normative criteria that **delimit action and agency**. So, when texts prioritize governmental regulation (OCF, PA, EGD), they marginalize individual action as insufficient; and when texts center on citizen transformation (AIT, LS), they delegitimize state actions as inadequate or insufficient. This attribution is not a neutral description but a political operation that authorizes certain agencies and solutions while excluding others from sustainability discourse.

Figure 3.1 thus visualizes how sustainability achieves **discursive coherence** through futuring architecture rather than semantic stability or consensus. This is achieved by **selecting, filling, and deciding the logic of elements** populating each frame and their interrelated operation. These elements do not arise independently; our findings show they are linked to what we term **underlying factors,** such as temporality, geography, ethics, intentions, and ideologies, as evidenced by when OCF's Cold War context populates the diagnosis with nuclear threats and the future with a peaceful and harmonic society. This combination enables sustainability to function as a seemingly coherent

political discourse that can adapt to diverse agendas and contexts. Through this adaptability, the backcasting frame **authorizes, disciplines, and legitimizes** identities, agency, challenges, goals, and interventions, thereby constituting sustainability as a managerial-transition discourse. This managerial orientation, however, simultaneously facilitates and constrains articulation, as while it motivates interventions by rendering transformation necessary and achievable, it produces an unilinear discourse that imposes specific problems, objectives, trajectories, and roles, marginalizing alternatives through structural exclusion. So the frame legitimizes sustainability without requiring consensus, while disciplining alternatives without appearing closed.

1.5 DISCUSSION

This study set out to explain how sustainability discourse attains coherence and political durability despite the persistent absence of semantic consensus. Across a corpus of ten temporally, geographically, and authorially heterogeneous texts, our analysis shows that sustainability is not stabilized through shared meaning, ontological agreement, or definitional closure. The concept shifts from Buddhist happiness frameworks to technocratic climate targets, from spiritual-ecological reconciliation to business-led transformation. Instead, sustainability is rendered coherent through a shared futuring architecture that links Envisioned Futures, Present Diagnoses, and Prognostic Pathways. This finding reinforces post-structuralist scholarship that treats sustainability as a constructed discourse rather than a stable concept or objective condition (Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019; Mouffe, 2023), while extending it by specifying the structural logic through which provisional coherence is achieved.

Previous floating and empty signifier characterizations of sustainability (Atkins, 2017; Brown, 2015; Kögl & Kurze, 2013) have correctly identified sustainability's openness to multiple and even contradictory appropriations of the term, yet they have not engaged enough in how such openness produces rather than prevents the operational coherence and stability the term has acquired over more than three decades. Our findings confirm sustainability's floating and empty qualities but advance these interpretations by showing how sustainability is open to signification, but it is not structurally indeterminate. Every text in our corpus, from Our Common Future (WCED, 1987) to The Care Society (ECLAC, 2022), articulates sustainability through a backcasting logic.

This insight addresses a central puzzle in sustainability scholarship (Atkins, 2017; Brown, 2015; Kögl & Kurze, 2013; Shi et al., 2019): how can a concept that attaches to nearly anything, serves divergent and competing goals, and is appropriated by actors with opposing interests nonetheless retain political traction and global recognizability? Our analysis reveals that sustainability's coherence and stability stem not from ontological agreement or semantic consensus (Purvis et al., 2018; Salas Zapata & Ortiz Muñoz, 2018), but from structural coordination, from a futuring architecture that accommodates contextual and even contradictory content while maintaining discursive legibility across contexts through shared

structural elements. Our findings demonstrate how actors disagree fundamentally about what must be sustained, why, and through which means, yet their discourses remain recognizable as "sustainable" because they construct the future, present, and pathways in similar ways. So, the criticized “fuzziness” and ambiguity of sustainability (Salas Zapata & Ortiz Muñoz, 2018; Shi et al., 2019) can be read as the very enabler that has made sustainability generate performative coherence and political relevance over more than three decades through Envisioned Futures, Present Diagnoses, and Prognostic Pathways.

This architectural perspective also clarifies how our contribution differs from existing structural models of sustainability. Much of the literature has sought to organize sustainability by identifying discrete components, such as thematic pillars (Dalampira & Nastis 2020; Purvis et al., 2018), agency models (Kortetmäki & Huttunen, 2023; Middlemiss, 2014), solution typologies (Frank, 2016; Puttock et al., 2025), or normative assemblies (Burkhardt, 1989; Yamada et al., 2022). While these approaches identify important organizing principles, they tend to fragment what our analysis reveals as an integrated architecture. By treating elements as autonomous categories, they overlook how sustainability gains political force through the relations among elements and their positioning within a shared futuring logic.

Our findings demonstrate that these elements do not function as independent organizing principles but as content-filling structural positions whose meaning derives from their location within the backcasting architecture. When read through a futures lens (Dryzek, 2013; Hay, 1999; Seefried, 2015), this architecture does more than organize sustainability discourse; it structures how futures are anticipated and rendered actionable in the present. Sustainability discourse operates as a mode of futuring insofar as it organizes temporal relations between present, future, and intervention in ways that govern anticipation itself. As scholarship on anticipatory governance and temporal politics has noted, dominant modes of anticipation do not merely describe possible futures but actively participate in producing them by delimiting what can be imagined, debated, and acted upon (Dryzek, 2013; Hay, 1999; Seefried, 2015). Our analysis shows that sustainability’s coherence rests on precisely such a futuring logic.

This explains why sustainability persistently appears as a managerial-transitional discourse, not because management is inherent to the concept, but because this orientation is a structural effect of its discursive architecture. While previous scholarship has linked sustainability's managerial orientation to implementation strategies (Elkington, 1994; Raworth, 2018; Rockström et al., 2009), our findings demonstrate that manageability is inscribed at the level of discourse itself. Through backcasting, we exposed how sustainability constructs a discourse that motivates and legitimizes particular actions, allocates agency, and authorizes specific goals (Dryzek, 2013; Hay, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2010). This shifts the analytical focus from viewing management as an application of sustainability to understanding manageability as inscribed into the very way sustainability is articulated.

This makes the translation of backcasting from a planning and policy-formulation method (Bibri, 2018; Holmberg, 1998; Robinson, 1982) into a discursive futuring frame necessary. We deploy this translation to reveal how sustainability discourse operates through a futuring architecture that privileges endpoint-defined horizons, linear trajectories, and future-oriented pathways. Through this architecture, imagination is disciplined, and the range of conceivable futures is narrowed. As our findings showed, emergent, cyclical, relational, or non-instrumental temporalities are not explicitly rejected; rather, they become structurally unintelligible within the dominant framing, as critical scholarship has noted (Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019; Stirling et al., 2023). These effects are not accidental distortions of sustainability discourse but structural consequences of its underlying architecture.

Within this futuring architecture, Envisioned Futures do not merely establish what should be achieved as a prescriptive goal (Holmberg, 1998; Robinson, 1982); they retrospectively construct what counts as crisis in the present. In this sense, the normative horizon works backward through time, disciplining diagnosis before diagnostic claims are even articulated. Present Diagnosis, in turn, performs problem definition as expected, but it also amplifies inadequacy and urgency (Hay, 1999), transforming distant futures from aspirational visions into existential imperatives. Present Diagnoses extend this disciplinary logic by foregrounding certain challenges, themes, and responsible actors, thus, guiding where and how transformation should occur through two recurrent mechanisms: portraying crises as interconnected and insoluble within existing arrangements, and invoking urgency that constrains deliberation (Hay, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2010).

In this way, diagnoses do not merely describe unsustainability; they produce it as a condition demanding intervention along pre-authorized pathways (Carant, 2017). While pathways are often presented as strategic solutions or technical instruments (Bibri, 2018; Martens & Rotmans, 2005; Redclift, 2005), our analysis shows that they function as gatekeeping devices that authorize particular actors, interventions, and forms of knowledge while rendering alternatives illegible. Pathways are deemed legitimate only insofar as they align simultaneously with diagnosed problems and envisioned criteria. In this way, they do not merely bridge present and future; they actively constitute what can count as sustainable action and who can act legitimately. This gatekeeping function exceeds remedy identification and conventional prognostic framing (Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1988), revealing how pathways operate as selective and disciplinary filters that make the future appear achievable and the present solvable. In doing so, they advance backcasting scholarship (Bibri, 2018; Holmberg, 1998) by demonstrating that pathway formulation is not a neutral step in planning but a constitutive discursive operation that shapes agency, authority, and possibility within sustainability discourse.

Taken together, these dynamics generate a constitutive temporal loop in which each frame retrospectively and prospectively constructs the others, rendering their intelligibility mutually dependent. This simultaneity contrasts with classical framing models, which treat diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational functions as sequential (Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1988), as well

as with backcasting literature that presents steps as ordered methodological stages (Bibri, 2018). In sustainability discourse, these operations function concurrently, producing coherence through interdependence rather than linear progression.

This insight sets the stage for unexpected findings about the backcasting architecture itself. Our analysis revealed that the same structural consistency and radical openness that enable sustainability to have a coordinated stability across time, authorships, and contexts, also constitute its primary vulnerability. While critical scholarship has long warned that framing sustainability as a managerial project organized around a normatively defined futuring architecture generates closure, exclusion, and appropriation (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 1995; Leff, 2019; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2010; Tellería, 2025), our analysis shows that these limitations are not merely accompanying effects. Rather, the very features that secure sustainability's coherence simultaneously render it vulnerable to appropriation by actors pursuing incompatible objectives. Our findings showed that organizations and governments mobilize the backcasting architecture to legitimize incremental, managerial, or strategic sustainability claims, while activists and moral authorities, such as Al Gore or Pope Francis, deploy the very same architecture to demand radical transformation. Both articulations remain structurally legible because the backcasting frame imposes no semantic constraints, yet it governs form rather than content. In this sense, the exclusions and appropriations identified by earlier scholarship are not external distortions of sustainability discourse but structural effects of the architectural conditions that make sustainability discursively coherent in the first place.

This structural vulnerability has profound geographic and epistemic implications. Despite our corpus including texts from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe, the backcasting architecture consistently privileges discourses of progress, development, and managerial control oriented toward future end-states, regardless of regional origin. The backcasting frame performs its own exclusions before any specific content is articulated, as by transforming sustainability from an open discourse about human-environment relations into a technical problem requiring managed interventions, it renders alternative temporal logics, non-linear pathways, and fundamentally different relationships between present and future structurally illegible. This privileges rationalist, linear, and goal-oriented thinking while marginalizing contexts, ontologies, and epistemologies that differ from it (Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019), maintaining an exclusionary and unilinear discourse that prevents, from its very foundation, the inclusion of alternative articulations, particularly non-Western epistemologies, as critical scholarship has noted (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 1995; Feola et al., 2021; Jacobsson, 2019; Malik, 2025; Mazutis et al., 2020; Todaro & Torelli, 2024; Toft & Hansen, 2025). This structural constraint raises the question of whether we need to reformulate how sustainability is discursively constructed or accept that full inclusion may be impossible within current architectural parameters.

Our analysis thus reveals a foundational paradox at the heart of sustainability discourse, as the same backcasting architecture that enables global coordination, adaptability, implementation, and political

durability simultaneously embeds structural constraints that delimit who can speak, which problems are rendered necessary, which futures appear legitimate, and what forms of action and agency are authorized (Escobar, 2014; Jacobsson, 2019; Tellería, 2025). Accordingly, sustainability's political relevance does not derive solely from its floating or empty character (Atkins, 2017; Brown, 2015; Kögl & Kurze, 2013), but from a structurally consistent futuring architecture that organizes anticipation across heterogeneous temporalities, authorships, and contexts while simultaneously enabling exclusion, strategic appropriation, and the concealment of contradictions and incompatibilities (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 1995; Stirling et al., 2023). By making this architecture explicit, we show that sustainability's coherence is not the product of shared meaning but a discursive accomplishment of futuring, through which futures are rendered thinkable, actionable, and governable in advance. Recognizing this dual operation clarifies why repeated attempts to pluralize or democratize sustainability encounter structural limits that precede substantive debate, raising more fundamental questions about how futuring practices, including discursive constructions, themselves might be reconfigured if sustainability is to be enacted in genuinely inclusive ways.

1.6 CONCLUSION

Over nearly four decades, sustainability has achieved global prominence while remaining embedded in what many describe as a contested and "fuzzy" discursive field (Shi et al., 2019). This study addressed the paradox of how a concept lacking semantic consensus nonetheless attains coherence and political relevance across diverse contexts, authorships, and geographic regions. Rather than pursuing definitional clarity or ontological consensus, endeavors that have repeatedly proven elusive (Purvis et al., 2018; Salas Zapata & Ortiz Muñoz, 2018; Shi et al., 2019), we shifted analytical attention to the discursive architecture through which sustainability is constructed and made operationally coherent.

Drawing on post-structuralist discourse theory (Ainsworth, 2020; Escobar, 2014; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 2007), we reconceptualized backcasting from a transition-planning methodology (Bibri, 2018; Holmberg, 1998; Robinson, 1982) into a discursive futuring frame composed of three interlinked elements: Envisioned Futures, Present Diagnoses, and Prognostic Pathways. Through qualitative frame analysis of ten influential political texts (1987–2022) produced by multilateral organizations, governments, religious institutions, and corporate actors across Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and global governance arenas, we demonstrated that sustainability consistently gains coherence through this shared futuring architecture.

Despite radical variation in content, political orientation, and geographic origin, all texts organized sustainability through the same triadic structure. Envisioned Futures establish normative horizons that retrospectively define what counts as unsustainable in the present (Dryzek, 2013; Seefried, 2015). Present Diagnoses frame current conditions as interconnected crises demanding transformation,

converting distant futures into existential imperatives (Hay, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2010). Prognostic Pathways function as gatekeeping devices that authorize particular actors, interventions, and forms of knowledge while rendering alternatives structurally illegible (Feola et al., 2021; Lencucha et al., 2023). Through these interdependent operations, sustainability achieves performative coherence rather than substantive consensus, enabling heterogeneous actors to participate in sustainability discourse while pursuing incompatible objectives.

This futuring architecture is not neutral. By privileging linear, goal-oriented temporalities and solutionist logics, it marginalizes epistemologies grounded in emergence, relationality, and non-instrumental values (Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019). Despite the geographic diversity of the corpus, the frame consistently privileges Western paradigms of progress, development, and management, confirming long-standing critiques (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 2014; Jacobsson, 2019; Mulindwa, 2020) while specifying the structural mechanisms through which such exclusions are produced.

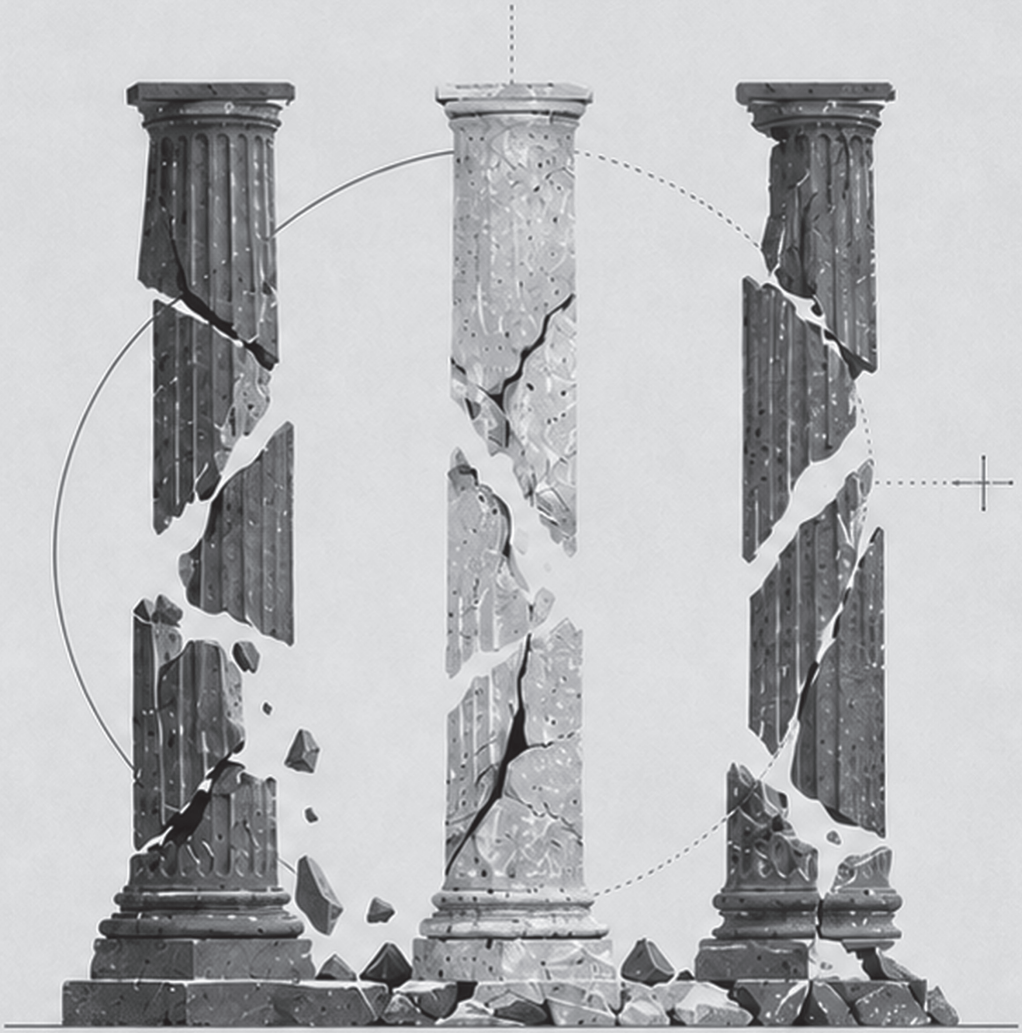
By making this architecture explicit, the article contributes to sustainability and futures scholarship in three ways. Conceptually, it demonstrates that sustainability's political durability rests on discursive structure rather than semantic agreement. Theoretically, it advances futures studies by showing that backcasting operates not only as a planning technique but as a dominant futuring logic that structures anticipation, agency, and legitimacy. Empirically, it offers a comparative analysis that reveals deep structural consistency beneath surface heterogeneity. At the same time, the findings expose a central paradox: the very architecture that enables coordination and action simultaneously embeds exclusionary constraints, rendering sustainability coherent at the cost of structural closure.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The corpus excludes colloquial, indigenous, and grassroots articulations that may resist institutionalized futuring logics, and the synchronic design does not capture potential historical shifts in the architecture. Moreover, repurposing backcasting as a discursive futuring frame entails an analytic risk of foregrounding structure at the expense of contingency. These limitations open avenues for future research, including the study of alternative discursive architectures in non-institutional contexts, diachronic analyses of futuring logics, and comparative work examining whether the apparent universality of backcasting reflects structural necessity or institutional path dependence.

For practice, the implications are deliberately ambivalent. The backcasting frame facilitates coordination by linking crisis, aspiration, and intervention, offering governance actors a powerful resource for mobilization. Yet this same architecture disciplines alternatives and remains vulnerable to strategic appropriation, risking the transformation of sustainability into a performative discourse that stabilizes inequalities while masking contradiction. These tensions raise foundational questions for futures and sustainability governance alike: Must collective futures be organized through linear, endpoint-driven temporalities? Can sustainability be enacted without reproducing managerial exclusions? What

alternative futuring architectures might accommodate plural epistemologies, relational ontologies, and non-Western cosmologies without translating them into developmental logics?

Until such questions are addressed, backcasting should be understood not as an impartial analytical tool or neutral futuring logic, but as a political discursive strategy whose deployment structures what futures can be imagined, governed, and legitimized (Escobar, 2014; Laclau, 2001; Stavrakakis, 2007). The question, then, is no longer only how sustainability discourse is articulated, as this study has shown, but whether sustainability should continue to work this way and for whom.



Chapter 4

Opening Closures: Organizational Arrangements and Moral Articulations in Institutional Global Hegemonic and Local Counter-hegemonic Sustainability Discourses

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates how institutional sustainability discourses enact closure through logocentric operations that structurally marginalize alterity. We argue that closure is not contingent upon geographical origin or ideological-power positioning but constitutes a structural feature of institutional discourses, manifesting equally in Global Hegemonic Discourses (GHD) and Local Counter-hegemonic Discourses (LChD). We identify two interlocking discursive mechanisms that produce closure: Organizational Arrangements (OAS), which establish hierarchical orders and internal dynamics in a dominant meaning structure; and Moral Articulations (MAs), which bind values and identities through normative imperatives that discipline inclusion and regulate exclusion. To expose how closure operates through these mechanisms, we engage with deconstruction as an ethical practice. We apply it through a double-reading strategy, comprising Double Commentary and Disruptive Reading, to two institutional texts: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) and The Care Society (ECLAC, 2022). Our readings reveal how OAs and MAs collaborate to constitute, impose, and legitimize particular interpretations of sustainability, rendering alterity unintelligible, contrarian to the dominant discourse, and morally deficient from its very emergence. Through our readings, we unveiled that OAs-MAs function not merely to establish structural positions, internal logics, and disciplinary and regulatory actions, but to prevent inclusion, police alterity, naturalize authority, conceal differánces and aporias, and mask structural incompleteness. Our contribution lies in opening closures, exposing them as structural conditions of logocentric discourse-making. Deconstruction proved essential for opening the closures in institutional sustainability discourses, foregrounding its constitutive inclusion/exclusions and affirming an ethical responsibility toward that which remains unrepresented, excluded, and yet to come.

Keywords: Sustainability, Discourse studies, Deconstruction, Derrida, Organizational arrangements, moral articulations, Hegemonic &. Counter-hegemonic

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, societies have articulated diverse understandings of the human–nature relationship. Stoic Greek philosophers saw nature as a rational part of a unified cosmos (Papaioannou, 2024). Daoists in imperial China sought harmony among the ten thousand beings of the natural world (Miller, 2003). While Maya sacred texts, the Popol Vuh and the Chilam Balam, situated humans within a living, animated landscape (Morales Damian, 2010; Naranjo, 2004). The Industrial Revolution brought these longstanding reflections into political discourse (Kidd, 1992; Mensah & Ricart Casadevall, 2019), sparking the conversation about population growth and resource limits (Malthus, 1798), and decades later about pollution and planetary boundaries (Carson, 1962; Meadows et al., 1972). Yet, it was until the publication of the Our Common Future Report ((WCED), 1987), when sustainability emerged as a global discourse (Modak et al., 2022), integrating into a single discourse the complex challenges and dynamics between the environment and human needs across social and economic dimensions. Since then, the concept has proliferated through international agendas such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (African-Union, 2001); the Declaration of Santa Cruz+10 (OAS, 2006); the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015); or the European Green Deal (EU, 2019), giving rise to multiple interpretations of sustainability.

Despite their apparent openness, international sustainability discourses have been observed to become exclusionary when institutionalized, systematically marginalizing plural epistemologies and alternative socio-political imaginaries (Ala-Uddin, 2019; Arora-Jonsson, 2023; Escobar, 1995, 2014; Leff, 2019; Shiva, 1988). These exclusionary tendencies are particularly evident in Global Hegemonic Discourses (GHDs) on sustainability (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018), which are primarily shaped in and by the so-called Global North, privileging anthropocentric perspectives, technocratic expertise, and market-oriented logics to present universalized strategies and visions (Arias-Maldonado, 2013; Jacobsson, 2019; Kashwan et al., 2021; Reuter, 2023; Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2021). In doing so, GHDs often exclude context-specific knowledges and alternative ontologies (Arora, 2023; Leff, 2008; Mulindwa, 2020) that resist assimilation into dominant epistemic regimes or institutional contexts. Less frequently acknowledged, however, is that these exclusionary tendencies are not confined to institutional GHDs (Carroll, 2007; Filc, 2020). Empirical studies show that Local Counter-hegemonic Discourses (LChDs) can also reproduce hierarchies that privilege dominant identities and symbolic orders, sidelining populations and elements that do not conform to their internal logic, such as urban communities or economic elites (Manson Meier, 2016; Ribadeneira Aroca, 2020; Van der Walt & Oosthuizen, 2021), thereby reproducing the exclusionary tendencies of GHDs. LChDs on sustainability can also marginalize other interpretations, even when they are recognized for including relegated voices, cultural traditions, historical experiences, and other contextual specificities that challenge—partially or completely—hegemonic paradigms (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018). This tendency suggests that institutional sustainability discourses are structurally predisposed to exclusion, regardless of their geographical origin, whether global or local, or their ideological-power positioning, whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic.

The exclusionary tendencies of institutional sustainability discourses have been extensively examined through their entanglement with power relations, epistemic hierarchies, economic prioritization, and strategies of institutional legitimation (Arias-Maldonado, 2013; Auad & Fath, 2022; Escobar, 1995, 2014; Kashwan et al., 2021; Leff, 2019; Vries, 2013). Although much of this research focuses on GHDs, it has advanced ideological critiques (Arora, 2023; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Mota Díaz & Sandoval Forero, 2016), exposed inherent contradictions (Bick & Keele, 2022; Hickel, 2019; Redclift, 2005), identified silenced voices (Banerjee, 2003; Mulindwa, 2020; Yamada et al., 2022), and revealed sustainability's anthropocentric, neoliberal, or political biases (Davies, 2020; Jacobsson, 2019; Leff, 2019; Lockwood, 2018). Despite these significant contributions, few studies interrogate how exclusions are enacted at the level of discourse construction itself. Existing research has examined discursive articulations (Atkins, 2017; Kögl & Kurze, 2013), discursive functions and dynamics (Ainsworth, 2020; Argento et al., 2022), and power relations embedded in language (Brown, 2015; Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2021; Yasmin & Amin, 2024). However, research has not focused on exclusions as a constitutive element of discursive structures themselves. While some efforts gesture toward this direction (Clark, 2020; Clark & Lynes, 2023; Dragicevic, 2018; Fritsch et al., 2018; Shokoohyar et al., 2023; Telleria, 2020; Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2021), none explicitly examine how sustainability's internal discursive architecture operates through structural mechanisms to impose limits that foreclose alternative interpretations through its very discursive structure.

Our contribution lies in opening institutional sustainability's "closure" (Critchley, 2014; Derrida, 1967), that is, structural formations that systematically marginalize from their discursive structure all that does not conform to their internal logic. We theorize that institutional sustainability discourses enact closure because of their logocentric orientation, a tradition in Western rationality, which operates through the metaphysics of presence, producing discourses that appear coherent, complete, and self-evident, thereby imposing seemingly universal, sufficient, and transcendental truths (Caputo & Derrida, 1997, pp. 11–12, 49 49; Derrida, 1967, pp. 136–137). Logocentrism anchors meaning to a central, authoritative presence, around which a play of signs occurs, resulting in the construction of dominant structures. Only meanings that reinforce or conform to this structure are included, while those that challenge, resist, or fall outside its logics are deferred, becoming alterity or otherness. We contend that institutional discourses on sustainability rely on two discursive mechanisms to put in operation closure: Organizational Arrangements (OAS), which establish the hierarchical order and internal logics inside the structure (Derrida, 1978, pp. 278–280); and Moral Articulations (MAs), which bind values, identities, and practices through normative imperatives to discipline inclusion and regulate exclusions (Ariansen, 1999; Kibert et al., 2012; Yamada et al., 2022). Together, we claim, the work to define, fix, and legitimize what is and what is not sustainability.

We explore our arguments by reading two types of institutional discourses, GHDs and LChDs (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018), to show that closure is not determined by geographical origin or ideological-power positioning but by logocentrism. The selected texts are the GHD The 2030 Agenda

for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) and the LChD The Care Society: A Horizon for Sustainable Recovery with Gender Equality (ECLAC, 2022). We read them using deconstruction as an ethical practice, a reading commitment towards the alterities foreclosed (Critchley, 2014; Derrida, 1988). We apply it through two readings, Double Commentary and Disruptive Reading, tracing how the OAs and MAs mechanisms operate in tandem. In doing so, we reveal how these discourses delineate the limits of who and what can be thought, said, and enacted in the name of sustainability, thereby opening the closures that marginalize alterity.

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LOGOCENTRISM & DECONSTRUCTION AS AN ETHICAL PRACTICE

In institutional sustainability discourses, closure does not mark the end of meaning but names the structural operation through which a system presents itself as coherent, complete, and self-evident (Critchley, 2014; Derrida, 1978, p. 280). Closure can be understood as an effect of logocentrism, a tradition in Western rationality that anchors meaning to a privileged origin or central presence, endowing it with authority and producing the illusion of coherent and stable meanings (Derrida, 1978, p. 280). The central presence anchors meaning through a play of signs, where circulating signifiers are drawn into a constructed discursive structure. The signifiers that reinforce the central presence are incorporated and organized within the structure, compelled to conform to its norms, hierarchies, and internal logics. Meanwhile, signifiers that disrupt the structure's apparent coherence and stability—such as contradictions, inconsistencies, or competing epistemologies—are excluded and repressed as external to the system, becoming alterity or otherness (Critchley, 2014, pp. 4–6). Through this operation, logocentrism establishes fixed discursive limits, closing the discourse to what lies beyond them (Derrida, 1967, p. 51). What is produced are discourses that perform coherence and totality, staging themselves as exhaustive and therefore sufficient, universally valid, and immune to context, time, and intentions.

The metaphysics of presence, a logic within logocentrism, governs the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion sustaining meaning structures by establishing the criteria for what can be incorporated into it and what must be excluded. This logic is grounded in a specific theory of the sign, where each sign is presumed to consist of a signifier, the material form of meaning such as a word or symbol, that corresponds directly and naturally to a signified, the concept it represents (Derrida, 1967, pp. 11–15). This presumed unity produces seemingly stable structures that privilege presence, that is, immediately available, self-contained, and independent meanings that transcend any context, temporality, intentions, epistemology or ontology (Derrida, 1967, pp. 20–23). In other words, the metaphysics of presence assumes that meanings are self-evident, truthfully declared, transparently materialized, and inherently available to those approaching it, existing before the construction of any structure and regardless of any external factor (Derrida, 1967, pp. 49–65). As such, each signifier is presumed to point

toward a final, authoritative source of meaning, securing the coherence and universality of the structure as a totalizing force (Derrida, 1967, pp. 20–23).

This dominance of presence privileges signifiers that align with its logic, elevating them over those considered implicit, opaque, situated, partial, incoherent, or resistant to assimilation (Derrida, 1967, pp. 160–165), actively rendering such alternatives absent within the structure. Through this presence/absence logic, discourse is produced by oppositional differentiation, constructing binary pairs such as nature/culture or life/death, where the first term is treated as originary and self-present, and the second as derivative or supplementary (Derrida, 1978, p. 279; 1988), allowing for its deferral from the structure. To clarify, by relying on the metaphysics of presence, logocentrism differentiates and defers signifiers within and outside discursive structures, a process known as différance (differentiate + defer) (Derrida, 1967, pp. 61–65). In doing so, it systematically excludes alterity by stabilizing discourses in rigid, closed structures, thereby marginalizing alterity. However, this very attempt at stabilization inevitably generates aporias, internal contradictions, moments of instability, that expose the limits of the structure itself (Derrida, 1978, pp. 281–285), which, when spotted, can open the closure apparently fixed.

Thus, despite the logocentric desire for presence and totality, closure is never absolute. It functions instead as a structural and authoritative operation that attempts to conceal the play of différance and suppress structural instability (Derrida, 1978). Yet because différance remains irreducible, every closure carries within it the trace of what it excludes, rendering the structure always vulnerable to opening.

1.3.1 Sustainability's Mechanisms of Closure

The closures enacted by institutional sustainability discourses are shaped through what we term mechanisms of closure, discursive operations that simultaneously organize meaning and function as instruments of limitation, exclusion, stabilization, and legitimization (Derrida, 1988, p. 58). Our study focuses on two particularly salient yet undertheorized mechanism: Organizational Arrangements (OAS) and Moral Articulations (MAs).

We define OAs as the mechanisms that structure the meaning of sustainability by determining the internal order and logic of its dominant discursive formation (Derrida, 1978, pp. 278–280). This involves establishing the hierarchical positioning of signifiers and defining their permissible relations and dynamics, which together sustain the illusion of the discourse's coherence, intelligibility, unity, and completeness (Derrida, 1988, p. 58). While OAs operate internally, their effects extend to the treatment of alterity, as they set the structural limits to defer, subordinate, or exclude signifiers that do not align with their dominant arrangement or cannot be positioned within its structured logic. For their part, we understand MAs as mechanisms that link particular practices, identities, goals, or actors by prioritizing and conferring specific moral systems and orders upon signifiers, whether rational (Burkhardt, 1989; Kant, 1991; Vereb, 2022), relational (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993; Zigon, 2024), affective (Ahmed & Khalidi, 2019; Mouffe, 2023), or any other contextual or cultural. In doing so, MAs discipline inclusion and

regulate exclusion, as by explicitly articulating what ought to be, they implicitly dictate what must not be. In doing so, they secure the discourse's closure through ethical justification, affective relevancy, and social desirability (Ariansen, 1999; Kibert et al., 2012; Yamada et al., 2022).

These two mechanisms are interlinked. OAs determine how a discourse is ordered and how its internal logic operates (Derrida, 1978), while MAs assign and reinforce the legitimacy and authority of discourses by disciplining inclusion and regulating exclusion (Burkhardt, 1989; Yamada et al., 2022). This means that once OAs position a particular signifier—centrally or marginally—within the discursive structure, MAs strengthen that position and its dynamics by articulating it as either morally acceptable or undesirable, thereby reinforcing the limits set by OAs. In this joint operation, inclusion and exclusion are not only structurally enacted but also morally justified. Alterity is thus not merely excluded for a perceived lack of coherence; it is often deferred, cast as morally deficient or suspect. For example, an OA that organizes a discourse around carbon pricing as the driving solution for climate change, structuring problems, goals, and actions around this concept (Bukowski & Kreissl, 2022; Carey, 2012), can employ MAs to reinforce this frame by casting carbon pricing as the most efficient and globally responsible choice. This amplifies logocentric closure, excluding alternatives like climate reparations or indigenous stewardship, not only for their lack of coherence with the dominant structure but also through moral delegitimization—implicitly rendering them irresponsible or ineffective. This example demonstrates how OAs and MAs work together to set and legitimize closure by framing the dominant discourse as both structurally coherent and morally virtuous, while casting alterity as incoherent and morally illegitimate.

1.3 RESEARCH STRATEGY

To expose the closures of institutional sustainability discourses, we adopt deconstruction as an ethical practice (Clines, 1995; Critchley, 2014). This is not a method of analysis, critique, or correction, but a mode of engagement with alterity. Its ethical dimension does not lie in moral prescriptions that imply a reader's ethical superiority or assign moral categories to signs, but in an unconditional commitment to the other (Critchley, 2014, pp. 68–69). Deconstruction thus becomes an ethical refusal of closure when it stays vigilant to what lacks representation, what was excluded and repressed, and the disruptive moments that might open closures.

This approach to deconstruction is suited to engaging with OAs and MAs because it reveals how institutional sustainability discourses are delimited through differentiation and deferral of alterity (Derrida, 1978, pp. 278–280). Rather than correcting or replacing these logics, deconstruction allow us to expose their functioning from within, tracing how discourses determine, organize, and moralize inclusion and exclusions through discursive mechanisms of closure. In doing so, deconstruction let us to identify closure not as failure, but as a condition of discursive constitution (Critchley, 2014, pp. 4–6; Derrida, 1995, p. 14). Our aim is not to replace dominant signifiers with repressed ones, nor to cast the

dominant as ethically flawed and the excluded as inherently virtuous; instead, we seek to unveil the operations enacted by OAs-MAs to draw limits, stabilize meaning, and foreclose themselves to alterity.

We apply this practice by reading from within discourses, examining both their declarative statements and what lies beyond them (Derrida, 1995, p. 14). We focus on tracking the discourses' differánces and aporias to expose how logocentric closure operates, as through these deconstructive elements we can reveal the instability embedded in seemingly rigid structures, identifying moments of rupture where alterity becomes visible, and thereby opening the closures that are constructed by institutional sustainability discourses.

1.4.2 Sample & Selection Criteria

To test our arguments we focus on institutional discourses, which can be understood as the organized and hierarchized deployment of language by institutions—such as governments or international organizations—that both shape and reflect power relations, norms, and behaviors, thereby sustaining institutional structures through interrelated interpretations (Mayr, 2015; Phillips et al., 2004).

We selected two different types of institutional discourses, GHD and LChD, which represent different geographical origins and ideological-power positions. To represent GHDs, we selected *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015), the most comprehensive and influential global sustainability discourse currently guiding international governance through 2030. The discourse has been noted for its universalist orientation and its reproduction of logocentric assumptions (Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2021), adhering to our argument. In contrast, to represent LChDs, we selected *The Care Society: A Horizon for Sustainable Recovery with Gender Equality*, developed by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2022). This is the first major UN policy text to position a value, "care", as central to sustainability, offering a feminist, context-sensitive perspective that departs from the technocratic approach of others GHDs.

What unifies these texts is their institutional authorship, political function, and agenda-driven structure, features that resonate with logocentrism, making the discourses ideal for a deconstructive practice.

1.4.3 Double Reading Strategy

We approach each discourse through a double reading strategy (Kakoliris, 2022b). This strategy does not operate in stages or steps but through two interrelated and iterable readings: one named *Double Commentary* (Derrida, 1988, p. 143), and the other one known as *Disruptive Reading* (Caputo & Derrida, 1997).

In the Double Commentary, we begin by tracking the discourse's language, structure, and logic. We mirror its terms, treating its central presence as the organizing origin and operative guide. We then identify the OAs that give the discourse structure coherence, alongside the MA that legitimizes

its closure. While multiple MAs may be active within a discourse, we focus on the one that sustains its central presence. This selective focus enables a targeted reading without the need to map every moral imperative, which exceeds the scope of this paper. In the Disruptive Reading, we attend to the moments where the discourse forecloses alterity, centering on the signifiers used. We trace how OAs and the selected MA work together to exclude and repress the other, reading for différance and aporias, its tensions and contradictions that both enable closure and reveal its instability.

We apply these two readings independently to each discourse, as our goal is not to compare them, but rather to reveal how the interlocked operation of OAs and MAs produces logocentric closures. To further delve into this, we revisit the Double Commentary and Disruptive Reading to identify the distinct operations through which OAs and MAs collaborate to enact closure, identifying how these closures are not only constructed but also function internally.

1.4 FINDINGS: EXPOSING THE CLOSURE

The findings are structured in two subsections, each dedicated to one text. We first present the findings of the Double Commentary and then proceed to expose the outcomes of our Disruptive Reading. At the end of the section, we present a joint reading of the discourse, presenting how OAs-MAs operationalized closure in the discourses.

1.5.4 Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development organizes its discourse around the central presence "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)," which are presented as a "shared" and "universal" "plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity (UN, 2015, pp. 5–6). SDGs comprise 17 "integral and indivisible" goals and 169 targets that "demonstrate the scale and ambition" of a renewed global partnership (UN, 2015, pp. 7–8). Their aim is to "realize the human rights of all" and to "achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls" within the context of a "healthy environment" (UN, 2015, p. 7).

In terms of its OAs, *The 2030 Agenda* explicitly affirms that it is built upon three "balanced" dimensions: economic, social, and environmental (UN, 2015, p. 7). While other peripheral dimensions such as technology, culture, and politics support this structure, they remain secondary to the core triad, acting as auxiliary elements. Regarding its moral articulation, the agenda grounds itself in rational morals, when adhering to international laws and principles, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Rio Declaration principles like "common but differentiated responsibilities" (UN, 2015, p. 8). Yet, some moral articulations suggest an inclination towards relational-care and affective ethics, exemplified by phrases like "peaceful, just and inclusive societies", "global Partnership" or "shared principles and commitments." These MAs reinforce the discourse's logocentric logic; however, "leaving no one behind"

stands out as one of the articulations that helps to anchor the SDG structure, which is why we select it as the discourse's driving MA.

Leave no one behind

The Agenda 2030's MA to "leave no one behind" (UN, 2015, p. 10) is presented as a "pledge," and accompanied by the commitment to "reach the furthest behind first." Declaratively, the articulation appears as a gesture of inclusion. However, upon disrupting reading, this formulation enacts various closures that are logocentric in form and thereby exclusionary and repressive in effect, as shown by its three signifiers: "leave," "no one," and "behind."

The signifier "leave" presupposes movement, agency, and a preordained path, suggesting not merely a departure but a structured and directed trajectory toward an imagined destination of "prosperity." This directionality is rendered legitimate by the discourse's *iterability* of aspirational signifiers, such as "bold," "transformative," and "urgently needed", which are ascribed to the "partners'" "tireless" efforts to "implement this Agenda" (UN, 2015, pp. 3, 6 6). In doing, the discourse already stablishes that the way to move is through the 17 goals and their targets, while implicitly marking those who do not follow this path as stagnant, lazy, conservative, or morally deficient, revealing how the normative imperative to "leave" is always already foreclosed. This evidences how différance operates here, as to "stay" or "move otherwise" is rendered unintelligible within the logic of "leave" of the SDGs.

This directional mandate is structured by an OA, that makes sustainability possible only through "sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth," which is positioned as the foundational condition for all dimensions of prosperous lives, whether social, and environmental cultural (UN, 2015, pp. 3, 9, 13). This reliance on economic growth establishes a hierarchical model within the discourse, structured by three imperatives: (1) economic growth as the primary engine for prosperity, (2) the achievement of "a just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world" as its social consequence (UN, 2015, p. 7), and (3) the strategic "management of our planet's natural resources" to secure the Goals for present and future (human) generations (UN, 2015, p. 13). This logic enacts a prefigured type of arrangement where growth precedes social justice, and ecological stewardship is conditional on growth's efficiency. Alternatives to this OA, such as sufficiency economies, reciprocity-based livelihoods, or degrowth, are foreclosed through both discursive exclusion and moral delegitimating. This is evident in the assertion that "growth is a key requirement for eradicating poverty" (UN, 2015, p. 9), paired with the moral imperative to "free the human race from the tyranny of poverty" (UN, 2015, p. 3). Together, these statements collapse economic critique into moral irresponsibility, transforming poverty from a structural condition to be rethought into a tyrannical presence to be eliminated. In doing so, the discourse forecloses imaginaries that decouple prosperity from growth, delegitimizing alternative socio-economic configurations.

But "leaving" not only determines the place to arrive and how to do so, but the subjects leaving and guiding the movement. While *The 2030 Agenda* universalizes its scope and nominally acknowledges "different approaches, visions, models and tools" (UN, 2015, p. 5), it disproportionately positions specific geographies and populations as the "furthest behind"—notably "African countries, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States" (UN, 2015, p. 6). These designations are *saturated* with moralized vocabularies, such as "vulnerable," "in need," "at risk", which fix these subjects in positions of lack, fragility, and incompleteness. Their knowledges, cosmologies, or trajectories, however, are deferred, as their "left" position is determined by their socioeconomic role in the global order. This makes of their legitimacy dependent on movement toward a center already occupied by developed nations, whose implicit "resilience," "strength," and "capacity" are privileged yet discursively invisible, organizing meaning without being named. The OA that authorizes this movement is mirrored in the MA that morally disciplines it, as "leaving" is not a neutral movement directive; it performs an moral closure that authorizes institutional actors, "we the peoples," "partners", and the United Nations itself to define what constitutes inclusion, development, and well-being, thus reaffirming the centrality of a singular path to sustainability.

The aporia is thus embedded in the sign "leave" itself, as it assumes that someone has already been left, that movement should follow a specific path, and that leaving in alternative ways is a deviation from the norm. It presumes not only that movement is necessary, but that movement must proceed through a predetermined developmental path, directed to peripheral populations, and lead by specific developed and institutional actors, leaving no space for alterity, as not following its path is morally deficient.

The signifier "leave" is reinforced by a second, equally consequential sign: "no one." At first glance, this articulation suggests a comprehensive moral imperative: an inclusive universality. Yet this universality functions through abstraction, projecting an undifferentiated moral subject that displaces the very particularities it purports to include. This erasure is evident in *The 2030 Agenda*'s brief gesture toward cultural pluralism, as when it references "some cultures" that refer to the planet as "Mother Earth", it only brackets this worldview as a localized "common expression" (UN, 2015, p. 17) rather than a legitimate epistemic foundation, failing to integrate it as equal site of knowledge, leaving its dominant vision of sustainability grounded in managerial and technocratic rationalities, and foreclosing relational cosmologies to the margins of acceptability.

The invocation of "no one" thus suggests *The 2030 Agenda* speaks to and for all, yet does so by substituting a generalized moral figure—the undifferentiated subject of sustainability—for a differentiated plurality of voices. For instance, the pledge to leave "no one behind", when combined with the assertion that "the dignity of the human person is fundamental…for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society" (UN, 2015, p. 4) flatten differences by treating inclusion as a technical, managerial task, not as a

site of negotiation or contestation. What emerges is not an openness to alterity, but a closure enacted through normative abstractions that regulate who can appear and under what terms.

This identitarian flattening is reinforced by *The 2030 Agenda's* three-dimensional OA, which privileges certain institutional actors, such as corporations, urban populations, political elites, by aligning their roles with the logics of growth, governance, and global integration. These actors are discursively authorized to occupy the position of coherence, while others, whose lifeways, embodiments, or epistemologies resist integration, are excluded or rendered unintelligible. For instance, *The 2030 Agenda*'s recognition of "gender equality" is restricted to a binary frame—men and women—thereby erasing non-binary, trans, and queer identities from the terrain of justice. Similarly, its repeated invocations of "present and future generations" are anchored in an anthropocentric imaginary, wherein only human life is endowed with moral weight. Non-human beings are relegated to the margins, described in managerial terms as "natural resources," or reduced to biological taxonomies such as "fauna" and "biodiversity." These signifiers position the more-than-human world not as subject, relation, or kin, but as instrumental to human-centered sustainability. Their potential alterity, whether ontological, ethical, or epistemic, is thereby foreclosed by a rationality that speaks in the language of stewardship while enacting proprietorship.

Closure, then, is not merely a semantic accident but a structural necessity of the signifier "no one." Positioned as a moral totality, "no one" mobilizes a rhetoric of universal inclusion that depends on a prior delimitation of institutional categories. Its iterability throughout the text, whether in "no one must be left behind," "inclusive and equitable education for all," "opportunities for all," or "universal respect" (UN, 2015, p. 4), produces an illusion of ethical clarity. Yet beneath this universality lies an aporetic structure: to include "all," the discourse must first determine who qualifies as "someone." Those who fall outside the recognizable categories, those whose alterity resists translation into *The 2030 Agenda's* logics, are rendered absent. The unspoken "some ones", such as nonhuman entities, stateless persons, undocumented migrants, or prisoners do not disappear; they are displaced, deferred, and silenced under the weight of the universal.

Of equal significance, though positioned last in the sequence, the third signifier, "behind", deepens the closure of the MA by presupposing a spatial and temporal order in which certain actors are already situated in deficiency, delay, or lack. *The 2030 Agenda* constructs the status of "countries in situations of conflict" and "least developed countries" not as divergent but as deficient, casting them as out of sync with the normative temporal progression it envisions. Anchored in the universal target of 2030, this imagined horizon is presented as a linear endpoint attainable by all, albeit through "differentiated" means, thus requiring the "timely implementation of targets" (UN, 2015, p. 21). However, the discourse does not meaningfully engage with social, economic, political, or epistemological differences, nor does it interrogate the power asymmetries and structural antagonisms that organize the global development order. Instead, the signifier "behind" is stripped of its plural potential and reduced to a homogenizing imperative, whose value is secured only through its deferred binary: "ahead."

Those designated as "ahead" through concepts such as "developed", institutionally capable, and democratically organized, occupy the unmarked position of presence. They are positioned as models of progress, tasked with assisting the laggards rather than re-examining the effects of their own extractive, carbon-intensive, or exclusionary practices. This is shown in *The 2030 Agenda*'s calls on "developed countries to implement fully their official development assistance commitments" and to "provide enhanced international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building" (UN, 2015, p. 39). These articulations reaffirm a paternalistic and even postcolonial moral geography, in which support flows unidirectionally from normative centers of authority to those deemed incapable of advancement on their own to the hierarchical path set by the OA. The result is a discourse of compliance: those "behind" are invited to catch up, but never to question the rationality of the journey itself.

This framing forecloses not only the alterity of "those behind," but also the contradictions, contestations, and exclusions embedded within "those ahead." The vulnerabilities of middle- and upper-income populations, urban poor communities, and rural territories under ecological strain within so-called developed contexts remain largely unspoken. By privileging a unidirectional conception of progress, socioeconomic, and temporally linear, evolutive, and mechanistic, *The 2030 Agenda* reproduces a hegemony that renders alternative paths, values, and rhythms illegible. In this architecture, those who do not conform to the prescribed direction or pace are not recognized as different but marked through différance as "behind", always already positioned in deferred compliance with the standard of the "ahead." Their role is not one of coexistence but of delayed convergence.

The aporia in "ahead" lies in the impossibility of a truly universal horizon of development that refuses to pluralize its directions and temporalities. By positing "ahead" as the unmarked terminus of progress, *The 2030 Agenda* anchors sustainability to a single developmental arc measured by growth, implemented through quantifiable targets, and bounded by the fixed horizon of 2030. This structure forecloses the possibility that sustainability might emerge from dissonance rather than consensus, from slowness rather than speed, from divergence rather than alignment. The signifier "ahead," through appeals to justice, peace, and inclusivity, stabilizes its authority while concealing the exclusions it generates. So what appears as a promise of shared advancement is, in effect, the logocentric stabilization of a singular future.

The signifiers "leave," "no one," and "behind" expose how the Agenda, while presenting itself as inclusive and transformational, as it remains anchored in the metaphysics of presence. It stabilizes the meaning of sustainability through binary oppositions, such as leave/stay, no one/someone, behind/ahead, reinforced by a hierarchical OA that privileges specific rhythms, values, subjects, and ontologies. Through "leave no one behind," *The 2030 Agenda* produces normative imperatives that regulate inclusion and exclusion, legitimizing its own interpretation of sustainability as singular and superior. The aporia lies

in this paradox: *The 2030 Agenda* seeks to overcome exclusion through a structure that systematically reproduces it. Its most inclusive gesture becomes its most enduring form of closure.

1.5.5 The Care Society: A horizon for sustainable recovery with gender equality

The Care Society is structured on the central presence "Care Society," understood as the model that places the "sustainability of life", including the planet, at "the heart of development" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 12). It argues that prioritizing care requires acknowledging vulnerability as intrinsic to the human condition, alongside interdependency and eco-dependency, and fostering relationships in which every individual is both caregiver and care recipient (ECLAC, 2022, p. 28).

The discourse's central presence revolves around the pursuit of gender justice, particularly women's autonomy and equality, by deploying a set of OAs that categorize the right to care into three interrelated dimensions: (1) care of persons, (2) care of caregivers, and (3) self-care, and 4) care for the planet (ECLAC, 2022, p. 29). Agency within this configuration is structured through the spatial metaphor of the "care diamond," comprising the dynamic interplay of the State, market, family, and community organizations (ECLAC, 2022, p. 22), with the State positioned as the "guarantor of the right to care" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 26). These institutional arrangements are mobilized in response to several interlinked challenges, ranging from socioeconomic inequality and concentration of power to patriarchal cultural patterns and exploitative resource use. Framed as "interdependent" and "balanced," the discourse's OAs extend across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, while also incorporating cultural, ethical, political, and ideological domains, "which are historically situated" (ECLAC, 2022, pp. 23, 167).

For their part, the discourse's MAs are animated by a relational-affective moral core anchored in "care" and extended through derivative values such as "solidarity," "co-responsibility," "equality", and "dependency." These values are embedded within a normative rationality grounded in a human rights framework, operationalized through seven principles: universality, progressiveness, equality and non-discrimination, access to justice, equal and inclusive citizen participation, and access to information (ECLAC, 2022, pp. 25–26). Despite the apparent diversity of MAs, our reading identifies "care" as the discourse's central moral imperative, functioning not only as the origin and organizer of meaning, but also as a disciplinary and regulatory logic that imposes itself on alterity.

Care

The Care Society presents "care" as the driving moral imperative for achieving the "sustainability of life," framing it as the "priority objective" of societies and a "universal, indivisible and interdependent" human right (ECLAC, 2022, pp. 17, 155 155). Through this MA, the discourse enacts closure, appearing redemptive in its aim to "put an end to the existing patriarchal culture of privilege and hierarchical power relations" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 43), yet simultaneously foreclosing the possibility of alterity.

This closure operates through the discourse's interpretation of "care" and its proposed "taxonomy". By presenting care not as one possible articulation among others but as the structural precondition, "essential for achieving sustainable development with equality" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 8). Inclusion is transformed into a normative obligation, where deviation is rendered illegible because alternative ontologies or moral arrangements outside the logic of interdependence and institutionalized care have been excluded since the origin. The claim that "it is essential to recognize the irreplaceable value of care for both people and the planet" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 13) further highlights how care functions in this way, grounding the entire discursive arrangement into a single MA. This convergence forecloses dissent by collapsing moral imperatives into the institutional discursive structure, exposing a binary opposition, care/indifference, that stabilizes *The Care Society's* legitimacy and authority by rendering any alternative, either autonomy, refusal, or disaffiliation, as "unsustainable," implicitly unjust and unequal, and politically irresponsible.

The effect of this closure is not exclusion by denial, but closure through discursive *saturation*. As by the multiple addition of diverse elements, the discourse does not become plural, but rather it absorbs difference into a pre-made arrangement and moral order. By offering "a comprehensive approach" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 35), *The Care Society* neutralizes contradiction by rearticulating divergence as integration, rendering oppositional elements morally and structurally coherent within its architecture. For example, implicit tensions between gender equality/patriarchal privilege or life sustainability/capital accumulation are not interrogated but sutured into seamless arrangements and moral imperatives.

In the case of Gender Equality/Patriarchal Privilege, *The Care Society* denounces "the existing patriarchal culture of privilege" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 43), demanding that men "renounce their patriarchal privileges and participate co-responsibly" as a condition for achieving the Care Society (ECLAC, 2022, p. 27). It recognizes the structural and historical effects of patriarchy on women and marginalized genders, which is explained through the "androcentric" model of development. However, the text leaves out any reflection on how patriarchy also constrains men or how "care" might be reimagined beyond guilt and responsibility, where masculinity is reduced to a moral problem to be corrected and men's only acceptable gesture is to "renounce their patriarchal informal privileges" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 27). The discourse, thus, saturates the structure by absorbing feminist critique into a logic that delegitimizes masculinity rather than deconstructing binary gender hierarchies. The result is a closure that reduces difference to correction, recoding gender relations as an issue of male reform rather than of structural reimagination.

In a similar vein, the binary opposition between life sustainability/capital accumulation operates by framing "life sustainability" as an imperative for justice, well-being, and planetary survival, while positioning "capital accumulation" as inherently exploitative of labor and nature, inequality-producing, and environmentally destructive, calling to "prioritize the sustainability of life over the accumulation of capital" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 23). Through an OA that identifies the prevailing development model as

"capitalist" and "anthropocentric," *The Care Society* privileges productive over reproductive labor and market over care-based relations (ECLAC, 2022, p. 28). Through this architecture, "life sustainability" saturates the discourse by exploiting that which shall be overcome. This generates a différance between critique and continuity, where the paradigm of accumulation is denounced yet retained, as it gives negative identity and urgency to the dominant OA, producing an aporia between the call to transcend accumulation and the reliance on its very logics to define and justify the Care Society. By adopting this structure, the binary opposition excludes subsistence economies, degrowth imaginaries, or non-monetized ecological relations that resist both market accumulation and care logics. These alternatives are foreclosed not by rejection, but by their illegibility within the discourse's structure.

Thus, it is through differánces of "care" how *The Care Society* enacts its closure. Its OAs grounded in a set of privileged interrelated signifiers: "interdependence", "vulnerability," and "eco-dependence,"; which derive meaning only through contrast with a repressed set of oppositional terms: "individualism," "autonomy," and most explicitly, "self-sufficiency" (ECLAC, 2022, pp. 17, 28). These signifiers elevate "care" to the highest hierarchical position, rendering alterity as structurally divergent and morally deficient, hence, incapable of achieving sustainability. This is evident in the claim that "the notion of self-sufficiency denies the constitutive vulnerability of bodies, the interdependencies between people and their eco-dependency" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 28). Closure is here not achieved through overt exclusion, but through the discursive naturalization of "care" as an ontological truth. Those aligned with dependency and vulnerability are granted legibility, while subjectivities animated by individualism, autonomy, or self-sufficiency are foreclosed and morally delegitimized as embodying "a fictitious conception of humanity" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 28).

Closure is further deepened through the way "care" is taxonomized into four categories (ECLAC, 2022, p. 29), with "care of persons" occupying the dominant position. This category centers on those institutionally recognized as vulnerable, primarily women, but also "infants, persons with disabilities, and older persons" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 28), who are framed simultaneously as caregivers and care recipients. Despite its rhetorical inclusivity, *The Care Society* marginalizes precarities that fall outside this declarative vulnerability, such as those shaped by spiritual, cultural, or epistemological exclusion, or by refusals of the normative logics of "care". As a result, "care for persons" enacts a structural aporia: it proclaims a universal discourse of care while delimiting in advance who qualifies as vulnerable and therefore deserving. This evidences how the very pluralism and inclusion the text claims to uphold operate through exclusion and suppression of difference.

The closure of "care of persons" is further entrenched through the adjoining category of "care for caregivers," which is itself subordinated to the leadership of the State, the central actor in the Care Diamond. The State is positioned as the guide to watch over, regulate, enforce, and look after the interests of others in the geometrical OA: the market, family, and community organizations, reducing their participation and agency to almost paternalistic terms, as if they were objects of the State's

regulation and protection. Meanwhile, caregivers, when not State representatives, are not recognized as autonomous subjects but only through their relation to others and mainly in domestic settings. This is evident in *The Care Society*'s emphasis on "co-responsibility between men and women" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 169), which positions caregiving within binary gender relations, tethered to heteronormative family structures. By confining the "right to care" to "households, families and persons" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 29), the discourse excludes non-normative configurations such as alternative women's roles, LGBTQ+ families, non-binary caregivers, or collective models of care beyond the family unit. In doing so, *The Care Society* enacts a différance between recognized caregiving and unacknowledged forms of care, those beyond what is legible within its normative structure and what remains outside its moral and institutional arrangements.

"Self-care" is also deprived of other interpretations as it is articulated not as an autonomous or individual effort, but as a functional necessity to ensure the continuity of the broader caregiving system. As *The Care Society* states, "self-care is fundamental to the recovery of energy and emotional well-being for the continuity of care" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 28), positioning it not as an end in itself, but as a means to serve the interdependent logic of the Care Society. This articulation subordinates "self-care" to a supporting imperative within the OA, as it is not practiced for the subject's well-being, but only insofar as it maintains the operational coherence of the whole. This generates a différance, as while individual needs appear acknowledged, their meaning is deferred and displaced through instrumentalization. Forms of self-care rooted in individualism, independence, disengagement, or boundary-setting are originally foreclosed because they do not reproduce interdependent and collective "care"; they interrupt it. Thus, what is called "self-care" forecloses precisely those forms of "care" that do not conform to the relational terms the discourse prescribes.

The fourth type of care, "care of the planet," reveals how *The Care Society's* OA enacts closure by prioritizing human dominance. Though framed through the "principle of eco-dependence," the discourse reproduces an anthropocentric logic in which the environment is valued solely for its utility: "people depend on the environment, as it is the source of resources and goods" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 167). Unveiled *binary oppositions*, such as human/non-human, caregiver/dependent, manager/resource, evidence the position of humans as subjects of care and the Earth as a passive recipient. Even the call for a "just and gender-equal transition to low-emission economies" (ECLAC, 2022, p. 167) reasserts this logic, subordinating planetary systems to human-centered development. The aporia lies in the impossibility of including the non-human without reinscribing its subordination. This generates a différance between the stated eco-dependence and the discursive exclusion of other-than-human ontologies, such as indigenous cosmologies, where rivers have rights or mountains speak. These alterities are foreclosed not by denial, but by technocratic absorption. Thus, care of the planet becomes a moral MA that reinforces the OA's closure, recoding relational imperatives into technocratic and managerial structures. As a result, what appears to be an expansion of care to nature is, in fact, a containment: the difference of the Earth is not denied but disciplined, deferred, and domesticated-cared for only insofar

as it does not disrupt the coherence of the anthropocentric order. *The Care Society's* inclusivity is thus predicated on a logic of conditional belonging, in which the planet itself becomes both the object of care and the limit of permissible difference.

Across its architecture, *The Care Society* is constructed not as one possible path to sustainability, but as its only legitimate form. Closure is enacted not through overt exclusion, but through the *saturation* and moralization of meaning, where every element, from institutions to identities, is drawn into a holistic OA that appears comprehensive yet forecloses alterity. Each type of care—of persons, of caregivers and self, and of the planet—is organized through binary oppositions: care/indifference, gender equality/patriarchal privilege, life sustainability/capital accumulation, human/nonhuman. These binaries fix care within a hierarchical logic where only certain subjectivities, community-driven, dependent or reproductive, are granted value. This structure is sustained through the joint operation of OAs and MAs, which institutionalize care through the state, families, markets, and communities, while simultaneously moralizing it as the foundational principle of sustainability. What cannot be made coherent within this configuration is not explicitly but rendered unsustainable and morally deficient and illegitimate. The aporia that unveils is that the more totalizing the care, the less room for difference. In naming all forms of sustainability as care, the discourse disciplines what care can mean, foreclosing its contestation.

1.5 DISCUSSION: LOGOCENTRIC CLOSURES OF INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSES

Our findings confirm that institutional sustainability discourses enact closures that are not contingent on a discourse's geographical origin (Global/Local) or ideological-power orientation (hegemonic/counter-hegemonic), but are structurally constitutive of institutional meaning-making, as they rely on logocentrism to structure their architecture.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (GHD) and *The Care Society* (LChD) evidenced logocentrism through the metaphysics of presence (Derrida, 1967, pp. 20–23), anchoring meaning to a central, authoritative presence—SDGs and Care Society—around which signifiers revolve, following internal arrangements, such as the prioritization of the economic dimension in *The 2030 Agenda* and the care for persons in *The Care Society*. These centers establish dominant structures that operate through différance, creating binary relations such as behind/ahead or care/indifference that simultaneously constitute and limit what can be recognized as sustainability. When these arrangements are combined with moral imperatives like "leave no one behind" and "care," they produce discourses that exhibited apparent coherence, completeness, and universality (Critchley, 2014; Derrida, 1988), while simultaneously appearing socially desirable, necessary, and morally superior (Held, 2006; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Mouffe, 2023; Tronto, 1993). This advances literature that focuses on power repressions (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 1995; Leff, 2008), implementation failures (Davies, 2020; Hickel, 2019; Redclift, 2005), or

historical exclusions (Arora-Jonsson, 2023; Mulindwa, 2020; Shiva, 1988), revealing how closures are constructed from the very structure of discourses.

By applying deconstruction as an ethical practice and using a double reading strategy (Caputo & Derrida, 1997; Derrida, 1988; Kakoliris, 2022b), we revealed how institutional discourses enact closure through two operations, OA and MA, which operate jointly to stabilize meaning, reinforce internal coherence, and marginalize alterity (Ariansen, 1999; Derrida, 1978, pp. 278–280; Kibert et al., 2012; Yamada et al., 2022), as evidenced in the 2030 Agenda's articulation of "leave no one behind," where the OA of economic growth as a precondition for development structures inclusion around a singular developmental arc, while the MA delegitimizes alternatives—such as degrowth or reciprocity-based livelihoods—by framing them as morally irresponsible or inefficient.

The combined operation of the two mechanisms of closure surpassed our initial understanding of OAs as mere determiners of positions, relations, and dynamics, and MAs as simple sources of discipline and regulation. Our case studies revealed how OAs and MAs jointly to: (1) Prevent inclusion from the very origin, for instance, by excluding non-binary and LGBTQI+ identities through a foundational recognition of only two genders; (2) Police discursive boundaries by restricting the limits of meaning and alterity, as seen in *The Care Society*, where "self-care" is permitted only insofar as it reproduces the collective caregiving structure, rather than functioning as an autonomous or divergent practice (ECLAC, 2022); (3) Naturalize authority, making it appear inherent, legitimate, and beyond question, as evident in how both texts privilege institutional actors as the rightful arbiters of sustainability, thereby repressing the agency of the very subjects they claim to include; (4) Conceal moments of différance and aporias, for example, by linking "underdevelopment" with "vulnerability" in ways that preemptively stabilize meaning, transforming historically contingent and politically contested conditions into fixed developmental identities; (5) Claim comprehensiveness through iterability and saturation, yet use this totalization to obscure their inherent incompleteness. In The 2030 Agenda, this is seen in the overextension of the SDGs—from poverty eradication to climate action—while in The Care Society, it appears in the taxonomy of care, where saturation functions as a mode of integration that conceals contradiction through moral coherence; and (6) Use binary oppositions to give meaning to presence and absence, as evidenced in the logic that for those "behind" to exist, those "ahead" must necessarily be presumed.

While deconstruction literature has recognized these logocentric operations (Caputo & Derrida, 1997; Derrida, 1988; Kakoliris, 2022b), their combined action, their entanglement with MAs, and their application to sustainability discourses remain unexplored, making our findings a significant contribution to both deconstructive theory and sustainability scholarship. Our findings further reveal how institutional sustainability discourses stabilize meaning not merely through overt exclusion, but through a performance of inclusion that simultaneously forecloses alterity. This finding complicates the conventional understanding of discursive exclusion as a binary 'in/out' process (Auad & Fath, 2022;

Jacobsson, 2019; Yamada et al., 2022; Yasmin & Amin, 2024), instead revealing a more sophisticated mechanism of conditional inclusion that disciplines difference while appearing to embrace it. Through these findings, we extend deconstruction's (Derrida, 1967, 1978) conceptualization of the metaphysics of presence into sustainability discourse, complementing literature that has deconstructed sustainability (Clark, 2020; Dragicevic, 2018; Fritsch et al., 2018; Shokoohyar et al., 2023; Telleria, 2020), but not through the mechanisms we recognized and their operations unveiled.

Our application of deconstruction as an ethical practice rather than a method of critique also represents a significant contribution to sustainability discourse research, where it has been limited explored (Clark & Lynes, 2023; Dragicevic, 2018; Fritsch et al., 2018; Leff, 2019; Telleria, 2020). The double reading strategy we employed (Kakoliris, 2022b), proved essential for exposing how closure operates through the very gestures that appear most inclusive, enabling us to unveiled not what each text defines as sustainability, but how its meaning is produced, repeated, and stabilized, and at what cost (Derrida, 1967, p. 61). This approach to deconstruction allowed us to rethink sustainability not only in terms of what it excludes, but also in terms of what it must systematically exclude and includes to remain intelligible. In doing so, we were able to trace how signifiers like "leave no one behind" and "care" function not as openings to alterity but as mechanisms of foreclosure disguised as moral imperatives.

Our engagement with deconstruction reveals how scholarship focused on content and power relations (Arias-Maldonado, 2013; Arora, 2023; Escobar, 2014; Kashwan et al., 2021; Mota Díaz & Sandoval Forero, 2016) may miss engaging with the structural mechanisms through which meaning is stabilized and alternatives are rendered unintelligible. Our findings suggest that exposing these mechanisms requires a reading practice that can simultaneously engage with what discourses say and what they structurally foreclose, a capacity that deconstruction provides through its attention to différance, aporias, and the constitutive exclusions that enable meaning.

Theoretically, our findings suggest that efforts to democratize sustainability discourse by including more voices, perspectives, or values may inadvertently reproduce the logocentric structures they seek to challenge. The finding that LChDs enact closure through identical mechanisms as GHDs indicates that geographical origin or ideological-power positioning alone cannot guarantee openness to alterity. This challenges the prevalent assumption in sustainability studies that LChD discourses are inherently more inclusive or pluralistic than hegemonic ones (Leff, 2019; Mota Díaz & Sandoval Forero, 2016; Mulindwa, 2020). Our analysis suggests that the problem lies not in particular content or authorship but in the institutional and, therefore, logocentric form of discourse itself. This finding has implications for social movements, policy reforms, and academic research that seek to advance alternative sustainability discourses.

Practically, these findings suggest that efforts to create more inclusive sustainability discourses may need to focus not only on who participates, which contexts are taken into consideration, or what

perspectives are included, but also on how discursive structures themselves need to change to avoid foreclosing alterity. This might require developing new forms of institutional engagement that remain vigilant to their closure mechanisms and maintain openness to what remains unrepresented or unintelligible within their logics.

Our paper is not exempt from the closure mechanisms it identifies. The selection of texts, the application of deconstructive reading, and the presentation of findings all involve organizational arrangements and moral articulations that foreclose alternative interpretations. The irony is not lost that a study exposing closure operates through its own forms of closure. Several limitations merit acknowledgment. First, the focus on institutional texts may not capture the full range of sustainability discourse, particularly informal, embodied, or non-textual forms of meaning-making, which might deviate from logocentrism. Second, the selection of two texts, while theoretically justified, limits our findings to other institutional contexts or discursive forms. Third, the emphasis on deconstruction as ethical practice may itself privilege certain forms of engagement over others, potentially foreclosing alternative approaches to reading and interpretation.

These limitations point to the study's own aporias, its structural inability to fully account for what it excludes in its focus on textual analysis and deconstructive reading. This self-reflexivity is not a weakness but a necessary acknowledgment of the study's own position within the logocentric structures it analyzes, as our deconstructive engagement with sustainability discourses shall be recognized as our own, happening in a specific time and context, and filtered through our knowledge and capabilities.

Given its limitations and aporias, our study opens several avenues for future research. First, there is a need for empirical investigation of how closure operates in other forms of sustainability discourse, including scientific publications, policy documents, activist communications, or corporate sustainability reports. Such research could engage with the mechanisms of closure we identified or the six operations unveiled, or identify others to deepen our knowledge of how closure is enacted. Similarly, there is potential for ethnographic research examining how closure operates in embodied sustainability practices, organizational cultures, and informal interactions. This could extend the analysis beyond textual discourse to investigate how OAs-MAs function in lived sustainability practices. There is also an opportunity to combine deconstruction with other theoretical frameworks, whether post-colonial (Escobar, 1995; Leff, 2019 2019; Mota Díaz & Sandoval Forero, 2016) or in-depth linguistic, philosophical and moral readings (Dragicevic, 2018; Fritsch et al.; Telleria, 2020; Yamada et al., 2022), to reveal alternative mechanisms of closure or openness within sustainability discourse. Meanwhile, there is potential for exploring how awareness of closure mechanisms might inform more ethically responsive sustainability practices and behaviors.

In a nutshell, our findings reveal that sustainability discourses are still structured by logocentric mechanisms that stabilize meaning through exclusion. Whether articulated through the triadic pillars

or through holistic structures, these discourses enact closure by marginalizing alterity, repressing non-conforming identities and elements. Our deconstructive reading revealed these closures creating opportunities to place them *sous rature*, under erasure, highlighting their interpretive necessity while simultaneously exposing their contingency, instability, and exclusions (Derrida, 1967, p. 61). In doing so, we have showed alignment with our ethical commitment to expose what sustainability cannot include and to remain accountable for what they silence. In this way, we do not seek to complete or correct discourses, but to keep them perpetually open to what remains other.

1.6 CONCLUSION

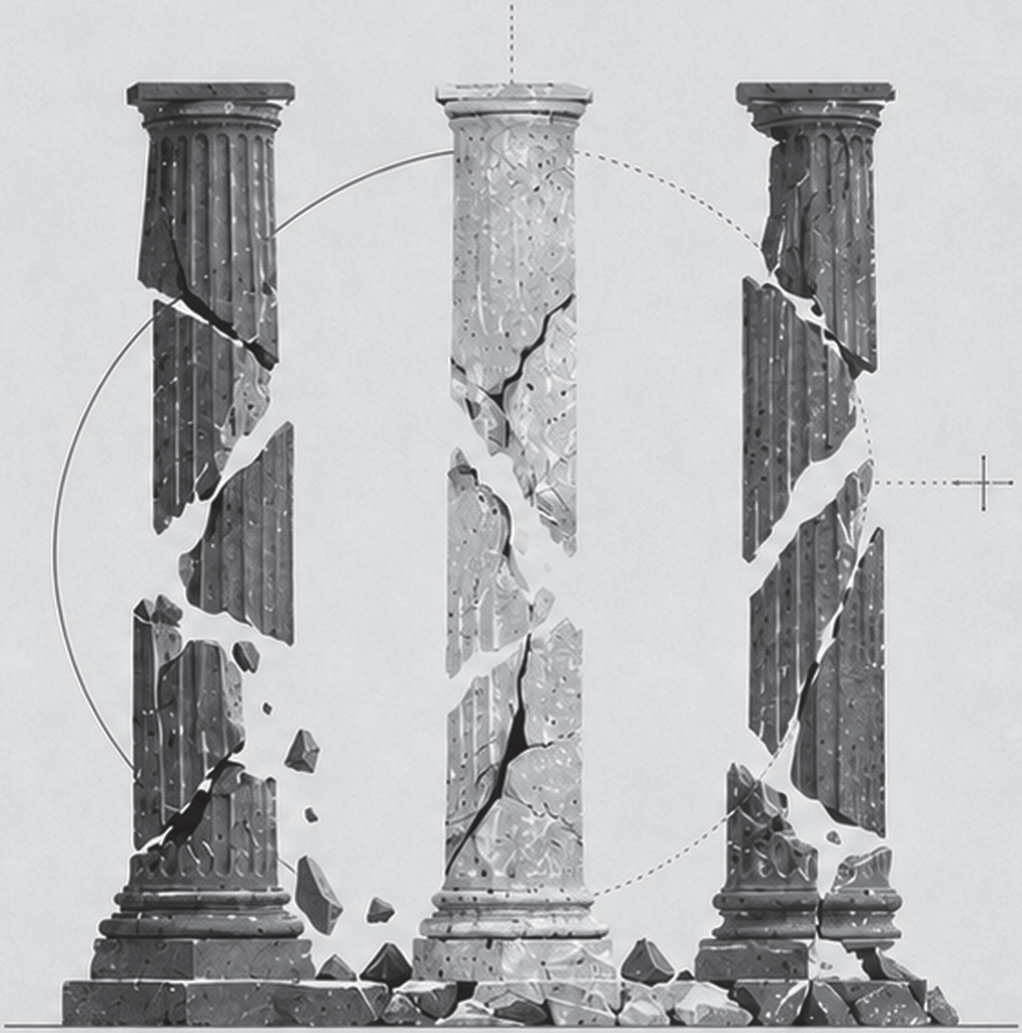
This paper has interrogated how institutional discourses of sustainability, whether GBD or LChD, produce closure due to their logocentric orientation through the interplay of OAs and MAs, which draw and fix the limits of what constitutes sustainability. By using deconstruction as an ethical practice (Critchley, 2014, pp. 15–16; Derrida, 1967, p. 61), we opened the closures embedded in two institutional texts: *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015) and *The Care Society: A Horizon for Sustainable Recovery with Gender Equality* (ECLAC, 2022). In doing so, we have revealed how even when claiming inclusivity and pluralism, institutional sustainability discourses are structurally predisposed to foreclose alterity, as they rely on differánces to authorize meaning and secure their own coherence.

Our readings have unveiled how OAs-MAs collaborate to suppress alterity by relying on hierarchical and normative arrangements such as three-dimensional structures or saturated taxonomies, while using moralism as an amplifier and enforcer of discursive limits, relying on elaborated articulations like "leave no one behind" or single values such as "care". We also showed how OAs-MAs function together, not merely to establish structural positions, internal logics, and disciplinary and regulatory actions as we initially theorized (Ariansen, 1999; Derrida, 1978; Kibert et al., 2012; Yamada et al., 2022). Instead, they also act together to preclude inclusion from the outset, to police alterity, to naturalize institutional authority, to conceal différance and aporia, and to mask the inherent incompleteness of the discursive structure itself.

Deconstruction, as an ethical practice (Critchley, 2014; Derrida, 1988), enabled us to resist treating sustainability as self-evident, neutral, or universally meaningful. Instead, we approached it as provisional, marked by the différances and stabilizations it enacts, and by the contradictions, exclusions, and silences it represses. As a result, we are now able to signal both the necessity and insufficiency of sustainability, where the term is necessary, yet insufficient for capturing the plurality of meanings and practices it represses, and that give it shape (Derrida, 1978, p. 278; 1988). In doing so, our study reveals that the challenge facing sustainability discourse is not the elimination of exclusion but the development of ethical practices that remain responsive to what is foreclosed. As Derrida reminds us, meaning is never

final; it is always deferred, always in play, always *à venir* (Derrida, 1988), highlighting the ongoing need for disruption and ethical accountability.

We have thus disrupted the assumption that institutional sustainability is, or could ever be, a coherent or universally inclusive discourse. Sustainability must be placed *sous rature*—under erasure—to mark it as both indispensable and insufficient (Critchley, 2014, pp. 15–16; Derrida, 1967, p. 61). Only by doing so can it be read against itself, opening its exclusions to scrutiny while remaining accountable to those it cannot absorb. As we have exposed, institutional sustainability discourses are neither a coherent nor a pluralistic dialogue. They are marked by structural silences and moral imperatives. To engage with them is to resist their stabilization, trace their limits, and expose the operations that render their exclusions unremarkable (Fritsch et al., 2018; Telleria, 2020). This is a call for continual ethical vigilance: one that reads for what is missing, listens for what is silenced, and refuses to let closure have the final word.



Chapter 5

Everything, Anything, All at Once: How Populist Logic Defies Binary Mappings of Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability has become a contested discourse in contemporary politics, as populist movements bypass traditional left-right divides. This study challenges the binary mappings that link right-wing populism with market-oriented, exclusionary, and environmentally skeptical positions, and left-wing populism with redistributive, inclusive, and pro-environmental agendas. Drawing on post-structural ontology, social systems theory, and Essex School discourse theory, the research conceptualizes populist sustainability discourse as operating through undecidability, the strategic maintenance of radical openness that enables simultaneous, contradictory articulations to coexist without resolution. Through Political Discourse Analysis of speeches by Argentine President Javier Milei and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, the study demonstrates how both leaders exploit sustainability's discursive openness across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The findings reveal that nodal points (*Libertarianism, Fourth Transformation*) do not stabilize meaning; rather, they sustain contradictions that serve populist antagonistic logic. As a result, sustainability becomes a contingent, iterable discourse whose meaning continuously shifts beyond ideological boundaries according to the construction of the people, their will, and the antagonistic other, remaining 'always already' undecidable. This reveals incompatibilities between populist discourse and the coherent, long-term policymaking that sustainability governance presupposes, while exposing how populism exploits sustainability's own constitutive exclusions, incoherences, and contradictions.

Keywords: Sustainability, Populism, Undecidability, Political Discourse Analysis, Latin America

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has become one of the most invoked yet deeply contested discourses in contemporary politics (Lee & Kim, 2024). Initially articulated by the United Nations as a universal development pathway that seeks to balance economic, social, and environmental dimensions ((WCED), 1987), has proliferated across heterogeneous worldviews, institutional settings, and political projects that frequently contradict one another (Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019). Far from converging, sustainability has fragmented: from Indigenous cosmologies such as 'Buen Vivir' to technocratic growth frameworks, from ambitious green transitions to open skepticism about the concept itself. The rise of populism has further magnified this multiplicity (Fu, 2025; Stone Jr., 2022) by capitalizing on the discursive openness of sustainability to reframe it through an antagonistic logic.

Existing scholarship, whether from the ideational approach (Lockwood, 2018) or the discursive one (Mouffe, 2023) has largely interpreted these populist articulations through binary ideological mappings, in which sustainability is presumed to align consistently with predefined left–right positions. Yet recent studies and empirical evidence challenge these mappings. Across regions and political projects, populist actors are increasingly articulating sustainability through combined positions that appear incompatible, such as supporting extraction while invoking environmental protection (Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2022; Duina & Zhou, 2024; Ofstehage et al., 2022). These contradictions often coexist within a single discourse rather than alternating over time or articulation (Fu, 2025; Roch, 2022), suggesting discursive logics that exceed binary mappings.

While existing frameworks, such as ambivalence (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), floating signifiers (Kögl & Kurze, 2013; Laclau, 2001), or empty signifiers (Ainsworth, 2020; Laclau, 2001), attempt to account for these tensions, they ultimately treat contradiction as a transitional condition that needs to be stabilized. Either because its fluctuating state corrects and threatens sustainability (Dannemann, 2024); because it is part of a contested landscape awaiting capture (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985); or because it is a moment of indetermination that requires provisional and partial condensation to become articulable (Laclau, 2001; Zicman de Barros, 2025). Consequently, they fail to account for forms of articulation in which contradiction and indetermination are not a hurdle to be overcome, but actively pursued, managed, and mobilized.

This article adopts a different position, arguing that populist sustainability discourse does not always seek stabilization; instead, it frequently aims to maintain and exploit its own openness. Drawing on deconstruction (Derrida, 1967), Social Systems Theory (Luhmann, 1995), and Discourse Theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), this article advances *undecidability* as a discursive practice used and sustained by populist actors to 'supplement' sustainability (Derrida, 1978), keeping it radically open to simultaneous, opposing articulations that require neither stabilization. By rendering sustainability iterable, reversible, and permanently revisable, undecidability provides populist leaders with the flexibility to mobilize

heterogeneous demands and perform coherence without ever delivering it (Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2021). Consequently, they can continuously rearticulate sustainability in response to shifting antagonisms, intentions, and contextual demands.

Empirically, the article examines the speeches of two Latin American presidents typically positioned at opposing ideological poles (Cárdenas Eguiluz, 2024; Narvaja de Arnoux, 2024): Javier Milei in Argentina (2023–2027) and Claudia Sheinbaum in Mexico (2024–2030). Although their programs appear incompatible: libertarian austerity versus redistributive statism, both construct sustainability as a discourse in which oscillation and contradictions are not resolved but strategically maintained. Through Political Discourse Analysis (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), the study maps how each leader articulates sustainability's economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Purvis et al., 2018); how they anchor these articulations through nodal points; and how the populist logic of constructing the *people*, their *will*, and an *antagonistic other* organizes these meanings. Ultimately, the analysis shows how populist sustainability discourse operates beyond binary mappings by keeping sustainability radically open to multiple and even conflicting articulations without rupture, rendering it everything, anything, all at once.

1.2 BEYOND BINARIES: THE UNDECIDABILITY OF POPULIST SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSES

Scholarship on populism has traditionally approached sustainability through binary ideological mappings across the right–left spectrum (Davies, 2020; Lockwood, 2018). This tendency appears regardless of how populism is approached. Whether framed as a 'thin ideology' or 'latent sets of ideas' that constructs a Manichean divide between the 'pure' or 'good' *people* and the 'corrupt' or 'evil' *elite* (Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2004), or as an articulatory logic constructing vertical antagonistic frontiers that conform the people with 'hierarchical superior' other (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Laclau, 2005b), existing approaches tend to interpret sustainability as a relatively fixed, ideologically anchored construction, thereby reinforcing binary left–right mappings.

This has led research to reduce sustainability's economic, social, and environmental dimensions to rigid characterizations. Right-wing populism is typically associated with market-oriented or protectionist economic positions (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022; Rodrik, 2021; Stankov, 2022), socially exclusionary agendas (Gottenhuber & Mulholland, 2019; Kroll & Zipperer, 2020), and environmental skepticism (Huber, 2020; Lockwood, 2018; Schwörer & Fernández-García, 2023; Wetts, 2025). By contrast, left-wing populism is linked to redistributive economics (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990; Stankov, 2022), socially inclusionary agendas (Chazel & Dain, 2023; Mouffe, 2023), and pro-environmental positions (Davies, 2020; Hällmark, 2025; Stavrakakis, 2007; Stone Jr., 2022), as synthesized in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1. Binary Mapping of Populist Articulation of Sustainability

Sustainability	Left-wing	Right-wing
Economic	Protectionist or/and market-oriented	Redistributive
Social	Exclusionary Approach	Inclusionary Approach
Environmental	Skeptical/Denialist (limited action)	Pro-environmental

While such mappings offer classificatory clarity and have structured much empirical research, they overlook what a growing body of studies consistently demonstrates, that populist actors articulate positions that defy these binaries. They may oscillate between right and left articulations (Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2022; Duina & Zhou, 2024; Ofstehage et al., 2022) or deploy both simultaneously within the same discourse (Fu, 2025; Roch, 2022). These patterns reveal not only the openness of sustainability as a signifier but also the indeterminate, incoherent, and contradictory ways populist actors mobilize it. Such forms of engagement challenge the explanatory capacity of binary mappings and call for a framework capable of accounting for instability as a constitutive discursive practice.

1.3.1 Limitations of Binary Mappings

Drawing on this empirical evidence, this study identifies three limitations of binary mappings.

First, binary mappings assume that populist discourse tends toward some form of stabilization. In the ideational approach, stabilization follows from populism's attachment to 'thicker host ideologies' that supply coherence (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde, 2004). In the discursive approach, stabilization is achieved through partial and momentary fixation, through the attachment of elements into chains of equivalences (Kølvraa, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). While these mechanisms have been useful for explaining how populist discourses cohere and temporarily organize meaning, they do not reflect what occurs in many populist engagements with sustainability, where actors oscillate between conflicting positions or deploy contradictory articulations simultaneously. While there have been attempts to account for these dynamics through concepts such as 'ambivalence' (Hatakka et al., 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser), 'floating signifiers' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), or 'empty signifiers' (Laclau, 2001; Zicman de Barros, 2025), these concepts still presume a trajectory toward stabilization. Whether as alternating corrective and threatening forces (Hatakka et al., 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), as a form of contestation awaiting resolution (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), or as the temporary concentration of heterogeneous demands around a nodal point to overcome indeterminacy (Laclau, 2001; Zicman de Barros, 2025). This study argues instead that, in populist discourse, sustainability is neither provisionally stabilized nor awaiting fixation. Rather, instability is pursued, sustained, and mobilized as a discursive strategy, enabling populist actors to exploit the radical openness of sustainability without attempting to resolve its contradictions.

Second, binary mappings presuppose that a populist actor's ideological placement determines their sustainability positions, reducing them to fixed left–right categorizations across the economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Although this assumption has supported useful classificatory work, it cannot account for empirical patterns in which sustainability articulations are flexible, reversible, and strategically reconfigured, subordinated not to ideological consistency but to antagonistic logic (Duina & Zhou, 2024; Fu, 2025; Ofstehage et al., 2022). This study argues that it is precisely this antagonistic logic, that is, the confrontation between the people and their will against an antagonistic other, that provides the only consistent element in sustainability populist discourse (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Laclau, 2005b). And because antagonism, rather than ideology, organizes the discourse, sustainability's dimensions remain open to any articulation capable of reinforcing that frontier.

Third, binary mappings assume that consistency and coherence function as normative standards of populist discourse, thereby treating instability and incoherence as anomalies to be resolved through ideology or articulation (Hawkins et al., 2018; Kølvraa, 2017; Laclau, 2005b; Mudde, 2004). Yet research has shown that populism operates through affective and identitarian logics oriented toward mobilization rather than permanently consistent and discursive coherence (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Mouffe, 2023). Instead, populism relies on a logic that actively sustains heterogeneity by aggregating disparate and even contradictory elements into an antagonistic frontier (Laclau, 2005b), thereby keeping chains of articulation open and expandable (Zicman de Barros, 2025). This discursive openness enables populist actors, among other things, to preserve deniability by refusing stable commitments (Mouffe, 2018), mobilize grievances across otherwise incompatible groups (Mouffe, 2018), evade accountability for inconsistencies (Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2022), and adapt articulations to diverse contexts and audiences (Laclau, 2005b). Based on this, this study argues that inconsistency and incoherence are not merely possible but politically advantageous in populist sustainability discourse.

Taken together, these limitations show that while binary mappings and their theoretical foundations remain valuable, they do not account for the openness and strategic maintenance of instability, incoherence, and contradiction that characterize populist sustainability discourse. An alternative framework is thus required, one that treats instability, oscillation, and contradiction not as anomalies or transitional phases but as practices of populist articulation. This study proposes *undecidability* as that framework.

1.3.2 Introducing Undecidability: An Ontological, Systems, and Discursive Approach

To move beyond binary mappings and their limitations, this article adopts a discursive approach to populism (Laclau, 2005b; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) to examine how sustainability is articulated through the populist logic as an open, and therefore unstable, incoherent, and contradictory construction across its three dimensions. To account for this dynamic, the article advances *undecidability* as the organizing logic that makes such openness operative. To conceptualize undecidability, three theoretical

traditions are integrated: deconstruction (Derrida, 1967, 1981a), Social Systems Theory (Luhmann, 1995), and Essex School Discourse Theory (Katsambekis, 2020; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Zicman de Barros, 2025).

Deconstruction is aggregated as it introduced undecidability (Derrida, 1967, 1981a), defining it as the condition in which a signifier resists fixation to any stable, unified signified, remaining perpetually open to any and every meaning possibilities. This is best illustrated through Plato's concept of the *pharmakon*, which signifies both poison and medicine; it is not 'neither/nor' but 'all at once' (Derrida, 1981a). Consequently, meaning is never an inherent property of the sign itself. It is constructed through iterability and differential relations, shaped and deferred according to context, authorial intention, and the traces of what has been, what will be, and what is marginalized (Derrida, 1978, 1981a). This renders signifiers structurally unstable and never final, as signification requires constant supplementation, an addition with deferral, to accommodate new meanings without achieving closure.

Despite its contributions to undecidability theory, deconstruction alone is insufficient for studying populist sustainability discourse because its ontological focus fails to account for undecidability as a discursive practice that political actors actively mobilize. To address this, Social Systems Theory is incorporated (Luhmann, 1995), which recasts undecidability as the condition of possibility for any decision, insofar as only what is undecidable can ever call for a decision. Within this framework, decisions do not resolve undecidability but reproduce it, enabling continual adaptation and renewed forms of communication(Luhmann, 1995). Undecidability is thus reframed not merely as a latent condition of signification but as a strategic practice that social actors can inhabit, exploit, and sustain.

This emphasis on decision-making aligns with Essex School discourse theory, which likewise holds that articulation is contingent upon political choice (Kølvraa, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Zicman de Barros, 2025). Although this approach introduces a discursive account of undecidability and links it to the political dimension (Laclau, 1990), it treats it as constitutive of articulation rather than as a quality that actors can manage and strategically exploit. The theorization developed in this article departs from this assumption by advancing undecidability as a discursive practice actively used and sustained within populist sustainability discourse.

1.3.3 Undecidability and the Populist Logic

Within the Essex School Theory (Katsambekis, 2020; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 2017), discourse is understood as a structured yet contingent configuration in which meanings are only partially and momentarily fixed through the practice of articulation (see Figure 5.1). This practice begins by transforming floating *elements*, that is, signifiers whose meanings remain undecided and open to contestation, into *moments*, or signifiers that achieve partial stability through their specific position within the emerging structure (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). These moments are organized around a *nodal point* or a privileged signifier that provisionally unifies the discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). As interlinked moments are tied to this point, they form an *equivalential chain*. As these chains expand, the

nodal point is often progressively drained of its particular content, often transforming into an *empty signifier* capable of representing the entire chain (Laclau, 2005b). The conjunction and interrelation of these elements construct a discourse, yet only insofar as equivalential chains are set against an *antagonistic frontier*, where the constitutive outside or excluded other supplies the differential tension that makes the equivalence significant ('us' against 'them'), legitimizing and constraining what the discourse can integrate and what it must exclude.

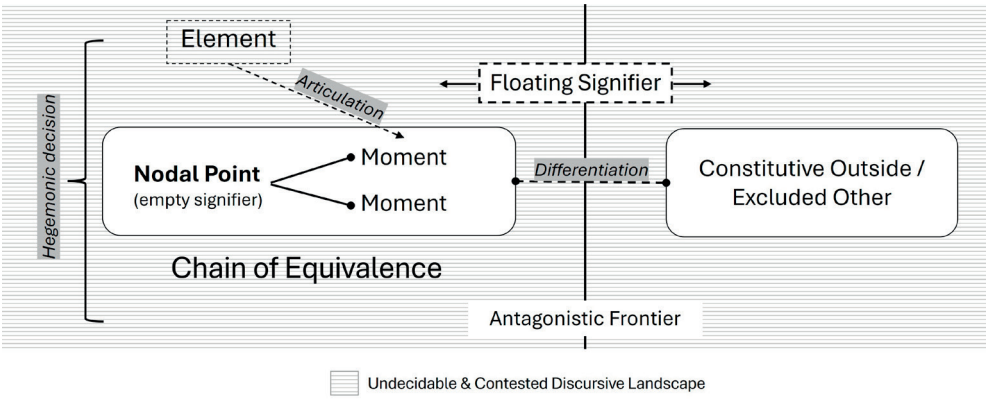


Figure 5.1. A Structural Visualization of the Discourse Logic of the Essex School's Theory

While this study aligns with the discursive formation and the components theorized by the Essex School, it departs in how undecidability is conceived. Drawing on a deconstructive-systems approach (Derrida, 1981a; Luhmann, 1995), undecidability is understood here as a manageable and operative practice of articulation, rather than as an obstacle that political decisions temporarily or partially resolve. If articulation converts elements into partially fixed moments (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) and dislocation unsettles those configurations (Laclau, 1990), then undecidability names the space of radical openness in which every articulation becomes possible (Derrida, 1967). Decisions, therefore, are not taken to stabilize moments or to produce partial equivalential chains that condense floating elements into saturated nodal points (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Zicman de Barros, 2025). Rather, decisions operate *phantasmagorically* and strategically (Derrida, 1981a; Luhmann, 1995), as they stage stability and coherence through performative articulations, yet remain irredeemably haunted by traces of their contexts, intentions, and past, future, and marginalized significations, while deliberately preserving radical openness. As a result, they are capable of hosting incoherent and contradictory articulations, supplementing them and making them coexist without resolution.

This approach to undecidability reshapes how populist engagements with sustainability can be understood, moving beyond fixed and predetermined binary mappings, however oscillatory, partial,

temporal, or polysemic they may appear (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Zicman de Barros, 2025). By reframing undecidability as a political discursive practice rather than a purely ontological condition, decision, or a pre-articulatory state, this study delves into how populist sustainability discourse remains open, contradictory, and strategically unstable, qualities that binary mappings cannot capture.

1.3 RESEARCH STRATEGY

To demonstrate how populist sustainability discourse operates through undecidability, this study employs Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) in the Essex School tradition (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The analysis focuses on the public speeches of two Latin American presidents, Javier Milei of Argentina (2023–2027) and Claudia Sheinbaum of Mexico (2024–2030), as contrasting cases of contemporary right- and left-populist articulations.

1.4.4 Case Selection

The cases were selected according to three criteria: (1) geographical context, (2) position within binary mappings, and (3) presence of an identifiable populist logic. These criteria reflect the premise that meaning and identity depend on context (Derrida, 1967; Luhmann, 1995) and are produced through relational and antagonistic articulations (Derrida, 1981a; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Latin America was selected as the regional focus because it remains an understudied context for examining how populism articulates sustainability, despite the region's long history of populist governments (de la Torre, 2014; Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990; Ianni, 1975) and its socio-environmental significance (OECD, 2018). The region's colonial legacies, extractivist development paths, and recurrent socio-environmental conflicts generate articulatory conditions that diverge from dominant global sustainability discourses (Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019), providing a fertile environment for analysis. By focusing on a single region, the study maintains a rigorous comparative baseline, while differences in political orientation and discursive formations allow variation relevant to undecidability. Authoritarian-oriented forms of populism in the region were excluded as they could constrain the discursive contingency needed to observe how undecidability is actively articulated (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Luhmann, 1995).

Therefore, among the possible regional cases, Milei and Sheinbaum were selected because they are both currently in office and exhibit recognizably populist patterns, articulating the *people* and their *will* against an *antagonistic other* (Cárdenas Eguiluz, 2024; Narvaja de Arnoux, 2024). However, they represent divergent projects that operate in opposite sites of binary mappings. Milei's discourse has been situated within the far-right spectrum (Merke & Pereyra Doval, 2024), whereas Sheinbaum emerges from a left-populist discourse associated with his predecessor's 'Fourth Transformation'

(Cárdenas Eguiluz, 2024). This contrast provides analytical leverage for examining undecidability, as both leaders mobilize sustainability discourses that appear coherent within binary mappings yet reveal contradictory, reversible, and context-dependent articulations.

1.4.5 Corpus

The corpus consists of official transcriptions of speeches in which each president addresses economic, social, and environmental issues in an interlinked manner, consistent with institutional conceptualizations of sustainability (UN, 2015). Given the limited published material meeting this first filter, speeches that explicitly reference environmental topics were also selected, recognizing the centrality of this dimension in distinguishing sustainability (UN, 2015). Given differences in tenure length and the volume of public addresses across administrations, the selection was guided by principles of representativeness and exhaustiveness (Braun & Clarke, 2013), with efforts made to balance the texts across both cases.

For Milei, the sample covers his first 500 days in office, from December 10, 2023, to April 23, 2025. It includes 17 official speeches published on the Casa Rosada website (casarosada.gob.ar) and one book titled El Camino del Libertario (Milei, 2024). In Sheinbaum's case, the sample comprises 63 event-based speeches published on her official website (presidenta.gob.mx), delivered during her first 200 days in office, from October 1, 2024, to April 17, 2025. Transcriptions of her daily morning press conferences were excluded from the sample due to their question-and-answer format and the breadth of topics typically addressed in them. For more details on the corpus of analysis, see *Appendices A5.1* and *A5.2*.

1.4.6 Operationalizing Undecidability

The analysis integrates PDA in the Essex School tradition for its theorization of populism as a discursive logic (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Laclau, 2005b) with sustainability's three dimensions (UN, 2015).

The analysis proceeds in two stages. The *first stage* maps how sustainability attempts to stabilize its articulation through a nodal point that appears to condense and unify heterogeneous elements by drawing on the 'thick ideology' it mobilizes to ground itself (Mudde, 2004). The study later delves into these elements on two interlinked levels, sustainability and the populist logic, exploring the articulations of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability (UN, 2015), and the articulation of the people, the people's will, and the antagonistic other.

To visualize these articulations, the study introduces a notation system that uses arrows (→) to highlight a consequence or result, plus signs (+) to make visible integrated and equivalential elements, and (in)equality symbols (≠/=) to portray opposing differentiations and deferrals as well as equivalential moments. For example:

CO_2 emissions → rising temperatures + shifts in weather patterns = climate change ≠ sustainability

Following the identification of partial articulations, the *second stage* employs the theoretical framework to identify when and how these articulations enact undecidability (Derrida, 1981a; Luhmann, 1995). This is achieved by re-reading the articulations from the first stage to isolate moments where divergent, contradictory, or incoherent articulations transgress binary mappings, in alignment with Table 1. The undecidability of these articulations is evidenced through selected textual fragments. Although qualitative discourse analysis involves interpretive judgment, subjectivity is mitigated through a systematic, theory-driven research strategy applied consistently across cases.

4.4 FINDINGS

Both Milei and Sheinbaum construct sustainability discourses that initially appear coherent with binary mappings, as Stage 1 shows, yet a closer reading reveals that both are traversed by undecidability, as Stage 2 evidences.

4.5.1 Stage 1: Mapping Binary Articulations

Both leaders anchor sustainability through nodal points that appear to reproduce expected binary mappings (see Table 5.2). For Milei, *Freedom* functions as the privileged signifier linking sustainability to *Libertarianism*, his stated 'thick ideology'. For Sheinbaum, *Justice* grounds sustainability, which she links to the ideological frame of the *Fourth Transformation*. Their ritualized mottos: 'Long live freedom, damn it!' and 'Long live the Fourth Transformation!', reinforce this centering.

From these nodal points, each president constructs chains of equivalence that appear to collapse the three sustainability dimensions into their respective ideological frames, each chain gathering a wide and internally diverse range of signifiers, among others. Milei articulates sustainability through Growth, Social Cooperation, and Resource Revalorization, which draw together elements such as free markets and private property in the economic dimension, merit and productive harmony in the social dimension, and creative exploitation and innovation in the environmental dimension. In contrast, Sheinbaum organizes sustainability through Moral Economy, Mexican Humanism, and Care for the Environment, which assemble pro-poor and anti-corruption principles in the economic dimension, indigenous roots, rights recognition, and participatory democracy in the social dimension, and state environmental governance and resource redistribution in the environmental dimension.

Table 5.2. Milei's and Sheinbaum's Articulation of Sustainability

		Milei	Sheinbaum
Nodal Point		Sustainability = Libertarianism = Growth + Social Cooperation + Revalorization of Resources	Sustainability = The Fourth Transformation = Moral Economy + Mexican Humanism + Care for the Environment
Sustainability Dimensions	Economy	Growth = Free Markets + Private Property → Competition + Division of Labor → Innovation + Productivity → Wealth Creation + Capital Accumulation → Savings + Investment + Prevision → Convergence → Long-term Prosperity = Sustainability	Moral Economy = Pro-poor + Anti-corruption = 'For the good of all, the poor come first' + 'No rich government with a poor people' → Sovereign economy → Bottom-up growth → Shared prosperity = Economic sustainability
	Society	Social Cooperation = Moral Duty → Individual Freedom + Responsibility → Dignity = Merit + Work → Voluntary Exchange → Mutual Respect + Productive Harmony = Maximization of Well-being = Sustainability	Mexican Humanism = Indigenous Roots + Rich National History → Social Rights Recognition & Institutionalization + Popular Sovereignty + Participatory Democracy + Government–People Unity → Social Vindication & Repair → Bottom-up Well-being → Social Justice → Shared Prosperity = Social Sustainability
	Environment	Revalorization of Resources → Creative Exploitation → Innovation + Productivity → Property Rights + Free Market + Freedom of Discovery = Wealth Creation → National Prosperity ≠ Scarcity = Sustainability	Care for the Environment = Resource Nationalism + Historical Revindication → State Environmental Governance → Rights-based + People-first Principle → Resource Redistribution + Sovereign Control of Resources → Strengthened National Capacity & Access → Self-sufficiency + Social Resilience + Cost Relief → Shared, Intergenerational Well-being = Sustainability

Table 5.2. Continued

		Milei	Sheinbaum
Populist Logic	The People	The People = Workers + Consumers + Families + Entrepreneurs + Future Generations = Vulnerable + Oppressed + Victims = Argentines = Libertarian Allies/ Lions of Freedom	The people = Indigenous Roots = The Poor & Vulnerable = Workers + Women + Youth + National Community → Government–People Unity = Fourth Transformation → Social Vindication = Shared prosperity = Sustainability
	People's Will	The Will of the People = Desire for Freedom = Long-term Economic Prosperity → Maximization of Well-being + National Greatness = Libertarian Sustainability	The People's Will = Desire for Justice = Recognition & Historical Vindication + Participatory Democracy → National Sovereignty + Ancestral Revival + Redistribution → Shared Prosperity + Intergenerational Well-being = People-centric Sustainability
	The Antagonistic Other	The Antagonistic Other = Socialists + Political Caste + Statists + Progressists (woke) + Globalists = Oppressive + Interventionist + Corrupt + Thieves	The Antagonistic Other = Neoliberals + Colonial Legacies + Economic & Social Elites + Judiciary + External interventionists + Opposition + Media = Corruption + Extractivism + International Subordination + Discriminatory Social Order + Unequal & Exclusionary Development + Privatizations & Commodification + Capture of Politics by Economic Power + Impunity + Disinformation

This apparent alignment with binary mappings also extends to the populist logic. In Milei's discourse, the *people* are constructed as a unified libertarian collective that includes entrepreneurs, workers, families, consumers, among others, opposed to an *antagonistic bloc* made up of socialists, the political caste, progressives ('woke'), or globalists. These others are portrayed as threatening the *people's will* for freedom to achieve long-term economic prosperity as a path towards the maximization of well-being and national greatness. Sheinbaum constructs populist chains that seem to align with left mappings, articulating the *people* as an inclusive and plural subject composed of Indigenous communities, the poor, women, or youth. These groups are positioned against neoliberal elites, colonial legacies, and corruption, which are portrayed as the *antagonistic others* threatening the *people's will* for justice and, with it, the pursuit of shared prosperity and bottom-up collective well-being within her people-centered sustainability discourse.

Taken together, Stage 1 reveals how both discourses seem to align with right-left binaries: freedom versus justice, growth versus redistribution, individual responsibility versus collective repair, and resource revalorization versus environmental care. These are sharpened by *antagonistic frontiers* pitting the *people* and their *will* against perceived enemies. However, Stage 2 shows that this coherence is performative.

4.5.2 Stage 2: Exposing Undecidability

Stage 2 reveals that Milei's and Sheinbaum's discourses harbor contradictions and incoherences that transcend left-right mappings. The undecidability is identified within their: a) nodal points, b) ideological frames, c) sustainability dimensions, and d) populist logic, and closes with a brief summary of what was exposed, revealing that binary mappings cannot be sustained in their discourses.

a) Nodal Points

Undecidability arises at the very nodal points where heterogeneous and incompatible articulations converge without ever resolving tensions. Rather than imposing coherence, *Libertarianism* and the *Fourth Transformation* absorb incompatible meanings, allowing dissonant elements to coexist by deferring and supplementing articulations.

In Milei's discourse, Libertarianism is deployed in an iterable contextual form. Domestically, it justifies welfare retrenchment while reframing vulnerability through the language of protection: 'We have a vocation to protect… the victims of the impoverishing system we are trying to change,' (20240301 Buenos Aires). Internationally, it underwrites techno-optimism and a rejection of environmental limits: 'If we truly had a resource problem, we should be aiming to colonize other planets, not condemning ourselves to death,' (20240224 Washington). *Libertarianism* thus becomes a flexible repertoire, activated differently depending on contextual or antagonistic needs. It appears as a moral virtue: 'Humans can only be moral when they are free,' (20240417 ECL); an organizing device for market relations: 'The market is a mechanism for social cooperation' (20250123 Davos); a national horizon: 'Make Argentina the freest

country in the world, for ourselves, for our children' (20240519 Madrid); and a solution to scarcity: 'The more goods available, the greater the well-being,' (20240417 ECL). As a result of each supplementation, *Libertarianism* carries a legitimizing function, and an authoritative and policing function through selective exclusions and moral claims: 'We have come to restore freedom to the Argentine people… Only as a free society can we… take advantage of the natural gifts God has granted us,' (20240301 Buenos Aires).

Sheinbaum's *Fourth Transformation* exhibits a similar pattern of ideological openness. The nodal point is articulated as historical reparation: 'Mexico is building a new path that has its foundations in our memory,' (20241118 G20), as a development model: 'We call our way of thinking Mexican Humanism and our model Moral Economy,' (20241118 G20), and simultaneously as a program compatible with capital oriented logics: '(it) includes public and private investment for industrialization, tourism, and services,' (20250112 100D). This openness generates a contradictory logic, as the same nodal point is used to denounce neoliberal dispossession: 'the theory of trickle-down economics was absurd… today, a new era is being built,' (20241118 G20) and to reassure investors of stability: 'the investments of both domestic and foreign shareholders will be safe in our country,' (20241001 Congress). Her articulation of sustainability is further transversed by a moral-affective dimension that aims to legitimize any possible tension and contradiction, whereas by exploiting the Fourth Transformation as justice matter: 'Justice, especially social justice, is the very essence of the Fourth Transformation' (20241220 Tarahumara); or as a moralized project: 'The moral authority and honesty that define us… are built with a single commitment: to fight for a Mexico with justice' (20250112 100D). As a result, the *Fourth Transformation* hosts articulations of welfare expansion and indigenous rights alongside industrial policy and foreign investment, not by reconciling them but by holding them together within the same ideological container. Its coherence is therefore performed rather than achieved, sustained through appeals to justice.

b) Sustainability Dimensions

Across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, both leaders articulate sustainability through contradictory but coexisting logics, whose coherence is performed through the nodal points rather than achieved through ideological or dimensional consistency, making sustainability itself an undecidable discursive site.

In terms of the **economic dimension**, Milei's *Growth* is articulated through mutually incompatible logics, evidencing an undecidable site. It appears as laissez-faire prosperity, where capitalism is framed as the generator of well-being: 'The capitalist system has done and does much more… to promote growth and social well-being,' (20240417 ECL); as a moral obligation, where fiscal balance becomes a matter of 'human dignity… at stake' (20240709 May Pact); and as authoritarian legal enforcement, where deficit financing should be 'classified as a crime against humanity' (20240301 Buenos Aires). These articulations place Milei's economic sustainability between libertarian minimalism and punitive

statism without ever choosing between them. *Growth* is therefore not fixed but reopens depending on the antagonistic frontier. Sheinbaum's *Moral Economy* demonstrates a parallel form of openness. It functions as an anti-neoliberal corrective: 'we have recovered… Pemex and the CFE,' (20241229 Panotla); while simultaneously endorsing global integration and investment, 'encouraging the relocation of companies,' (20241001 Congress). Within this configuration, fiscal austerity, 'there can be no rich government with poor people,' (20241001 Congress), coexists with the expansion of social rights: 'social programs… have now become rights for well-being,' (20250112 100D). Rather than incoherence, these movements show how the *Moral Economy* transcends left-wing mappings, as the economic dimension is not governed by ideological consistency but is decided situationally by what can be equated with *Justice* and mobilized through the antagonistic frontier. In this way, the *Moral Economy* becomes another undecidable site.

Regarding the **social dimension**, Milei's *Social Cooperation* is built through incompatible logics. It appears as a moral critique of socialism: 'envy, hatred, and resentment arise,' (20250221 BID); a defence of voluntary relations among equals: 'Social justice is an aberration… theft,' (20250221 BID); a celebration of meritocratic responsibility: 'their reward depends on their own effort,' (20240417 ECL); and the rejection of structural vulnerability to 'stop treating them like victims,' (20240519 Madrid). Social sustainability thus affirms autonomy while demanding cooperation, rejects inequality while presuming it resolved, and negates vulnerability while relying on it rhetorically. For her part, Sheinbaum's Mexican Humanism constructs social sustainability through identity hierarchization, centring indigenous history and roots, 'two sources: original culture… and fertile history,' (20241010 Rosarito), while elevating poverty as the privileged identity marker: 'for the good of all, the poor come first'. Yet these identities are also deferred and reconfigured when needed, as poverty is a transferable category justified not only morally but pragmatically: 'the poor come first… not only because it is justice, but because it has been proven to deliver results,' (20250405 Zinapécuaro). Likewise, inclusion is expanded or contracted depending on political context; for example, migrants become emblematic members of the people when useful for national pride: 'our compatriots… sustain the economy of the United States,' (20241001 Inauguration), revealing the substitutability of identities within the frame. These articulations demonstrate how *Mexican Humanism* sustains inclusion not through stable criteria but through the ideological pull of *Justice* and its performative functions, whether equivalence, moralization, or affective resonance.

However, nowhere is undecidability more visible than in the **environmental dimension**. Milei's *Resource Revaloriz*ation is alternately articulated as extractive necessity for 'exploiting our means being committed to our country's real needs,' (20240709 May Pact); an anthropocentric priority: 'the main environmental problem… is extreme poverty," 20240709 May Pact); a common-sense conservation against 'Preserving our planet for future generations is a matter of common sense, no one wants to live in a dump' (20250123 Davos), and market-led technological conservation strategy: 'With property rights and a price system, the problem (of scarcity) is solved,' (20240417 ECL). Sustainability becomes whatever positions him against the *antagonistic other*, allowing Milei to be simultaneously an

environmental defender and skeptic. Sheinbaum's *Care for the Environment* exhibits the same openness. It appears as resource nationalism: 'We do not hand over the nation's resources' (20250301 Salamanca); as rights-based environmentalism: 'we will carry out legal reforms to guarantee water as a national resource' (20241001 Congress); as indigenous restoration: 'lands that belonged to them (Rarámuri)… were returned to them' (20241222 Mazatlán); as large-scale environmental transformation: an 'ambitious circular economy project' (20241001 Congress); and as sovereign extraction: 'the constitutional reform… will further strengthen Pemex and the Federal Electricity Commission as companies owned by the people of Mexico' (20250112 100D). Across these contradictory articulations, no reconciliation is required, as the environmental dimension is determined situationally and in alignment with the populist logic.

c) Populist Logic

Across both discourses, the construction of the *people*, their *will*, and *the antagonistic other* remains continually reopenable. This iterability, driven by nodal points and antagonistic needs, renders populist logic itself an undecidable space, one where sustainability is determined by shifting people/enemy distinctions rather than by stable ideological or dimensional criteria.

In Milei's discourse, the *people* are constructed through shifting and context-dependent equivalences. At times they appear as a unified national subject desiring liberation: 'Argentina will be free, we Argentines will be free' (20240301 Buenos Aires), while at others as entrepreneurs driving prosperity: 'You are social benefactors… contributing to the general welfare' (20250123 Davos), and as victims of statism: 'the victims of the impoverishing system we are trying to change' (20240301 Buenos Aires). Because these articulations are not reconciled, Milei can interpellate both business elites and vulnerable groups as the *people* unified against a shifting enemy. Yet the boundaries contract when freedom claims challenge his frontier, expelling feminist, LGBTQ+, and pro-immigration actors: 'we have moved on to mass immigration motivated not by national interest but by guilt…Hordes of immigrants abuse, rape, or kill Europeans... but when one questions these situations, one is branded a racist, xenophobic, or Nazi,' (20250123 Davos). Thus, constructing a people aimed at reinforcing antagonisms rather than sustainability's nodal point or ideology.

Sheinbaum also constructs *the people* through an iterative logic that prevents stabilization. While her discourse establishes an expansive and inclusive collective that rejects 'racism, classism… and the criminalization of our brothers and sisters' (20250409 CELAC), her belonging criteria shift, not according to a stable principle, but according to what can be aligned with *Justice = Fourth Transformation*. The frontier, therefore, becomes porous and reversible. Actors can move from the *people* to *the antagonistic other* and back again depending on contextual demands. For instance, the United States is at times a sovereign threat: 'They should not come to give us civics lessons' (20250203 Ecatepec); and elsewhere a strategic partner: 'we complement one another' (20241001 Congress). Women likewise occupy contradictory positions: included as subjects of traditional care roles: 'who are the ones who care for the

sons and daughters?' (20241206 Tuxtla) while also symbolically elevated as the embodiment of national progress: 'for a woman to reach the Presidency,' (20250104 Huauchinango).

Because the *people* are unstable in both cases, their *will* becomes equally undecidable. In Milei's discourse, it alternates between freedom: 'Argentina will be free,' (20240301 Buenos Aires); well-being: 'contributing to the general welfare,' (20250123 Davos), and national greatness: 'Argentina will be great again,' (20240519 Madrid). In Sheinbaum's case, it is variously defined as a right: 'access to justice,' (20250112 100D); a form of recognition: 'foundations in our memory,' (20241118 G20), and shared prosperity: 'for the good of all, the poor come first,' (20241001 Congress). This shows how the *people's will* is undecidable because it depends on whichever meaning of the nodal point is activated at a given moment. Since both nodal points host undecidable forms, the *will* they anchor cannot stabilize; rather, it is continually reopened, re-defined, and redirected to sustain the antagonistic frontier. The *people's will*, therefore, cannot function as a coherent guiding principle but as an iterable construction.

Finally, the *antagonistic frontier* in both cases remains flexible and continuously renegotiated. In Milei's discourse, the *antagonistic other* iterates over time and context. Environmental enemies expand from 'Malthusians' and the 'Club of Rome' in 2024 (20240224 Washington) to the broader category of progressive identities: 'wokeism managed to distort this basic idea of protecting the environment for human enjoyment' (20250123 Davos). The frontier shifts not because new information emerges, but because antagonism must be sustained. Sheinbaum's frontier similarly operates through selective distinction rather than fixed criteria. Beyond the oscillation of the United States, she distinguishes 'bad' extractivism from legitimate national use, not through environmental principles but sovereignty claims: 'Throughout the entire neoliberal period… water ceased to be seen as a strategic natural resource for the country's development. The Water Law was changed, and what that law did was turn this national strategic resource into a commodity' (20250322 Tlaxcala). Hence, in both cases, antagonistic frontiers remain perpetually renegotiable, with sustainability's meaning determined by antagonistic positioning rather than dimensional coherence.

Summary

Taken together, these findings show that undecidability is not confined to a single element of the discourse but is reproduced across nodal points, ideological frames, sustainability dimensions, and populist logic. At each site, meaning is continually reopened, enabling contradictory claims to coexist because the identities that organize the discourse shift according to the logics of populist articulation rather than fixed ideological or dimensional criteria. As a result, sustainability becomes an undecidable signifier, revealing that the binary coherence observed in Stage 1 is performative. Stage 2 thus exposed sustainability as an open discursive formation sustained by iteration, intentions, and contextual redeployment. By simultaneously oscillating between and surpassing left–right mappings, both leaders defer any fixed articulation of sustainability, allowing it to be supplemented by incompatible, contradictory, and incoherent articulations that can coexist, even operate at once, without requiring

reconciliation. Rather than stabilizing meaning, their discourses accumulate and defer it, producing the appearance of coherence while maintaining structural openness. In doing so, sustainability becomes an undecidable discourse.

4.5 DISCUSSION

This study examined how populist sustainability discourse operates through undecidability (Derrida, 1967; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Luhmann, 1995), moving beyond the binary mappings that continue to dominate analyses of populism's engagement with sustainability (Davies, 2020; Huber, 2020; Lockwood, 2018; Mouffe, 2023). Although Milei and Sheinbaum appear to reproduce right- and left-wing articulations consistent with their attributed ideological positioning (Cárdenas Eguiluz, 2024; Narvaja de Arnoux, 2024), the findings reveal that such coherence is performative. Across nodal points, ideological frames, sustainability dimensions, and the elements of the populist logic, both leaders maintain articulations that remain radically open, reversible, and strategically reactivated, resisting stabilization and sustaining undecidability as the structuring condition of their sustainability discourses.

The findings challenge established approaches that conceptualize populist instability and contradictory and incoherent *articulations* as temporary or transitional. Accounts of *ambivalence* (Hatakka et al., 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), *floating signifiers* (Kögl & Kurze, 2013; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), and *empty signifiers* (Ainsworth, 2020; Zicman de Barros, 2025) all presume some movement toward stabilization, however partial or momentary. Yet neither Milei nor Sheinbaum conforms to these trajectories. Their discourses do not alternate between competing positions, nor do they seek provisional fixation to secure articulation. Instead, they maintain contradictory articulations simultaneously: *Freedom* legitimizes both deregulation and coercive legalism, while *Justice* anchors redistributive ethics and investor reassurance at once. These patterns show that populist sustainability is not merely contested or oscillatory but kept undecidable, advancing instability and radical openness as the very condition that makes articulation possible. Sustainability, therefore, remains continuously articulable, capable of becoming *everything* through supplementation, *anything* because it is not attached to any fixed content, and *all at once* insofar as undecidability sustains its perpetual reactivation within the discourse.

Building on these findings, the study advances two contributions. First, it reconceptualizes undecidability as a strategic discursive practice, rather than a residual or pre-articulatory condition that predetermines political engagements with sustainability. Contrary to theories that treat contradiction as a phase awaiting resolution (Hatakka et al., 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), contestation (Kögl & Kurze, 2013; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), or partial and momentary fixation (Zicman de Barros, 2025), the findings show how undecidability is maintained and managed, enabling populist actors to mobilize multiple, even incompatible meanings without committing to any single one. Second, the analysis demonstrates that binary mappings are strategically exploited beyond oscillation (Hatakka et al., 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser,

2012), provisional capture (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), or saturation (Zicman de Barros, 2025). The findings show that populist discourse achieves this through supplementation (Derrida, 1978), whereby binary mappings are reactivated and reattached to past and new, even contradictory articulations, without displacing prior uses, as demonstrated in Milei's and Sheinbaum's nodal points. Supplementation thus enables leaders to invoke binary articulations for legitimacy while simultaneously extending, reversing, or deferring them, keeping their boundaries open by leaving each signifier haunted by the traces of the meanings that have given, give, and will continue to give it substance (Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2021).

Beyond these anticipated contributions, several unexpected insights emerged. First, the study shows that binary mappings are not only transcended but strategically exploited. Throughout the analysis, right–left distinctions remain symbolically valuable because they offer recognizable ideological frames through which undecidable articulations acquire legitimacy and a façade of stability. Populist actors thus mobilize these binaries to perform ideological coherence while simultaneously contradicting them, thereby reinforcing rather than resolving undecidability. Yet binary mappings alone cannot explain how sustainability remains politically operative despite its radical openness. The analysis of sustainability's dimensions reveals that they function as organizing frames for the populist logic, structuring how economic, social, and environmental meanings are selectively activated, combined, or deferred to sustain antagonism.

Second, the findings expose a marked moral-affective turn that authorizes, polices, and legitimizes undecidable discourse (Mouffe, 2023). *Freedom* and *Justice* do not merely unify heterogeneous elements; they draw affective force and moral authority, allowing contradictory claims to coexist while preserving their appeal to the people. Their emotional and ethical resonance discredits opposing positions and naturalizes internal inconsistencies. Undecidability thus emerges not only as a discursive practice but as a moral-affective mechanism through which coherence is performed, dissent is delegitimized, and sustainability's meaning is continually reopened.

Third, the findings reveal a form of undecidability that was not initially accounted for, as it transcends sustainability, expanding to the very populist logic (Katsambekis, 2020; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 2017). While the Essex School recognizes that the *people* and the *antagonistic other* can become 'empty' (Laclau, 2005b) the cases examined show a deeper dynamic, as these identities are not simply emptied but iteratively and contingently supplemented. Their boundaries shift according to the demands of context and the actors' intentions, aligning with whatever articulation is most useful at a given moment. As a result, *the people* and *the other* not only transcend binary mappings but also exceed the discursive frames that initially appear to anchor them. An unstable logic thus organizes unstable content, refining theoretical understandings of populist articulation. Despite this instability, the populist logic still provides structural organization through the vertical antagonism that distinguishes populist discourse (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017), yet allowing contradictory identities and meanings to coexist without resolution.

Fourth, the findings show that sustainability under populist logic operates as a pharmakon (Derrida, 1981a): simultaneously 'healing' and 'poisoning' the discourse. This dual movement goes beyond the 'corrective' versus 'threatening' distinction associated with ambivalence (Hatakka et al., 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), because it does not unfold sequentially or in alternation but at the same time. For instance, Milei recognizes scarcity as an environmental problem while simultaneously proposing intensified resource exploitation as its remedy; likewise, Sheinbaum invokes environmental protection even as she expands fossil-fuel production. This reveals why populist sustainability remains compelling despite its contradictions, as undecidability is not a hindrance but a constitutive mechanism, allowing sustainability to function all at once as justification, solution, critique, and mobilizing symbol.

Among all the findings and contributions, maybe the most far-reaching insight is that the populist use of undecidability does not merely destabilize sustainability; it also reveals sustainability's own constitutive tensions. Populist articulation exposes how fragile sustainability's coherence already is, how readily its economic, social, and environmental dimensions can be reactivated, reweighted, or contradicted precisely because sustainability has always contained these heterogeneous elements within its structure. The ease with which populist actors mobilize contradictory positions is therefore not merely a function of populist strategy but reflects the intrinsic openness and internal fractures of sustainability discourse itself.

Despite these insights, this study has several limitations. First, focusing on two Latin American cases provides analytical depth but limits generalizability; comparative research across regions and institutional settings could test whether similar mechanisms of discursive undecidability emerge elsewhere. Second, the corpus is restricted to official speeches, capturing public articulation rather than policy deliberation or implementation; ethnographic work, policy analysis, and interviews would clarify how undecidability operates within governance practices. Third, while undecidability appears strategically operative, this study cannot determine whether it is intentionally deployed or structurally produced; research on discourse production may illuminate this distinction. Fourth, the qualitative discourse analysis used here is interpretive; mixed-method designs, inter-coder comparison, or process tracing could deepen empirical robustness. Finally, because reception was not examined, future studies should investigate audience interpretation, media framing, and opposition responses to understand how undecidability circulates and shapes political discourses, how it is interpreted, mobilized, or contested by different publics.

In the meantime, this study offers several implications for research and practice. For research, undecidability provides a framework for explaining how populist discourse is constructed and how it reorganizes meaning and identities in ways that resist ideological, discursive coherence, or dimensional stabilization. Extending its use beyond sustainability could also illuminate how populist logic reshapes other policy domains where stability and coherence are normatively expected. The study also advances existing theories, as it refines discourse theory by showing how articulation does not merely fix or float

meanings but can deliberately keep them open (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Zicman de Barros, 2025); extends undecidability theory by demonstrating its use as a strategic practice rather than solely an ontological condition (Derrida, 1967; Luhmann, 1995); and contributes to explanations of populist indeterminacy by identifying how contradictions are not transitional but systematically sustained (Hatakka et al., 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Methodologically, the notation system and the two-stage strategy developed here offer a replicable design for tracing articulations within the Essex School tradition (Katsambekis, 2020; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 2017).

For practice, the findings reveal a structural incompatibility between populist sustainability discourse and the long-term, evidence-based, and coordinated policymaking envisioned in global discourses (UN, 2015). While populist actors may advance environmental or social initiatives, such commitments remain contingent on their value for sustaining the antagonistic frontier rather than on sustained engagement with sustainability's dimensions. This contingency undermines policy coherence and durability, as undecidability resists governance models premised on stable projects or consistent commitments. Effective engagement with populist leaders, therefore, requires recognizing sustainability as a permanently open discourse and adopting approaches capable of accommodating ongoing rearticulation, rather than attempting to stabilize signification, strategies, or commitments that the populist discourse itself renders unstable.

4.6 CONCLUSION

This article aimed to explain how populist actors articulate sustainability in ways that defy the binary mappings that dominate existing scholarship. By examining the speeches of Javier Milei and Claudia Sheinbaum, leaders positioned at opposite ends of ideological spectra, the study showed that their sustainability discourses are not simply inconsistent or oscillatory within left-right divides but structurally undecidable. Rather than stabilizing their discourses around ideological binaries, both leaders sustain articulations that remain radically open, reversible, and continually reactivated.

The analysis demonstrated that this undecidability is not an accidental but a politically functional discursive practice. Nodal points such as Libertarianism and the Fourth Transformation, and the dimensions of sustainability all operate as sites where meaning is held open rather than fixed, not only through what they explicitly claim, but through what they exclude, defer, and leave available for future signification. Thus, in each articulation, coherence is performed rather than achieved, phantasmagorically haunted by the traces of past, present, and potential meanings. Yet, despite transgressing them, binary mappings are still invoked for legitimacy even as they are inverted, overloaded, or deferred through supplementation, enabling populist actors to maintain the appearance of ideological consistency. These findings challenge frameworks that treat contradiction or instability as conditions to be corrected

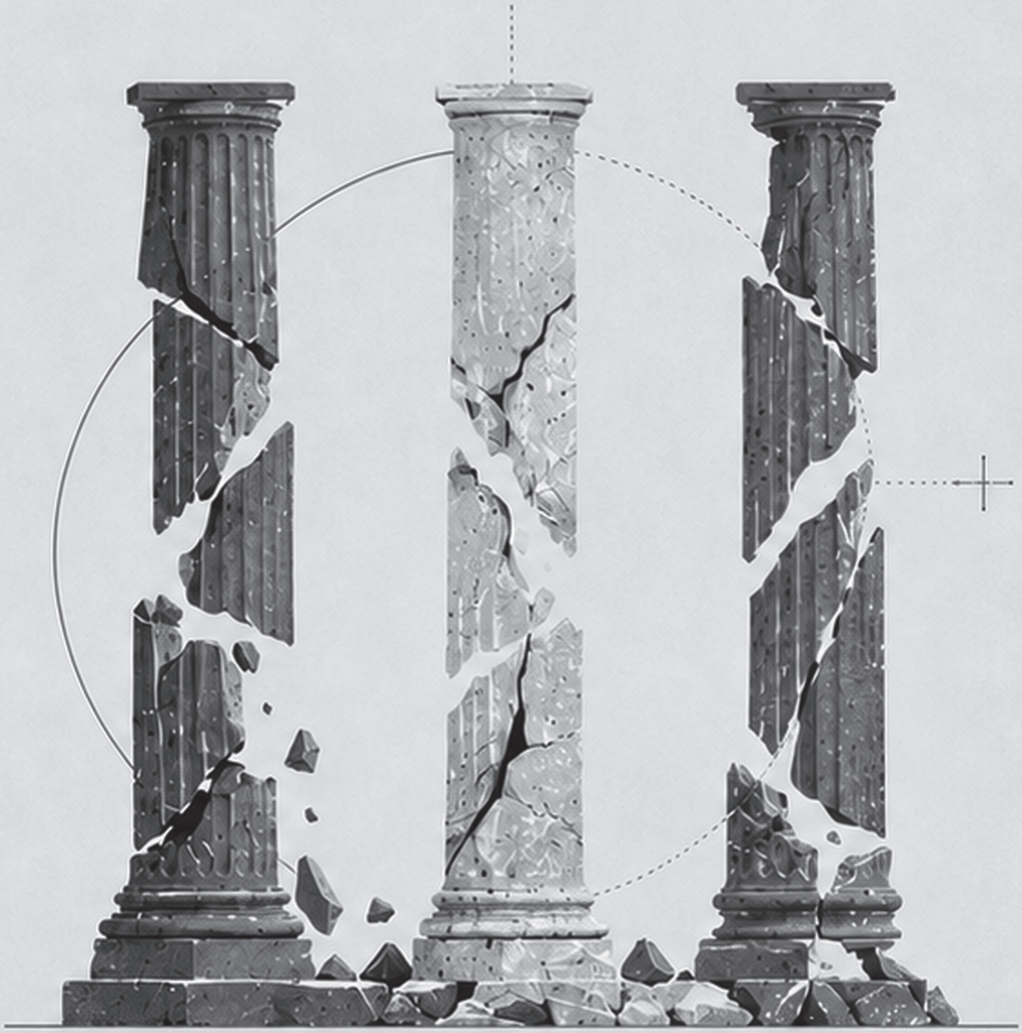
or transitional, whether through ambivalence, floating signifiers, or empty signification, by showing that populist articulation depends on keeping meaning undecidable rather than resolving it.

The study further revealed that undecidability does not reside solely in sustainability's dimensions but extends into the populist logic itself. The people, their will, and the antagonistic other proved to be as iterable and context-dependent as the sustainability elements they organize, allowing the same actors to move between threat and ally, depending on the demands of the moment. Nonetheless, the vertical frontier and its constitutive elements still provide a minimal organizational structure for the discourse, even if this structure remains unstable and is continually reconstituted through shifting articulations. In this way, an unstable logic organizes unstable content, extending discourse-theoretical understandings of populist articulation.

The analysis also revealed a distinct moral-affective dimension of populist articulations of sustainability, as the nodal points of both discourses function not only as sites of unification and condensation but as emotional and ethical authorities that legitimize contradiction, police the boundaries of the discourse, and authorize particular moments and identities. Through their moral force and affective resonance, Libertarianism and Fourth Transformation render incompatible claims simultaneously plausible and desirable, allowing undecidability to operate not as a weakness but as a source of political potency.

Taken together, these insights suggest that populist sustainability discourse does not merely bypass binary mappings; it exploits them to sustain radical openness. This makes undecidability the mechanism through which sustainability is articulated as everything through supplementation, anything because it is not bound to fixed content, and all at once, insofar as meaning is perpetually reopened. In doing so, sustainability under populist logic becomes a pharmakon, as it both 'heals' and 'poisons,' by recovering exclusions, contradictions, and incoherences not only in populist discourse but within sustainability.

This is perhaps the most significant contribution of this study: what populist undecidability reveals about sustainability itself. Milei and Sheinbaum's contradictory articulations highlight sustainability's own internal fractures and constitutive tensions. Populism may therefore expose and strategically activate the exclusions, contradictions, and incoherences embedded within sustainability's discourse. This raises a final question: has populism rendered sustainability undecidable, or has it exposed the undecidability that sustainability already contained? Whatever the answer, understanding sustainability as an open, contested, and radically revisable discourse is essential for grasping both the promises and the risks of its own construction.



Chapter 6

Reinterpreting Sustainability Discourses Around the World

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ABSTRACT

This Special Issue aims to advance the discursive landscape of sustainability by fostering critical reinterpretations of the concept to promote a more inclusive, context-sensitive, and equitable interpretation of it. This will be achieved by exploring how sustainability discourses have evolved and are interpreted across diverse contexts, sectors, populations, geographies, and disciplines, addressing limitations, gaps, biases, uses, and exclusions that the concept has adopted in dominant and conventional global discourses. This Special Issue will contribute to sustainability scholarship by encouraging the production of alternative interpretations that recover the elements and approaches that have been marginalized, underexplored, or repressed in the international discursive landscape. Submissions are encouraged to engage with critical frameworks such as decolonial theory, feminist environmentalism, or postcolonial critiques, as well as empirical research that explores how interpretations of sustainability shape and influence applications of sustainability, such as the role of nature-based solutions in urban and rural settings, education, or the development of more equitable economic models. By integrating multidisciplinary and multidimensional perspectives, this Special Issue is committed to offering a comprehensive, more inclusive, and context-sensitive approach of sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainability, Discourse Studies

1.1 INTRODUCTION

A decade has passed since the international community endorsed two emblematic global discourses on sustainability: the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). Ten years on, sustainability remains a pressing concern for human and planetary survival and well-being, especially amid the rise of skeptical narratives and mounting political polarization (Huber, 2020; Mouffe, 2023; Shokoohyar et al., 2023). While advances in policy coordination and goal-setting are evident (Höhne et al., 2021; Sachs et al., 2025), persistent questions remain regarding the meanings, exclusions, and operational assumptions embedded in the concept of sustainability itself (Arora-Jonsson, 2023; Menton et al., 2020; Mulindwa, 2020). As we reach the midpoint toward 2030, the urgency of addressing these questions intensifies. Current sustainability trajectories reveal persistent implementation gaps, deepening inequalities in climate impact distribution, and growing recognition that technocratic approaches alone cannot address the structural causes of environmental crises (Hickel, 2019; Koehler, 2020; Temper et al., 2018). This juncture demands not refinement of existing frameworks, but fundamental questioning of their epistemological foundations and power dynamics (Kashwan et al., 2021; Nightingale, 2015). In this complex discursive landscape, understanding how sustainability is constructed, interpreted, and contested across diverse contexts is not merely an academic exercise; it is an urgent condition for shaping the post-2030 development future.

This Special Issue departs from the recognition that sustainability is a discursive construct through which the world is rendered intelligible (Dalampira & Nastis 2020; Escobar, 1996; Hajer, 1995). As discourse scholars have long demonstrated (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Foucault, 1972), language does not neutrally mirror reality; it constructs it by organizing meanings and signs, consolidating consensus, and motivating action. Accordingly, when sustainability is articulated, it becomes a social construct that gives form to how environmental challenges are problematized, who is authorized to speak and act, which instruments are deemed appropriate, and what futures are imagined as desirable or even thinkable (Dryzek, 2022; Hajer, 1995). As such, sustainability may signify a policy discourse for "our common future" ((WCED), 1987), a business strategy (Elkington, 1994), or a social responsibility to address "planetary emergencies" (Gore, 2006), all divergent invocations that underscore how discourses are historically situated and shaped by context, beliefs, intentions, or ideology.

We embrace reinterpretation as a deliberate act of discursive reconstruction (Derrida, 1982; Foucault, 1972). Beyond analyzing existing meanings, the contributions actively challenge, disrupt, and reformulate sustainability by recovering marginalized epistemologies, exposing structural exclusions, and proposing alternative significations. Drawing on critical hermeneutics and poststructuralist scholarship (Derrida, 1982; Ricoeur, 1981; Wodak, 2015b), we understand reinterpretation not as discovering hidden "true" meanings but as an interventionist practice that contests taken-for-granted assumptions and opens conceptual space for alternatives (Brown, 2015; Stavrakakis, 2007). Therefore, we do not merely aim to understand how sustainability is constructed, but to intervene in that construction

to destabilize hegemonic signification (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), amplify silenced voices, and make visible what dominant discourses have rendered unthinkable (Escobar, 2014; Sousa Santos, 2016).

This multiplicity of meanings and underlying social dynamics necessitates a comprehensive and critical examination. Prior scholarship has used discourse analysis to trace the evolution of sustainability discourses (Dryzek, 2022; Kidd, 1992; Leff, 2008), to analyze embedded power relations (Escobar, 2014; Jacobsson, 2019), to dissect political and corporate significations and their operationalization (Banerjee, 2003; Howarth et al., 2000; Toft & Hansen, 2025), to explore normative and ideological underpinnings (Feola et al., 2021; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Mota Díaz & Sandoval Forero, 2016), and to assess performance and implementation failures (Ala-Uddin, 2019; Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2021). Yet, a persistent gap remains in achieving a collective, multidisciplinary, and globally inclusive perspective within a Special Issue, notwithstanding the consistent conceptualization of sustainability as a multidimensional construction (Purvis et al., 2018), and the established recognition of the historical marginalization of non-Western contexts within academic and global discourse (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 2014; Mulindwa, 2020).

The Special Issue addresses this gap by centering on voices and contexts often marginalized in sustainability scholarship. We integrate analyses from Ecuador, Bolivia, the Philippines, and Kenya, alongside critical examinations of dominant frameworks from the United States to international institutions such as the United Nations. This geographic diversity is not additive but constitutive, as it fundamentally challenges whose knowledge counts, which epistemologies are deemed legitimate, and what futures are imaginable (Sousa Santos, 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). The collection brings together multidisciplinary perspectives from political and organizational studies, as well as sociological and ethical analyses. The contributions map, examine, and challenge sustainability's diverse significations, thus revealing the embedded power relations, normative values, strategic applications, exclusions, and contradictions, along with the core meaning constructions within its articulation.

The contributions move beyond mere critique or the simple exposition of failures. They encourage the active reinterpretation and disruption of sustainability to offer novel insights for understanding and engaging with the term. In doing so, the Special Issue not only fosters a more diverse and inclusive discourse of sustainability but also holds direct relevance for practice and policy by showing how specific significations set priorities, consolidate agendas, and occlude alternatives (Carant, 2017; Hickel, 2019). Ultimately, we offer an integrated collection of studies that are not limited to a single field or context, advancing the research and conversation shaping current and future sustainability discourses.

Methodologically, this collection employs diverse research strategies for reinterpretation: frame analysis, revealing alternative sustainability logics (Hess, 2025); paradigm critique exposing epistemological hegemony (Ossewaarde, 2010); conceptual excavation of Indigenous alternatives (Villalba-Eguiluz & Carranza-Barona, 2025); empirical investigation of discourse-practice gaps (Kativu, 2025; Yamada, 2025); and deconstructive reading, unveiling structural exclusions (Martínez Aguilar et al., 2025; Tellería, 2025).

Together, these approaches demonstrate that reinterpretation requires both macro-level critique of institutional discourses and micro-level attention to how individuals and communities negotiate, resist, and reinterpret sustainability.

1.2 DISCUSSION ON THE RESEARCH OUTCOMES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The articles collected in this Special Issue reveal that dominant sustainability discourses embody ontological and epistemological assumptions that structurally exclude alternatives (Escobar, 2014; Hickel, 2019; Weber, 2017). These exclusions operate independently of ideological positioning or stated intentions. Martinez et al. (2025) demonstrate that counter-hegemonic discourses reproduce the very mechanisms of closure found in global hegemonic ones, challenging the assumption that oppositional framings inherently guarantee inclusivity (Gibson-Graham, 2006). This redirects attention away from the intentions of actors and toward the structural logic of discourse-making itself, the drive toward coherence, authority, and stabilization that previous research has highlighted (Derrida, 1982; Escobar, 2014; Laclau, 2005a).

Tellería's (2025) analysis of sustainability as systematic deferral further reveals that the problem with dominant discourses is not only in what sustainability promises but in how these promises operate. By positioning transformation as perpetually forthcoming, sustainability discourses can acknowledge crises while systematically avoiding the structural contradictions, particularly the incompatibility between perpetual economic growth and ecological limits, that implementation would expose (Hickel, 2019). The results are discursive architectures that, with each failure, reinforce rather than undermine the gaps between rhetoric and reality, generating calls for better implementation rather than paradigmatic questioning (Koehler, 2020; Weber, 2017). Ossenwaarde and Ossenwaarde-Lowtoo (2025) extend this logic by showing that epistemic exclusion is sustained not through explicit dismissal but through the habitual privileging of Enlightenment rationality, its norms of evidence, method, and intelligibility, which marginalize classicist, romanticist, and post-colonial paradigms (Sousa Santos, 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). This raises a question rarely confronted in sustainability studies: if Enlightenment rationality's hegemony operates through taken-for-granted epistemological commitments, can scholars trained within that paradigm genuinely engage with alternatives, or do we inevitably reproduce the very structures we critique?

The empirical contributions made by the authors (Hess, 2025; Yamada, 2025) provide a material anchor for this theoretical claim. When Yamada (2025) finds that younger, more innovative respondents in Kenya and the Philippines prioritize bottom-up, intra-generational framings, this is not "lack of awareness" but evidence that dominant discourses fail to capture the pragmatic, context-specific sustainability practices already occurring (Scoones, 2010; Temper et al., 2018). Similarly, when Hess (2025) demonstrates that opposition to solar farms articulates alternative sustainability concerns rather

than anti-sustainability positions, he exposes how technocratic decarbonization mandates delegitimize local ecological knowledge by framing place-specific concerns as obstacles to progress.

These findings converge in exposing how the discourse-practice gap is not an implementation problem to be solved through better communication or participation. It is a structural feature of how sustainability discourses operate to maintain coherence and authority. The gap exists because closure, the establishment of authoritative meaning, requires excluding the very contextual complexities, ontological pluralities, and epistemological alternatives that would make sustainability genuinely transformative (Brown, 2015; Laclau, 2005a). As discourse scholars have demonstrated, this exclusion undermines implementation effectiveness (Koehler, 2020), and forecloses the transformative potential of existing alternatives (Escobar, 2014; Temper et al., 2018).

However, perhaps the Special Issue's most unexpected contribution is its demonstration of the epistemic violence (Sousa Santos, 2016) embedded in attempts to "include" alternatives within dominant sustainability frameworks. Villalba-Eguiluz and Carranza-Barona (2025) show that the constitutionalizing of Buen Vivir in Ecuador and Bolivia has produced not transformation but co-optation. One in which biocentric ontologies and relational modes of coexistence are absorbed into political projects that continue to privilege extractivist development (Acosta, 2009; Escobar, 1995). This outcome is not a failure of implementation but a structural inevitability. Discourses grounded in human–nature dualism and anthropocentric instrumentalism of modernity cannot incorporate alternatives rooted in fundamentally different ontologies without neutralizing the very elements that make them transformative. As poststructuralist scholarship has noted (Brown, 2015; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 2007), ontological difference cannot simply be added to discourses built on contradictory premises; "inclusion" under such conditions operates as a mechanism of domestication rather than recognition (Escobar, 2014; Temper et al., 2018). Kativu's (2025) ethnographic analysis further renders this dynamic materially visible by showing that farmers' hybrid strategies are not signs of confusion or incomplete transition but forms of situated resistance and strategic navigation of incompatible epistemological regimes (Altieri & Toledo, 2011; Scoones, 2010). The violence lies not in the dissonance itself but in discourses that pathologize it as a "lack of integration," thereby misrecognizing what is, in fact, evidence of ontological incompatibility and the limits of inclusion.

This raises a central challenge, as if structural mechanisms defeat inclusionary efforts and translation risks violence, reinterpretation requires not better inclusion but fundamentally different discursive architectures. It requires accepting that multiple, sometimes contradictory sustainabilities must coexist without resolution into synthesis. But what type of discourses can support pluriversality without reproducing the closure mechanisms the authors identified (Martínez Aguilar et al., 2025; Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo; Tellería, 2025)? Yamada's (2025) finding that moral foundations and ideological orientations correlate with sustainability framings complicates this further by exposing how pluriversality requires not just institutional change but transformation of how individuals and

communities make sense of their relationships with each other and with more-than-human worlds. This suggests that reinterpretive scholarship must attend not only to macro-level discourse structures but also to micro-level processes of meaning-making, affect, and embodied practice (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 2015b), a methodological demand that few sustainability studies currently meet.

The authors in this Special Issue attend to these challenges by reinterpreting sustainability as a pluriversal discourse (Villalba-Eguiluz & Carranza-Barona, 2025), a radically open construction resisting closure (Martínez Aguilar et al., 2025), a paradigmatically contested terrain requiring trans-paradigmatic dialogue (Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo), a locally-grounded practice exceeding global frameworks (Hess, 2025; Kativu, 2025; Yamada, 2025), and a temporally deferred promise requiring paradigmatic rather than incremental change (Tellería, 2025). Together, they evidence that reinterpreting sustainability requires, first, acknowledging that hegemonic discourses such as the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), despite comprehensive ambitions, they represent culturally and historically situated understandings of desirable futures rather than objective and stable mappings of planetary needs. Second, institutions and authors crafting these discourses must interrogate not whether they are inclusive but whether their organizational arrangements and normative architectures structurally preclude genuine inclusion, a question that demands discursive architectures operating through logics we have yet to develop. Third, scholarship itself must acknowledge its complicity in epistemic violence: by studying, interpreting, and publishing about marginalized alternatives, scholars risk extracting knowledge while reproducing the structural conditions of marginalization (Sousa Santos, 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). The methodological approaches employed by the authors of this Special Issue show how to navigate these tensions while acknowledging that they cannot fully resolve them.

Yet the contributions also suggest grounds for cautious possibility. The discourse-practice gap documented by Yamada (2025), Kativu (2025), and Hess (2025) reveals that transformative sustainabilities already exist in communities navigating global constraints, developing practices that exceed dominant frameworks even as those frameworks render them invisible (Escobar, 2014; Scoones, 2010; Temper et al., 2018). The challenge, as poststructuralist approaches have long documented, is not inventing new frameworks but dismantling structural mechanisms that render existing alternatives unthinkable within dominant discourse (Brown, 2015; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 2007). This may require accepting that transformation will be messy, contradictory, and incomplete, as Martinez et al. (2025), Ossenwaarde and Ossenwaarde-Lowtoo (2025), and Telleria (2025) suggest, and recognizing that sustainability's persistent failure to achieve coherent consensus might actually be evidence of health rather than pathology, indicating the survival of alternatives that refuse assimilation. The contributions together suggest that neither critique nor alternatives alone suffice: reinterpretive praxis must simultaneously expose exclusionary structures and defend the space for alternatives to exist on their own terms, even and especially when those terms remain unintelligible to current dominant discourses.

1.3 CONCLUSION

A decade after the adoption of the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda, sustainability remains a pressing global concern and a deeply contested discursive terrain (UN, 2015; UNFCCC, 2015). As this Special Issue confirms, sustainability is not a neutral descriptor but a discursive construction that shapes which problems, actors, and futures become thinkable (Dalampira & Nastis 2020; Escobar, 1996; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). The contributions examine how sustainability is articulated and contested across diverse contexts, temporalities, and authorships, revealing that sustainability simultaneously organizes meaning and forecloses alternatives.

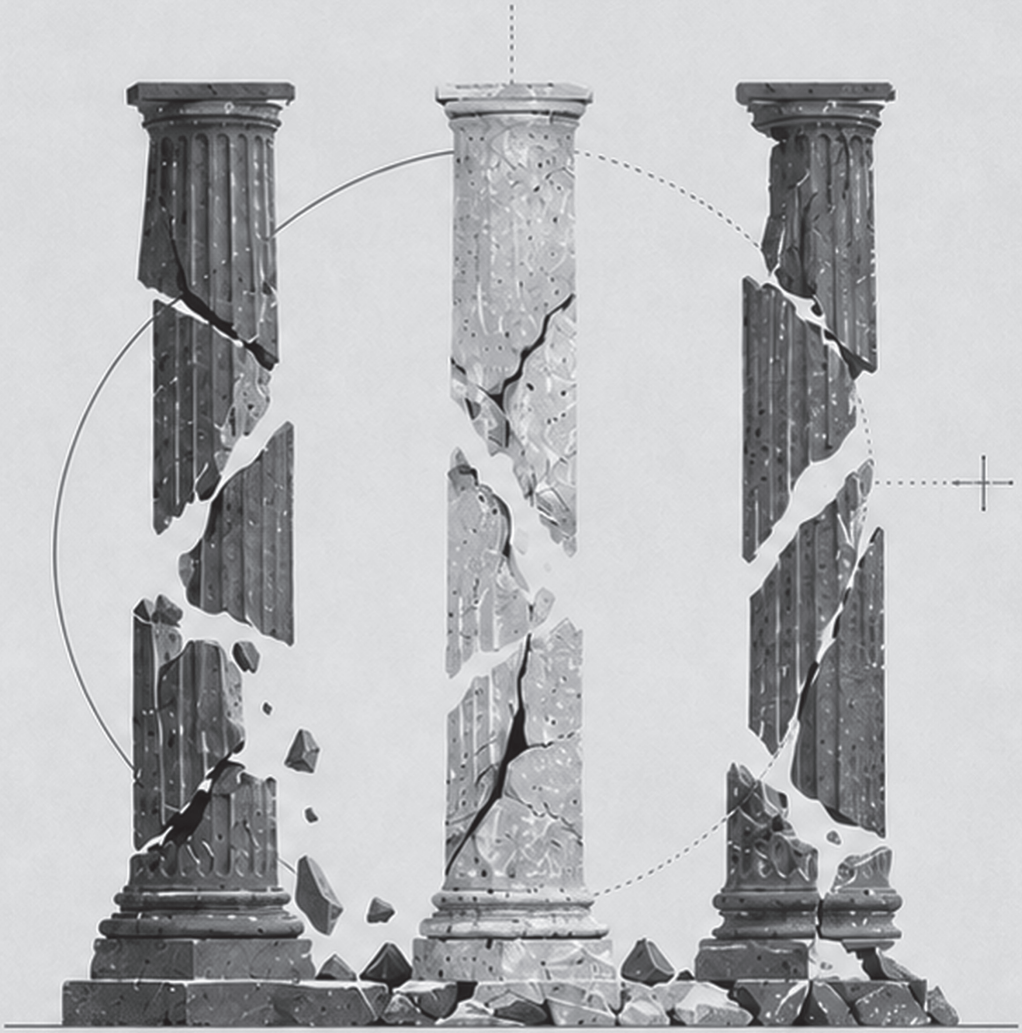
Building from this shared recognition of sustainability's contested construction, the Special Issue advances three principal contributions to contemporary scholarship. First, through analyses spanning Ecuador, Bolivia, the Philippines, Kenya, the United States, and international institutions, the collection demonstrates how sustainability is interpreted, contested, and operationalized across diverse socio-political contexts (Hess, 2025; Kativu, 2025; Martínez Aguilar et al., 2025; Tellería, 2025; Villalba-Eguiluz & Carranza-Barona, 2025; Yamada, 2025). This comparative mapping reveals patterns through which certain knowledge, actors, and temporalities are privileged while others are marginalized or erased. Second, the articles move discourse analysis from critique toward deconstruction, exposing the structural mechanisms, organizational arrangements, moral articulations, paradigmatic hegemony, and temporal deferral that render exclusion and violent repression not incidental but constitutive of sustainability discourses (Martínez Aguilar et al., 2025; Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2025; Tellería, 2025). In doing so, the collection foregrounds the architectures that make particular futures appear inevitable and alternative epistemologies unintelligible. Third, by recovering and analyzing alternative significations, the Special Issue offers not merely critique but generative conceptual resources for reinterpreting sustainability beyond the epistemic and institutional constraints that currently delimit it (Hess, 2025; Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2025; Villalba-Eguiluz & Carranza-Barona, 2025).

As the horizon of 2030 approaches, the central challenge our volume advances is not improving the architectures of existing sustainability discourses but interrogating their adequacy. The contributions collectively demonstrate that dominant and naturalized approaches remain unable to confront the structural drivers of ecological degradation precisely because those drivers are embedded in their ontological and epistemological foundations, which reproduce anthropocentrism, the growth imperative, technocratic rationality, and universalist claims to applicability (Kativu, 2025; Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2025; Tellería, 2025; Yamada, 2025).Reinterpretation, as practiced throughout this collection, therefore emerges not as an abstract academic gesture but as a necessary discursive intervention aligned with long-standing calls to rethink and rework the meaning of sustainability within its own linguistic and ideological constructions (Dryzek, 2022; Escobar, 1996; Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2008). It involves exposing what has been rendered invisible, creating conceptual and material space for what has been excluded, and challenging the presumed universality of dominant sustainability discourses.

The trajectories opened by this Special Issue suggest a set of interrelated research avenues. Methodological innovation requires developing research practices capable of embodying pluriversal principles rather than reproducing extractive or epistemically hierarchical relations (Kativu, 2025; Villalba-Eguiluz & Carranza-Barona, 2025). Institutional transformation demands designing organizational forms that can host genuine epistemic plurality without resolving it into technocratic consensus or managerial absorption (Martínez Aguilar et al., 2025; Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2025). Temporal reorientation calls for shifting sustainability discourse from its habitual orientation toward future promises and deferred horizons to a mode of present-centered accountability and historical reckoning (Tellería, 2025). Practical experimentation invites investigations into the policies, practices, and community-led initiatives that emerge when groups possess meaningful autonomy to define sustainability according to their situated priorities, rather than adapting themselves to externally imposed metrics (Hess, 2025; Kativu, 2025; Yamada, 2025).

Our collection of articles, therefore, raises an important question: What if sustainability, as currently articulated, is not the solution but part of the problem? What if the task is not to achieve "sustainable development" but to imagine forms of flourishing that exceed development's epistemic and institutional limits (Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2025; Tellería, 2025)? And what if transformation requires not more efficient implementation of established frameworks but their fundamental disruption (Martínez Aguilar et al., 2025)? The contributions gathered here suggest that these questions are neither rhetorical nor speculative; they are invitations to engage seriously with what Escobar (2014) describes as "a pluriverse: a world where many worlds fit." Such a pluriverse cannot be produced through sustainability-as-usual. It demands the reinterpretive praxis exemplified across this Special Issue. A critical, creative, and collective effort to carve out conceptual and material spaces where diverse ways of being, knowing, and flourishing may coexist without forced commensuration.

This is the work that lies ahead.



Chapter 7

Discussion & Conclusion

1.1 DISCUSSION

Throughout the chapters that constitute this dissertation, the question *what is sustainability?* was not answered but displaced, as instead of searching for an essence, we turned to how sustainability is articulated, through what logics it is made intelligible, and how we may engage with it without becoming captured by its closures. Following these lines of inquiry, the dissertation opened with a methodological chapter that introduced our deconstructive reading. A type of reading that served us to trace how sustainability is constructed, stabilized, contested, and reconfigured in the chapters that followed, exposing the limits that structure it, and the possibilities of its articulations. Yet, while we revealed the architectures, logics, and tensions that make the term operable, coherent, and legitimate despite its multiplicity and instability, we conclude this thesis with a chapter that returns to the point of departure. A move we made to evidence what we discovered: that there is no inherent meaning of sustainability to be recovered, as sustainability does not exist before its uses, but emerges through the discursive practices that invoke, fix, contest, or keep it open.

What we articulate as "sustainability" does not lie intact, waiting in an undecidable space to be articulated (Ainsworth, 2020; Brown, 2015); nor as a neutral sign endowed with inherent and static meaning (Dunlap & Catton, 1994; Nagoda, 2015). On the contrary, it is a sign open to articulation, produced where, when, and by whom it is articulated and thought (Derrida, 1988), carrying with it the traces of what precedes and exceeds it. Hence, each time we asked ourselves *what sustainability is*, we were *toujours déjà* (always already) situated in an aporetic crossroads (Derrida, 1967 266). That is, in a contradiction without possible resolution because the question itself presupposed the existence of an essence that does not exist. As if the term were a mine whose depth guaranteed discovery. Yet the excavation uncovered no center. Instead, we revealed articulations and their supplements (Derrida, 1978); their architectures that organize meaning without ever fully closing it. So in the end, what this dissertation reveals is that we are not dealing with a singular and stable sustainability but with a plurality of *sustainabilities*, as each articulation constructs it, there, where it I articulated.

1.2 SUSTAINABILITIES: THE LOGICS OF A DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCT

As sustainability is not something signified but something articulable, we approached it as a discursive construct in order to examine how it is produced, how it is organized, and which logics shape its possibilities of meaning. Across Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, we encountered multiple constructions of sustainability. We saw it articulated as a political agenda for global development (UN, 2015). Erected as a national project oriented toward ensuring happiness in this life and across all reincarnations (Bhutan, 1999). Reconfigured as an ecological conversion grounded in faith and moral responsibility toward Creation (Francis, 2015). Presented as a corporate vision centered on the efficient use and management of resources (WBCSD, 2021). And even exposed as a popular and antagonistic confrontation (Huber,

2020; Lockwood, 2018; Mouffe, 2023; Ofstehage et al., 2022). This breadth of variation reveals that, despite their contrasting and even contradictory articulations, these discourses nevertheless gather around the same signifier, each attempting to fix what sustainability should mean and each pushing its margins in different directions.

This finding resonates with what critical (Jacobsson, 2019; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Ribadeneira Aroca, 2020), postcolonial (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019), and post-structuralist literatures (Fritsch et al., 2018; Mouffe, 2023; Stavrakakis, 2007) have argued for decades: that sustainability is not a natural or stable signifier, but a discursive construction in continuous reconfiguration. To recognize it as such implies accepting that "sustainabilities" neither reflect reality nor simply describe it; they intervene in it and produce it. For when the Brundtland Report defines sustainable development as that which meets the needs of the present without compromising those of the future ((WCED), 1987), it is not merely describing a state of affairs. It is instituting a horizon and producing a reality by deciding who counts as a subject (future generations), what kinds of interventions are legitimate (managed development), and which worlds fall outside its structure (those in which time is not organized through the logic of intergenerational inheritance). Hence, our insistence that the meaning of "sustainabilities" does not preexist their articulation. It emerges through that very act, stabilizes within the architectures that momentarily give it form, and shifts whenever another voice lays claim to it.

The question that arises, then, is not whether sustainability is a construct, but how that construct operates. What structures and logics allow such disparate articulations to coexist under the same sign without collapsing?

Across this thesis, we observed that sustainability does not appear as an isolated construct; rather, it is produced in permanent tension with the context from which it emerges and to which it responds, with the relations of power that traverse it, and with the position, intention, and knowledge of those who enunciate it. This is consistent with deconstructive (Derrida, 1967; Fritsch et al., 2018), post-structuralist (Foucault, 1972; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), and critical/postcolonial approaches (Escobar, 1995, 2014; Leff, 2019; Spivak, 1988), which understand concepts not as fixed entities but as effects of discursive practices marked by contingent externalities to the concept itself. We may therefore affirm that we are dealing with a term constituted artificially. A sign produced by discursive architectures that sustain it and, at the same time, put it at risk. Yet if we accept this, the question persists, because if sustainability is produced, how does this artificiality take shape? How is it constructed, how does it function, and how is it sustained for a term so contested to remain recognizable?

At the discursive level, we observed that these contingent externalities, activated whenever sustainability is invoked or put to use, give rise to articulations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), which are discursive structures that seek to grant sustainability a relatively stable meaning, at least for a time. This process does not unfold in a vacuum but within an open, shifting, and always contested field of

signification, where multiple possible articulations compete to become the dominant reference. Within that field, sustainability operates as a point of attraction and condensation for heterogeneous signifying elements, a nodal point (Zicman de Barros, 2025), around which these elements begin to cluster, producing partial and temporal coherent articulations through their interlinking. It is in that assemblage where the term takes on meaning, yet, how do such disparate elements succeed in binding together?

As we saw in Chapter 1, deconstruction would explain this linkage through *différance* (Derrida, 1978): the simultaneous movement of differentiation and deferral through which meaning never appears in full presence, but is perpetually displaced, deferred to other signifiers, marked by its exclusions, and haunted by that which has yet to arrive. Post-structuralist discourse theory (Kølvraa, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 2017) would understand it through an antagonistic logic in which the signifier is organized through chains of equivalence that achieve only partial and temporary stability by drawing a frontier against a constitutive outside. Meanwhile, critical and postcolonial traditions (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 2014; Jacobsson, 2019; Leff, 2019) would insist that such linkages are inherently traversed by power relations. Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, however, we observed that these explanations are not mutually exclusive; rather, they converge. Sustainability operates through the entanglement of four interwoven movements: differentiation, equivalence, deferral, and power.

Regarding the movement of **differentiation** (Derrida, 1967; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), we observed that the elements articulated under "sustainability" acquire meaning both through what they include and through what they distinguish themselves from, for without difference, there is no meaning. In our readings, this differentiation took multiple forms. Aligned with deconstruction (Derrida, 1967; Fritsch et al., 2018), some appeared as binary oppositions—global/local, protection/care, prosperity/well-being—organizing the discursive field around hierarchical pairs. Yet because such oppositions do not allow coexistence and operate through the subordination of the supposedly inferior term, they proved insufficient for explaining the diversity of differentiations present in the discourses we read. This led us to the incorporation of a second type of difference: antagonistic differences, as proposed by the Essex School (Laclau, 2005b; Mouffe, 2023). These are differences that do not function as hierarchical opposites but constitute one another through confrontation, often mobilizing affective or ethical vocabularies as mechanisms of demarcation. Chapter 4 illustrated this dynamic through the construction of sustainabilities around the conflict between the *people* and the *elite*. However, our readings also revealed a third form of difference that fits neither the binary logic nor the antagonistic one. We refer to what we call systemic differences (Luhmann, 1995). These are differences that the discourse neither combats nor subordinates, but also does not integrate. They are elements it registers as irrelevant, inassimilable, or incompatible with its strategic decisions. Elements it cannot incorporate without destabilizing itself. So, as it is unable to absorb them or to confront them directly, the discourse instead defers them, keeping them outside its operative structure without needing to turn them into enemies or opposites. Chapter 3 exemplified this form of difference by showing how both the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015) and the Society of Care report (ECLAC, 2022) signify sustainability not only

through what they integrate but also through what they leave out, exclusions that are not necessarily antagonized, merely rendered inoperative.

The second movement we identified is that of **equivalence** (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 2017), understood as a logic through which heterogeneous elements are equated and rendered comparable, and linked under the sign "sustainable." Through this movement, sustainability can simultaneously articulate intergenerational justice, economic efficiency, and environmental care without collapsing, because the elements that integrate it are stripped of their particularities and reorganized as partially interchangeable components within the same signifying space. Chapter 2 showed how this logic operates through the construction of architectures such as backcasting, in which texts as disparate as the Brundtland Report ((WCED), 1987), An Inconvenient Truth (Gore, 2006), and Laudato Si' (Francis, 2015) can articulate sustainability by resorting to the same transition structure. This coherence does not reflect an ontological consensus but an articulatory production, an equivalence that generates provisional stability.

The third movement, that of **deferral** (Derrida, 1981a; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Luhmann, 1995), shows how discourses exclude or postpone differences of every kind whenever they cannot be integrated without fracturing discursive coherence, or when they are neither significant nor threatening, but their incorporation would nonetheless destabilize the articulation. Chapter 3 demonstrated how the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015) defers the tension between economic growth and planetary limits by associating it with technological innovation, while the *Society of Care* report (ECLAC, 2022) postpones the contradictions between redistribution and continued extractivism by framing them as temporary challenges to be resolved through transition. In both cases, what cannot be directly denied is deferred, rendered invisible, or displaced into a deferred or indeterminate temporality—just enough to cease threatening, at least momentarily, discursive stability (Tellería, 2025). In this way, articulations are produced that conceal the tensions that would endanger their internal coherence, dilute the exclusions that sustain their margins, and postpone those elements that cannot be openly rejected but whose integration would destabilize the discourse's equilibrium.

But these three movements do not operate in a vacuum. They are traversed by a fourth type of linkage: **power**. Not understood as mere external imposition, but as the force that selects, weighs, and delineates what can be articulated (Escobar, 1995; Foucault, 1972; Laclau, 2001; Leff, 2019). It is the point of convergence for interests, structures, and strategic decisions that determine what can be said, who is authorized to say it, and under what conditions it will be recognized as legitimate (Foucault, 1972). To achieve this, power deploys several mechanisms. It may manifest in discursive architectures that organize time and the future, as shown in Chapter 2; in moral vocabularies that delimit responsibilities and obligations, as Chapter 3 demonstrated (Yamada et al., 2022); or in antagonistic oppositions charged with affective and identitarian constructions, as illustrated in Chapter 4 (Mouffe, 2023). In this way, power traverses equivalence, amplifies difference, and authorizes deferral. It is both a condition

of possibility and a limit of articulation (Laclau, 2005b). Power allows "sustainability" to encompass and retain heterogeneous meanings without collapsing, while also fixing its boundaries and its silences.

These movements do not function as separate pieces but as part of a discursive composition that enables an unstable, open, and multiple signifier to function as if it were stable. This, in turn, allows its articulation in discourses that attempt to close its meaning when necessary or desirable, or to keep it open when convenient. And it is here that the constructed nature of the term becomes evident, not because it is "artificial" in the sense of false or unfounded, but because its stability, or its openness, is always produced, negotiated, institutionalized, and sustained by practices, decisions, and frameworks that uphold it.

This recognition of sustainability invites us to recognize that its apparent universality does not derive from a shared or stable essence, but from its articulation. From its capacity to organize elements, convene consensus, and institute horizons. As every discourse that invokes sustainability participates, intentionally or not, in the contestation to fix what sustainability is, in its production of partial and temporary articulations capable of legitimizing a particular construction of the term. Yet, this is paradoxical, as sustainability is always situated and traversed by differences, equivalences, exclusions, and power, so no single articulation can claim full authority over it. Hence, sustainability is not one. Instead, it is the name under which multiple articulations compete to speak: *sustainabilities*. A diversity that is not a discursive or ontological flaw, but the very mode through which the term operates. An insight that exposes the need to understand the kind of signifier capable of sustaining such heterogeneity, absorbing divergent articulations, and nonetheless remaining recognizable and legitimate.

1.3 AMBIGUOUS, EMPTY, OR SOMETHING ELSE… WHAT KIND OF SIGNIFIER IS SUSTAINABILITY?

Although understanding the constructions and the logics through which sustainability is articulated was a driving question throughout this thesis, as our readings developed, it revealed itself as insufficient. We encountered the necessity of naming the signifier we were dealing with, not only to describe how it operates and its logics, but because doing so locates our study within a broader theoretical tradition that understands signs as contingent, political, and structurally overdetermined (Derrida, 1967; Laclau, 1985; Zicman de Barros, 2025). Identifying the signifier thus clarifies the ground from which we can read sustainability, and therefore determines how the term can be understood, engaged with, and contested.

We therefore moved to a question that is no longer descriptive or technical, but ontological: *what kind of signifier is "sustainability"?* This is not a question of theoretical ambition or academic classification.

It is a positioning, yes, theoretical, but also political. Naming the kind of signifier we are dealing with allows us to grasp its force, its capacity to gather and bind, its limits, the places where it resists and where it fractures, and, above all, the possibilities for intervening in it. One does not intervene in an empty signifier as one intervenes in a supplemented one; nor does one destabilize a technocratically authorized term in the same way one destabilizes a term secured through moral closure. Before criticizing it, celebrating it, or setting it aside, we must understand the kind of operation sustainability performs within language. What is it doing when it articulates what it articulates?

As demonstrated in this dissertation, sustainability operates as a multifaceted signifier. Whether framed as ambiguous (Bastos Lima & Da Costa, 2021; Pesqueux, 2009), an oxymoron (Redclift, 2005), or a paradox (Argento et al., 2022; Salas Zapata & Ortiz Muñoz, 2018), insofar as it serves as a site for structural tensions that are difficult to reconcile. From critical and decolonial perspectives, sustainability is further described as a discursive apparatus of power (Escobar, 1995; Leff, 2019; Palmer, 2003), a form of imperial rationality inscribed in global governance (Escobar, 2014; Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2025; Quijano, 2000), and a mechanism of epistemic imposition, normative discipline, and the geopolitical ordering of development (Jacobsson, 2019; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Ribadeneira Aroca, 2020). Meanwhile, from a discursive approach, the term has been categorized as a floating signifier (Kögl & Kurze, 2013) or an empty signifier (Ainsworth, 2020; Atkins, 2017; Brown, 2015), a site where competing political forces struggle to fix its meaning through hegemonic contests, chains of equivalence, and antagonistic logics.

We have traversed all these readings of the sign, inhabiting each of them at different moments. Yet our approach to sustainability does not settle in any one of them. Not because we dismiss them, but because each names something, and at the same time leaves something else unnamed.

Consider, for instance, its designation as an ambiguous signifier (Bastos Lima & Da Costa, 2021; Pesqueux, 2009). At first, ambiguity seems to account for much of what we observed, as it evokes indefiniteness, vagueness, and semantic imprecision. So ambiguity might appear well suited to capture the proliferation of sustainability definitions, the overlapping frameworks, and the difficulty of fixing the term once and for all. Yet our readings showed that ambiguity is insufficient. Whenever necessary, sustainability fixes its meaning. We are not dealing with a sign lacking a structuring logic, but with a coexistence of structuring logics, multiple modes of organization that neither collapse into chaos nor reduce to a single essence. The issue is not an absence of structure, but a plurality of structuring forms.

A similar limitation emerges when sustainability is described as an oxymoron (Redclift, 2005) or a paradox (Argento et al., 2022; Salas Zapata & Ortiz Muñoz, 2018). The signifier certainly harbors internal tensions, such as growth and limits, liberal markets and redistribution, extraction and care. Yet these tensions do not paralyze it. We are not dealing with contradictions that render the signifier inoperative. These are administered contradictions and managed tensions or, in populist formulations, strategically constructed paradoxes. As Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated, such tensions do not float in a vacuum;

they are anchored in specific structures, contexts, and intentions that organize, hierarchize, or defer the terms in play (Derrida, 1967). The contradictions do not disappear; rather, they are redistributed. They are not resolved but postponed and deferred. Not eliminated, but arranged. And through that arrangement, the signifier does not weaken; it expands its operability.

Regarding its interpretation as a device of power (Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2025), at times even an imperial one (Quijano, 2000), oriented toward epistemic imposition and the reproduction of global hierarchies (Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019), our reading does not dismiss this interpretation of the sign but compels us to look beyond it. It is undeniable that certain articulations of sustainability have operated as forces of domination, universalizing Western epistemological frameworks and consolidating North–South asymmetries under the language of responsible and inclusive development (Escobar, 2014; Jacobsson, 2019; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Ribadeneira Aroca, 2020). Yet stopping at these readings is insufficient. Chapter 3 showed that this dynamic is not exclusive to hegemonic discourses. Counter-hegemonic ones also exclude, hierarchize, and force closures. They too delimit what is thinkable, draw normative boundaries, and silence whatever threatens to overflow their internal coherence. Thus, power cannot be reduced to the strategic will of dominant actors or to a hierarchical capacity to impose a political project. It also responds to logocentric inertias (Derrida, 1967): the structural need to produce coherence, reduce contingency, and stabilize the signifier so that it can function by closing what would otherwise remain indefinitely open. This structural account of power, however, does not enable sustainability to operate as an imperial term, nor does it imply that it possesses an inherent orientation toward domination. A signifier does not exercise power by essence. It dominates, when it does, through the configurations that mobilize it, the architectures that organize it, the struggles that seek to fix and authorize it (Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2025; Purvis et al., 2018; Weder, 2023).

At the internal level of the signifier, this play of power takes on a different inflection. Here, power does not concern nations, institutions, or geopolitical blocs, but the elements that compete with one another for priority and inclusion within an articulation. Within this space, chains of equivalence are woven and undone: some demands are elevated while others are subordinated; certain identities become central while others become dispensable. This shows that, within the articulation itself, power also operates as a mechanism of hierarchization, selection, and exclusion (Ainsworth, 2020; Kögl & Kurze, 2013). Yet this power does not exhaust the signifier's internal logic. As we have shown, power is part of how the signifier is constructed, given the constant contestation that characterizes the discursive field in which it resides. But this does not mean that sustainability, internally, is a term of domination. Rather, it is a signifier in perpetual negotiation, marked by the disputes that shape it at specific moments and in specific contexts. Yes, these disputes traverse and constrain it, but also make it mobilizable and transformable. As it is in this persistent instability that both its potential and its danger reside: sustainability can remain open to virtually any articulation, saturating the discursive field and complicating it, yet it is impossible to close it completely without exerting violence (Derrida, 1967), without excluding, without reducing that which exceeds its structure.

It is in light of this persistent instability that the descriptions which come closest to what we observed are those of the floating signifier and the empty signifier (Ainsworth, 2020; Atkins, 2017; Brown, 2015; Kögl & Kurze, 2013). These formulations resonate strongly with our readings, even if neither fully captures what emerged from our studies. Throughout this dissertation, especially in Chapter 2, sustainability appeared as a floating discourse. One that drifts within a competitive and contested discursive field (Laclau, 2001): a signifier available to be seized and resignified depending on context, timing, functionality, and the position from which it is articulated. In this sense, the reading of the floating signifier is not mistaken. However, such floating capability does not necessarily require partial or temporary stabilization, as discourse theory suggests (Forchtner & Kolvraa, 2015). As we showed in Chapter 4, some articulations do not seek to close the signifier. They do not attempt to suture it. They do not desire to fix it under a stable discourse. Quite the opposite, they aim to keep it radically open, not as a deficiency, nor as a failure of coherence to be corrected (Kögl & Kurze, 2013; Laclau, 2001), but as a deliberate condition of possibility (Luhmann, 1995). This reveals that the operability of the signifier does not depend on suturing. It may also depend on its undecidability (Derrida, 1981a), on an openness that refuses closure, such that the signifier need not cease floating to function. For this reason, the category of the floating signifier ultimately proves too short to understand sustainability.

This leads us to the explanation of the empty signifier. At first glance, sustainability seems to fit this category more closely than any other. It certainly operates as a center of attraction for heterogeneous elements (Laclau, 2001), a nodal point. A sign capable of condensing diverse, even contradictory meanings under a single name, because it lacks an inherent signified to anchor it. Through our readings, we saw how sustainability incorporates diverse and divergent elements that range from African regional development and poverty eradication (African-Union, 2001) to climate emergency and individual responsibility (Gore, 2006), and green industrial competitiveness (EU, 2019). Yet our analysis revealed a more complex dynamic in at least two respects. First, it does not function as a container that gradually fills with content until it reaches capacity (Laclau, 2001). Instead, in Derridean terms, it supplements (Derrida, 1981a). Each attempt to fix its meaning does not merely add a new layer; it displaces previous significations and reconfigures the signifier, leaving behind a series of traces that preclude definitive closure. Thus, sustainability is not an empty receptacle where meanings accumulate; it is an unstable construction in which every articulation carries the trace of what it has excluded, its differences, its tensions, and its past adjustments, all of which keep the signifier perpetually "in play". Second, its presumed semantic emptiness is not as empty as it is claimed (Ainsworth, 2020; Atkins, 2017; Brown, 2015). Our readings showed that sustainability is marked by these very traces, and that this marking enables the emergence of relatively stable architectures that organize its articulation. From a three-pillar model (Dalampira & Nastis ; Purvis et al., 2018), and a temporal-processual logic (Bibri, 2018), to moral frames (Yamada, 2025) and antagonistic structures (Huber et al., 2022; Lockwood, 2018). So, although sustainability may lack a stable signified, it does not lack inscription. It does not lack trace. It does not lack organizing form and logic. Reducing sustainability to an empty signifier risks erasing this density, erasing the very residues that make articulation possible. For this reason, while the concept

of the empty signifier brings us closer to what we observed, it remains insufficient to capture the full complexity of the term.

Amidst the numerous categorizations that both mirror and diverge from our observations, the question returns to us: *what kind of sign is sustainability if every classification holds only within certain limits?* The findings of this dissertation do not lead us to a new type of signifier that can replace the previous ones, nor do they offer a definitive classification. Rather, they confront us with a form of resistance. The resistance of the signifier "sustainability" to any final fixation. What we observed is not a sign that functions as one single type of signifier, but one *undecidable* (Derrida, 1978). One that can only function because it never allows itself to be fully closed.

1.4 SUSTAINABILITY: UNDECIDABILITY AND SOUS RATURE

In most of the discourses we read, sustainability is presented as a clear, nearly self-evident concept. However, our readings demonstrate that this clarity is not ontological, but performative and even strategic (Ainsworth, 2020; Luhmann, 1995). Sustainability does not reflect stability; it produces it. As Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated, its coherence does not stem from a shared semantic consensus nor from an inherent essence. It derives from the discursive architecture that gives it form and organizes it. From the logics that frame it to the structures that distribute responsibilities, hierarchize priorities, establish temporal sequences, and delineate antagonisms. Its meaning depends on what it selects and integrates, on what it relegates and excludes, and on the forces that shape its boundaries. For no matter how closed it may present itself, our readings revealed that every articulation is always accompanied by "ghosts" (Derrida, 1981a), the traces of what has been excluded, of the intentions that shape it, of the contexts and temporalities that haunt it, and the spectrum of what might have been or what could yet become. It is in these remnants that the limit of every closure becomes visible.

The attempts to fix its meaning, therefore, do not remedy an alleged original instability (Bastos Lima & Da Costa, 2021; Kögl & Kurze, 2013), nor do they fill a hypothetical void (Ainsworth, 2020; Brown, 2015). Rather, they are deliberate discursive acts (Luhmann, 1995) meant to produce coherence, secure stability, and legitimize an articulation. Its "stability," when pursued, is only partial, artificial, and momentary (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2021), sustained through performative, strategic, and power-laden decisions that momentarily position a particular articulation as the dominant one. Thus, as long as the institutional, managerial, political, or moral architecture that upholds it remains intact, coherence holds. But the moment its exclusions become visible, when tensions can no longer be deferred, and contradiction emerges, stability begins to crack. The signifier does not collapse; it shifts. It is re-articulated and re-composed, revealing, once again, its radical openness.

This discovery evidences an aporia (Derrida, 1993), a paradox without possible resolution. For sustainability is indeed a permanently open signifier, despite attempts to close it. Yet at the same time, it operates as a closed signifier whenever performative, strategic, or power-driven decisions manage to constrain it enough to allow its use, implementation, and institutionalization. Whether through development policies or as a hegemonic project, sustainability requires this facade of closure to function. Thus, closure and openness are not opposing processes, but moments of the same discursive logic. Closure does not cancel the floating condition of sustainability; it suspends it. And openness does not halt fixation, but enables re-articulation.

It is for this reason that we propose to understand, read, and engage with sustainability as an *undecidable* signifier.

Undecidability should not be confused with ambiguity or indecision. In Derridean terms, undecidability names the aporetic point at which every articulation is simultaneously adequate and insufficient, complete and empty (Derrida, 1978). It marks that which cannot be definitively resolved into one pole or the other without violating the very framework that sustains it. Sustainability embodies this condition, perpetually oscillating between openness and closure, inclusion and exclusion. Following the logic of the pharmakon explored in Chapter 4 (Derrida, 1981a), sustainability operates as a remedy when it offers a response to environmental crises, while simultaneously acting as a poison when it leaves rural populations behind. It functions as an emancipatory horizon and, at the same time, as an instrument of normalization and discipline. This is not the result of a simple oxymoronic tension (Redclift, 2005) or an illogical paradox (Argento et al., 2022; Salas Zapata & Ortiz Muñoz, 2018), but of a discursive architecture that requires this indeterminate oscillation in order to remain operative.

This mode of operation does not constitute a flaw to be repaired through stabilization, not even partially or momentarily (Kølvraa, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), nor is it a lack to be ethically corrected as a commitment to that which has been deferred or excluded(Critchley, 2014; Escobar, 2014). It is the very condition of possibility of the signifier. Thanks to it, sustainability can be invoked by global agendas, religious doctrines, national programs, corporate strategies, and feminist discourses without collapsing. Or articulated as radically open, as in the populist logic, precisely by refusing any definitive commitment that would restrict its reach. Through closure, sustainability can implement strategies, authorize decisions, and mobilize action; through openness, it can recover what has been excluded, absorb new demands, and remain available for re-articulation. This capacity allows the signifier to act as a point where seemingly contradictory positions coexist under the same sign: resource revaluation and environmental care; growth and prosperity; meritocracy and redistribution. A coexistence that is possible precisely because contradictions are not dissolved.

And it is precisely for this reason that sustainability should be read and use *sous rature*, under erasure (Derrida, 1967): ~~sustainabilities~~. A term that must be written, and simultaneously crossed out to represent

its double bind: its necessity and its inadequacy, its functional completeness and its ontological insufficiency. We propose to erase it not because it is false, but because it is indispensable yet deficient. The word remains visible within its erasure because it marks an ontological limit: that the concept is vital for thought, yet incapable of exhausting what it attempts to name. It is the visible inscription of an original absence, that is, a trace of a presence that was never full and an absence that is never absolute.

We cannot dispense with sustainability; we do not yet have a more operative signifier for articulating the interconnection between environmental, social, and economic dimensions. And yet, the term fails to fully capture what it promises to name. It always leaves something out. It always overflows. Its use institutes the illusion of stability, but its architecture reveals an irreducible openness, a remainder that returns and reconfigures. And it is precisely this interplay of openness and closure, this undecidability, that constitutes its discursive force.

Sustainability must be written, and at the same time kept, under erasure. Not to abandon it, but to resist closing its openness.

1.5 THE LIMITS OF DECONSTRUCTION

One of the strengths of this research lies in its aim to deconstruct sustainability. Our studies made this possible by employing diverse deconstructive strategies to explore the term. From a reading attentive to the discursive architectures that organize sustainability, such as the architecture of backcasting examined in Chapter 2, to a reading attuned to its radical openness, as Chapter 4 demonstrated, deconstruction operated as the central strategy that made this investigation possible. Deconstruction allowed us to uncover the architectures that generate coherence where none exists; to bring to light the tensions and *différances* that institutional discourses bury beneath transition and moral vocabularies; to register contradictions that coexist without rupture; to understand the oscillation between closure and openness; to grasp sustainability's undecidability as a structural condition; and, ultimately, to inscribe the term *sous rature*.

Yet deconstruction also revealed its limits throughout this research. Although it proved central for disrupting the logocentric structures that produce presence, coherence, and closure in sustainability discourses, it was not sufficient to explain all the mechanisms we found operating in our cases. Deconstruction alerts us to the tendency to search for a center of meaning, to produce presence, and to defer whatever threatens to destabilize the discourse (Derrida, 1967; Fritsch et al., 2018). But on its own, it cannot explain why certain discourses succeed in imposing themselves over others when all share the same logocentric disposition, nor why some articulations acquire institutional authority and normative force while others remain marginal. The articulations analyzed in this dissertation also demanded attention to the strategic decisions (Luhmann, 1995), hegemonic impositions (Escobar,

2014; Leff, 2019), and antagonistic struggles (Laclau, 2005b), as well as to systemic dynamics (Luhmann, 1995) that exceed textual analysis, such as exclusions that operate not through opposition, but through invisibility or irrelevance.

Similarly, the deconstructive insistence on binary oppositions as the primary mechanism of exclusion and connection proved insufficient to capture the architectural complexity we encountered in our readings. Articulation can not be reduced to hierarchical opposition or the infinite deferral of meaning. In the discourses read, we found that alongside binary oppositions such as human/nature or responsibility/irresponsibility, there exist antagonistic relations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), where both poles are mutually constituted without hierarchical subordination, as seen in the people/elite opposition explored in Chapter 4. Furthermore, we identified relations of systemic distance (Luhmann, 1995), where the excluded is not the opposite, but rather that which the system cannot absorb without transforming itself, as shown in Chapter 3. And we also observed relations of epistemic power and colonial suppression (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019), where the excluded is neither the different nor the invisible, but the actively suppressed, precisely because it threatens the hierarchies sustaining the discourse. While deconstruction helped us identify difference as deferred (*différance*), it did not distinguish among these modalities of exclusion, nor explain how they operate differently within institutional, populist, or counter-hegemonic contexts.

Moreover, deconstruction's tendency to privilege openness over closure by presenting undecidability and irresolvability as more "responsible" gestures than the provisional fixation of meaning proved insufficient for understanding sustainabilities (Derrida, 1988). While from an ethical-epistemological perspective (Critchley, 2014), keeping the signifier open can serve as a way of not betraying that which ultimately exceeds any attempt at closure, Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated that closure is not merely an authoritarian gesture, a "poison," or a betrayal of complexity. On the contrary, closure is also a condition of possibility for action. Sustainability must be practiced to exist, and to be practiced, it must be at least provisionally fixed (Ainsworth, 2020). Without closure, there is no backcasting architecture to organize transitions; there are no organizational arrangements or moral articulations to authorize, legitimize, or regulate sustainable practices. Deconstruction still serves to reveal the costs of closure: what it excludes, what it silences, what it defers; but it does not explain its necessity, nor does it offer categories for thinking how to manage that necessity without denying closure's insufficiency. Closure is not only violence; it is also a precondition for action and, at times, for emancipation.

Finally, while deconstruction identifies undecidability as a structural limit that haunts certain signs, such as the *pharmakon* (Derrida, 1981a), our readings repositioned undecidability as a discursive strategy, as we explored through the discourses of Sheinbaum and Mieli. Deconstruction treats undecidability as a barrier to fixation, but it does not consider that this limit can itself become a discursive resource. As it is not enough to note that a discourse is undecidable, one must ask whether undecidability is being managed, exploited, or sustained strategically, and to what purposes. By bringing a systemic approach

(Luhmann, 1995) and political discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2023) into our analysis, we recognized undecidability as more than an ontological condition: it is a mobilizable discursive strategy. This allowed us to identify sustainability not only as an undecidable signifier but as a field where undecidability is exploited either as a condition to be resolved through closure or as a condition to be sustained through openness.

For all these reasons, this research needed to supplement deconstruction with other theoretical traditions capable of explaining what deconstruction alone could not. We turned to critical and decolonial approaches (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019), to the Essex School theory (Laclau, 2005b; Mouffe, 2023; Stavrakakis, 2007), and to systems theory (Luhmann, 1995). Together, they compelled us to look beyond the surface of the term, beyond its official definitions, beyond its apparent neutrality. They led us toward something less visible: the architecture that sustains it and the logics that organize and operationalize it. And it was through these and not in its definition that we encountered ***~~sustainabilities~~***.

1.6 CLOSURES & FUTURE RESEARCH

Every research that sets out to deconstruct inevitably carries a paradox from the outset. As to open, one must also close; to expose the incompleteness of other discourses, one must dare to produce a momentarily complete understanding; to illuminate external exclusions, one must generate exclusions of one's own. This thesis is no exception. In writing it, we articulated, fixed, and traced limits. And these limits, like all boundaries, are necessary and insufficient, strategic and exclusionary, provisional and situated.

As we anticipated in the introduction, we did not intend to produce a final closure to the question that motivated us. We did not seek to determine, once and for all, what sustainability is. Rather, we attempted to expose the multiple voices, structures, and logics that traverse it. Through our empirical cases, we disrupted and displaced multiple articulations, returning them to the reader without the promise of final closure. This thesis is therefore not an endpoint. It cannot be. As no definition exists, or will ever exist, that can conclusively fix what counts as sustainability. But the absence of a definitive closure does not mean that this research had no value.

If this investigation offers a contribution, it does not consist of proposing yet another definition of sustainability. Rather, it advances a different way of reading and engaging with the term. Sustainability emerges not as a stable object to be clarified, but as a contested field structured through decisions, exclusions, and hierarchies that demand scrutiny. For those involved in designing public policy, the analysis demonstrates that every architecture entails exclusions and normative choices that must be rendered visible and contestable. For those participating in social movements, it suggests that

disputing sustainability does not merely involve contesting its content; it also requires challenging the very structures of articulation through which certain demands become intelligible while others are marginalized. Meanwhile, for those operating within corporate or institutional settings, the study reveals that discursive stability is never neutral. It is actively produced through organizational and hierarchical arrangements, exclusions, and contradictions, making it therefore open to reconfiguration.

Therefore, the value of this thesis does not lie in offering closed answers, but in providing tools to identify closures, interrogate sustainability's limits, and decide, more consciously, when to stabilize it and when to reopen it. Hence, our invitation is not to repeat our closures, nor to convert this thesis into a new orthodoxy. The invitation is to interrupt it, to transcend its margins, to re-articulate its insights according to the moment, the context, the desires, and the urgencies each reader inhabits. For if this investigation has worked at all, it has not done so by offering stability, but by leaving fissures. Fissures that cut across our analyzed corpus and extend into our own approach to deconstruction, opening spaces for new lines of inquiry and for questions we do not yet know how to formulate.

Despite our effort to portray discursive diversity across geographies, temporalities, institutions, and ideological frames, our corpus nonetheless privileges texts in English and Spanish, written documents with formal authority, and discourses already stabilized enough to circulate institutionally. In doing so, we left out voices that can expand or even contradict our findings: those unable to stabilize themselves sufficiently to enter institutional circuits; oral articulations whose performativity resists capture; and discourses expressed in non-Western languages, in which sustainability is signified in foreign ontologies. These exclusions reflect both the limits of our own competencies and the availability of the corpus, as well as deliberate methodological choices. Yet we do not understand them as definitive closures, but as openings still to be taken up. invitations for future research to explore whether constructions of sustainability in these other discourses reproduce or destabilize the tendencies, exclusions, tensions, and architectures we identified in our own readings.

Our preoccupation with the authority and legitimacy of sustainability discourses also left unexplored how sustainability is interpreted by the very subjects it includes and excludes: the populations affected, the voices silenced, those labeled "enemies," and the beings that often, without choosing it, bear the consequences of these articulations. Approaching sustainability from that other side would not merely complement the present analysis; it would unsettle the certainties that sustain the discourses examined here. Such an inquiry would likely reveal modes of signification grounded in lived experience, in geographies marked by vulnerability or resistance, and in forms of existence that do not readily translate into institutional discourse. These lines of inquiry remain open for future researchers.

We also did not examine in depth the material dimension of sustainability. We concentrated on discourse and did not pursue a sustained reading of how these discursive architectures become embodied in infrastructures, technologies, or concrete economic arrangements. A pending task, therefore, remains:

to understand how the discursive architectures we identified translate or fail to translate into material practices and systems. Such an inquiry would allow the interplay between discursive closure and material stabilization to be examined more directly. Similarly, the affective dimension was only partially addressed. While we pointed to the role of moral, emotional, and identity-laden vocabularies, we did not explore in an applied way how they operate within the articulation of sustainability discourses. And yet, without responsibility, there is no commitment; without affect, no mobilization; without identity, no adherence or refusal. No closure, no opening. We only briefly addressed them in the Chapters, keeping our exploration open to further readings.

Finally, although this thesis supplemented deconstruction with political-discursive (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Kølvraa, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), systemic (Luhmann, 1995), critical (Jacobsson, 2019; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Ribadeneira Aroca, 2020), and decolonial approaches (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 2014; Leff, 2019), it did so from a situated academic position. One rooted in academic literature, shaped by Western intellectual traditions, and addressed to audiences that largely share those frameworks. This position is not merely contextual; it is a condition of possibility that also delimits what could be thought and said here. Other supplements to deconstruction might emerge from different epistemic frameworks, other ontologies, other worldviews. From frameworks that do not begin from the assumptions mobilized in this work. Through them, other tensions, contradictions, and exclusions may surface, or even a radically different reading not only of sustainability but of deconstruction itself.

These fissures are both our closure and our opening. We do not name them to seek indulgence, but to take responsibility for them. To situate this thesis within a context, an ontology, a position, and a set of limits that define what it achieves, what it makes possible, and what it inevitably leaves outside. And it is precisely because of these fissures that we end this research with more questions than we had when we began.

1.7 CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, we saw that the stability and coherence of the articulations of sustainability depend on acts of opening and closure. On discursive architectures that both disrupt and fix its meaning, delimit what may count as sustainable, and legitimize certain elements while excluding others. **Chapter 2** established the methodological grounds for reading these constructions, showing how deconstruction can trace the architectures, supplements, and tensions that sustain discursive coherence and legitimacy. Using this reading, **Chapter3** examined ten institutional discourses, revealing the logics through which sustainability is articulated, stabilized, and made actionable, while bringing to light the tensions and exclusions that such closures produce. To further explore how closures operate, **Chapter 4** examined the organizational arrangements and moral articulations that sustainability discourses employ, exposing the mechanisms of closure that operate even within counter-hegemonic

discourses and demonstrating how authority, legitimacy, and responsibility are discursively ordered. As an alternative reading to institutional discourses, **Chapter 5** then engaged populist articulations, as they expose the signifier's radical openness, revealing that what lies outside the margins of institutional constructions can return to reorganize the sign from the margins without any stabilization. To close the study, **Chapter 6** returned to the question of what sustainability is, showing that the study of *sustainabilities* must remain open to any and every articulation: presented, marginalized, and still to come.

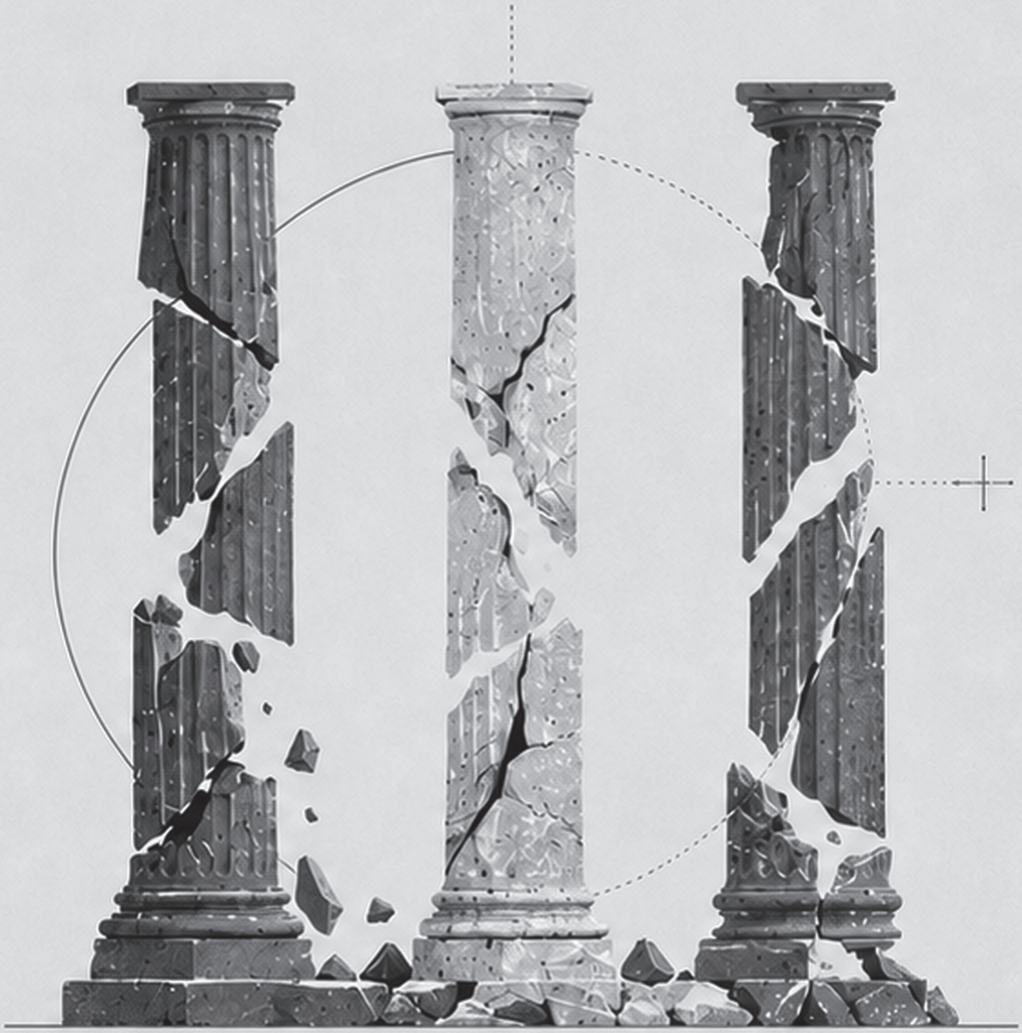
So if any characterization of sustainability emerged from these chapters is that sustainabilities are articulated constructions whose coherence and legitimacy rely on the appearance of stability and coherence, sustained through what we have described as strategic and *phantasmagoric* closures: decided operations that mask the open, saturated, and contested discursive space they inhabit, along with the traces of what is absent, what they sign has been, or will be. Yet closures do not simply foreclose meaning; they also create the very openings through which sustainability can be articulated, interpreted, and contested. They are the very mechanisms that render the signifier significant, usable and intelligible. So, closures are not a flaw but a constitutive and needed operation of sustainability, a *pharmakon*: remedy and poison at once, enabling coherence and stability while necessarily silencing what exceeds its frame. They produce the illusion of unity that allows the signifier to function, that allows it to use and operability as if it were coherent, and even universal and essential, while concealing the excess, omissions, contradictions, and heterogeneity that incessantly unsettle it.

This demonstrates that sustainability operates as an undecidable signifier. One in which any and every articulation can take place, not because it lacks structure, as in the floating signifier, nor because it is devoid of content, as in the empty signifier, but because its structure is always already fractured by the very operations that attempt to secure it. It is this simultaneity, of presence and absence, coherence and disruption, closure and openness, stability and radical supplementation, that makes the signifier undecidable.

This is why we propose to keep sustainability *sous rature*: ~~sustainability~~. Not because it should be abandoned, but because its necessity and its insufficiency must be held together. Writing it under erasure acknowledges that, while no other term yet articulates our environmental, social, and economic crises with comparable operability, we must resist treating it as settled or self-evident, whether through deconstruction or to any other reading strategy that can make us vigilant of every possibility. The erasure makes its limits visible: the worlds it cannot name, the futures it cannot yet imagine. And yet even this understanding may shift. For what if the insufficient begins to outweigh the necessary? What if sustainability, burdened by its historical sedimentation, its accumulated exclusions, its developmental orientation, and its managerial logic, can no longer articulate the futures we need to imagine? Perhaps the most "ethical" thing to do is not to continue supplementing it, but to recognize that certain signs become exhausted, and that our task is not to continue supplementing them but to accompany their

dissolution while searching for others. What would that other sign be? We do not know. Perhaps it should not yet have a name. Perhaps that is, precisely, the promise we attempted to make.

So, if this thesis contributes anything, it is an invitation to inhabit sustainability otherwise: with vigilance toward its limits, sensitivity to its absent traces, and a willingness to reopen what has been prematurely closed. And because of this, the thesis is not a closure but an opening: toward questions still arriving, toward futures not yet articulated, and toward signs that may one day replace the ones we now inherit.



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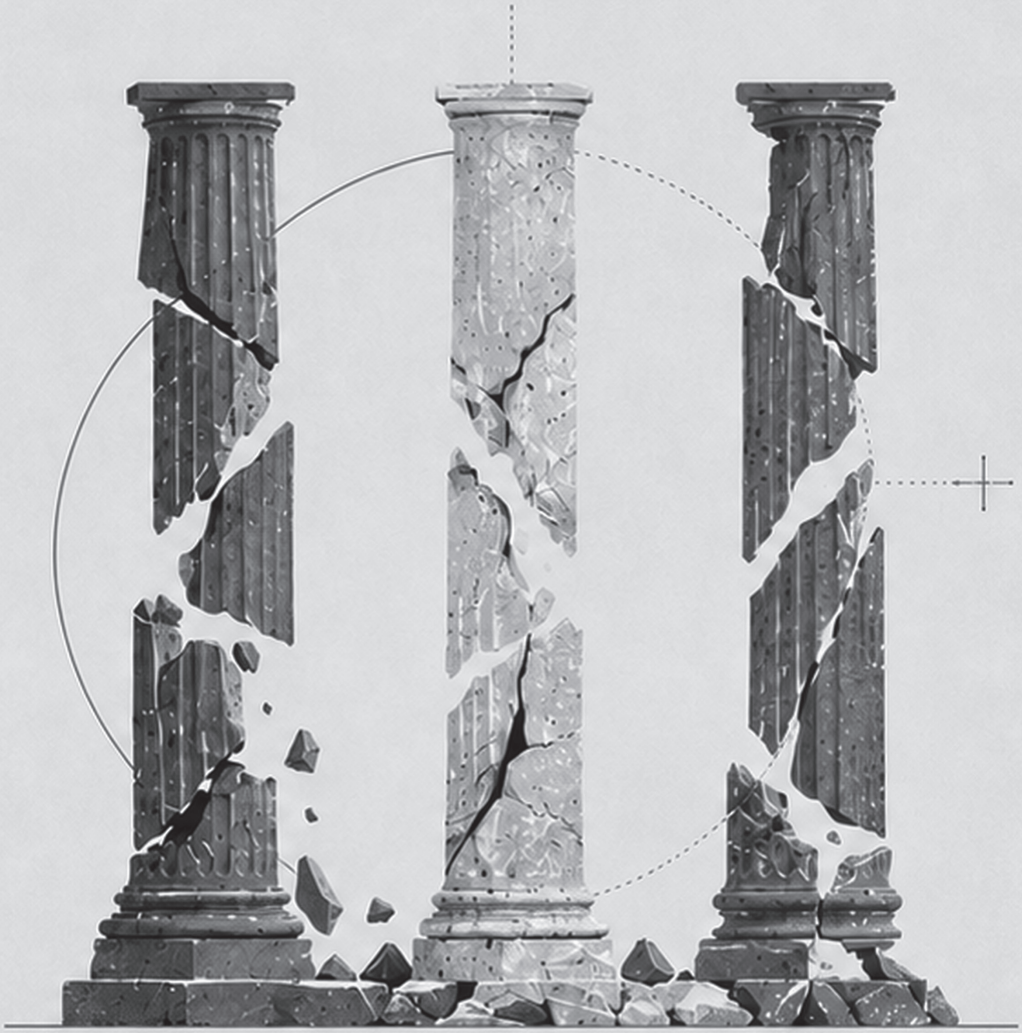

Appendices

A1 List of figures and tables

A2 Chapter Appendices

- **A2.1** Approaches to Deconstruction as a Reading Strategy
- **A3.1** Envisioned Future Frame
- **A3.2** Present Diagnosis Frame
- **A3.3** Prognostic Pathway Frame
- **A5.1** Sample of Javier Milei Speeches
- **A5.2** Sample of Claudia Sheinbaum Speeches

A3 Data Management Statement

A4 Dutch Summary

A5 English Summary

A6 Spanish Summary

A7 Acknowledgments

A8 List of Publications, Conferences, Grants & Other Activities

A9 About the Author

A1. LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

No. Chapter	No. Figure	Heading	Page
Chapter 2	Figure 2.1	Reading Strategy for Discourse Studies	37
Chapter 3	Figure 3.1	Backcasting Frame	63
Chapter 5	Figure 5.1	A Structural Visualization of the Discourse Logic of the Essex School's Theory	104

Note: *Figures are labelled using the chapter number followed by a number linked to their order of appearance within that chapter.*

Tables

No. Chapter	No. Figure	Heading	Page
Chapter 3	Table 3.1	Backcasting Frame	55
Chapter 3	Table 3.2	Corpus of Analysis	57
Chapter 5	Table 5.1	Binary Mapping of Populist Articulation of Sustainability	101
Chapter 5	Table 5.2	Milei's and Sheinbaum's Articulation of Sustainability	108-109

Note: *Tables are labelled using the chapter number followed by a number linked to their order of appearance within that chapter.*

A2. CHAPTER APPENDICES

No. Chapter	No. Appendix	Heading	Page Referenced
Chapter 2	A2.1	Approaches to Deconstruction as a Reading Strategy	23
Chapter 3	A3.1	Envisioned Future Frame	47
Chapter 3	A3.2	Present Diagnosis Frame	48
Chapter 3	A3.3	Prognostic Pathway Frame	50
Chapter 5	A5.1	Sample of Javier Milei Speeches	90
Chapter 5	A5.2	Sample of Claudia Sheinbaum Speeches	90

Note: *Each appendix is identified by the letter "A" for Appendix, followed by a number linked to its order of appearance within that chapter.*

A2.1 Approaches to Deconstruction as a Reading Strategy

Approach	Discipline	Moves	Object of analysis
Deconstruction as a Critical Analytical Tool *(Balkin, 1987)*	Legal studies	• Identification of hierarchical oppositions. • Temporary reversal of hierarchies by exposing present and absent elements, "free play" of connections, dominant legitimized interpretations, logic of supplements, and différance.	Legal texts, ideologies, and doctrines
Deconstructive Discourse Analysis *(Macleod, 2002)*	Qualitative research (psychology)	• Reading and re-reading of the material. • Thematic coding and re-reading of coded text while analyzing concepts. • Deconstruction through sous-rature. • Sabotaging binary oppositions by expanding one term to include aspects of the other and by introducing undecidables.	Discourse as events (discursive and social practices)
Deconstruction as a Double Bind Practice and a Process *(Kilduff & Kelemen, 2004)*	Organizational studies	• Interrogates claims to scientific truth, obvious principles, apparently clear arguments, gaps in logic, and assumptions. • Reveals absent elements and avoided conclusions, rhetorical moves, hierarchical binary oppositions, and contradictions in the discursive structure.	Organizational discourses
Deconstruction as an Aporetic Method *(Thomassen, 2010)*	Political studies	• Recognizes inherent subjective biases, positions, and traditions. • Begins with preparatory reading of the text. • Textual immanence: acknowledges the text's boundaries and indeterminacies while questioning its coherence and limits. • Double gesture / infrastructural accounting: investigates aporias to identify hierarchical conceptual distinctions beyond the structural level. • Reverses conceptual hierarchies by tracing iterable marks, exposing différance, and introducing undecidabilities. • Generalizes the displacement so the old hierarchy is not simply inverted but transformed through reinterpretation.	Texts in Derridean terms, including political phenomena, events, practices, and institutions

A2.1 Continued

Approach	Discipline	Moves	Object of analysis
Deconstruction as an 'Anti-Method' *(Griffin, 2013)*	International relations	• Selects the text. • Produces a first (traditional) reading focused on context, textual meaning structure, authorial intentions, and logical constructions. • Produces a second (deconstructive) reading focused on assumptions, primary elements, binary oppositions, tensions and contradictions, and mismatches with accepted meaning. • Unsettles the text by exposing how assumptions weaken the structural argument, breaking down hierarchical binaries, and questioning claims of normality.	Texts in Derridean terms, including political phenomena, events, practices, and institutions
Deconstruction Hypothesis *(Gnanasekaran, 2015)*	Linguistics, semiotics	• Reader: examines the text and its external context; uncovers blind spots and social standards; identifies sequential language relations. • Decoder/interpreter: delivers the content, identifies implications and patterns, and finds uninterrupted linguistic and semantic orders and equivalents. • Examiner/investigator/researcher: re-examines the text to reveal unconscious elements, unified patterns, opposing components, and paradoxical connections (aporias). • Critic: rereads the text to identify inconsistencies in language use and sentence structure, reveal tensions and deficiencies, and expose unconscious elements.	Texts as "the figural language of writings and expressions of the human experience" (p. 212)
Deconstructive Double Reading *(Kakoliris, 2022)*	Philosophy	• First reading / double commentary: reconstructs authorial intention and dominant interpretations; incorporates language and socio-institutional contexts; and identifies minimal consensus, common interpretive norms, and central meanings. • Second / deconstructive reading: displaces structural meaning by inverting hierarchical oppositions, exposing contradictions or blind spots, (re)inscribing repressed elements, and introducing undecidables.	Texts in Derridean terms, including political phenomena, events, practices, and institutions

A3.1 Envisioned Future Frame

Text ID	Envisioned Future	Temporal Target
OCF	Prosperous, just, secure world; satisfaction of basic needs across generations; equitable and revived growth; ecological capital maintained	21st Century / Beyond 2000
BT2020	Buddhist-rooted modernization; preservation of cultural identity & national sovereignty; clean, biodiversity-based growth; happiness over GDP	2020
NEPAD	African emancipation & global participation; poverty eradicated; competitive, integrated economy (7% growth); peaceful and democratic states; environmental loss reversed	2015 (15 years)
AIT	Habitable Earth; participatory democracy; civic mobilization; moral transformation; intergenerational justice	Mid-century; no fixed end-point
LS	Care for the poor and God's creation; spiritual-ecological reconciliation; dialogue and ecological citizenship	"Here and now", beyond / No fixed end-point
A2030	Just, peaceful, inclusive, and equitable world free of poverty; universal rights and human potential realized; sustainable and prosperous economies and growth; lasting protection of the planet.	2030
PA	Global temperature below 2°C (pursuing 1.5°C); resilient, low-emission societies; consistent financial climate flows	2050 (mid-century)
EGD	Climate-neutral, circular EU; competitive, prosperous, and resource-efficient economies; natural capital protected and enhanced; just, inclusive, participatory society grounded in well-being.	2030/2050
V2050	Business-led society: 9+ billion people living well within planetary boundaries; regenerative capitalism	2050
CS	Care society; gender equality; human-eco interdependence; sustainability of life prioritized over capital accumulation	Alignment with A2030 / No fixed end-point

A3.2 Present Diagnosis Frame

Text ID	Problems	Causes	Contextual Factors
OCF	Interlocking crises; environmental degradation; poverty; debt; nuclear threats; political tension	Compartmentalized thinking; development pressures; economic and social asymmetries; anthropocentric development; rapid urbanization; resource depletion	Late Cold War; nuclear war concerns; long-term polarization
BT2020	Cultural & identity erosion; environmental pressure; emerging social & economic inequalities; threats to sovereignty; complex governance; financial constraints for development; dependence on material gains	Western influence; rapid urbanization; development pressures; dependence on fossil energy; institutional gaps & data deficiencies; dependence on external assistance; resource extraction	Small nation; globalization; transition from authoritarian to more democratic regime; natural resources preserved (untouched)
NEPAD	Persistent conflict; poverty; weak institutions; environmental degradation; marginalization from globalization; reduced global political and economic participation; brain drain; low economic growth	Colonial legacy and post-colonialist practices; poor governance; low capacity; structural impediments; external exploitation; political and economic global asymmetries; resource abundance with poverty; lack of opportunities; debt burdens; concentrated and undiversified markets	Post-colonial Africa; globalization; economic and political barriers; fragmentation and disunity between African countries
AIT	Planetary emergency of climate change; threats of extinction; political paralysis; communicative distortion	Human-caused emissions; denial and disinformation; disconnection between science and politics; false economy-environment choice	Presidential election period; organized fossil fuel propaganda; communicative distortion; ethical decline
LS	Cry of Earth and Poor; throwaway culture; inequality; rapid urbanization; social breakdown and rise of violence; environmental degradation and climate change	Anthropocentrism & relativism; maximization of profits; wealth concentration; short-term thinking and *rapidification*; weak international responses; disconnection of human-creation; loss of values & purpose; ecological debt vs financial debt; intensive use of fossil fuels	Post-2008 financial crisis; technocratic paradigm dominance; industrialization; moral decline

A3.2 Continued

Text ID	Problems	Causes	Contextual Factors
A2030	Widespread multidimensional poverty and hunger; persistent inequalities (economic, social, environmental); climate change & persistent environmental degradation; conflicts; health threats; humanitarian crises	Unsustainable consumption/ production; governance failures; corruption; poor implementation; resource depletion & inefficient use; fossil-fuels dependency; compartmentalized approaches; uneven and unsustainable growth	Post-2008 financial crisis; uneven progress; asymmetric capabilities; conflict and terrorism; unilateral economic measures; poor responses
PA	Urgent climate threat; unequal impacts; vulnerability gaps; insufficient mitigation/ adaptation efforts	Anthropogenic emissions; unambitious & asymmetric targets; insufficient finance flows; weak technology/ capacity & low transfers; low transparency & coordinated accountability	Implementation deficits; transparency gaps; disparate national capacities; common but differentiated responsibilities
EGD	Environmental crisis; biodiversity loss; linear economy; energy poverty; fossil fuel dependency; social injustice	Resource extraction; unsustainable consumption; short-term corporate thinking; weak enforcement; linear economies; social asymmetries; unsustainable food system; unambitious regional targets; fossil-fuel dependency	Social vulnerabilities; carbon leakage risk; transition inequality; missed regional coordination & cooperation
V2050	Three interlocked crises: climate, nature loss, inequality; high costs of transition; investor and policymaker disinterest; short-termism; value extraction; polarization; misaligned finance	Capitalist model focused on value extraction; short-term self-interest; protectionism; corporate inertia	Post-pandemic exposure of vulnerabilities; COVID-19 impacts; trade wars; off-track SDG progress
CS	Overlapping crises (COVID, food, energy, care, climate, ecological); gender inequality; androcentric and anthropocentric development model; poverty; undervaluation of care; indigenous dispossession of land	Capital-centric economy; patriarchy; extractivism & post-colonial practices; self-reliance and individualism dominance; reduced participation (state and social); classism; disconnection with environment	Latin America/Caribbean context; historical gender hierarchies & macho societies; colonial legacies; multidimensional asymmetries

A3.3 Prognostic Pathway Frame

Text ID	Problems	Causes	Contextual Factors
OCF	Interlocking crises; environmental degradation; poverty; debt; nuclear threats; political tension	Compartmentalized thinking; development pressures; economic and social asymmetries; anthropocentric development; rapid urbanization; resource depletion	Late Cold War; nuclear war concerns; long-term polarization
BT2020	Cultural & identity erosion; environmental pressure; emerging social & economic inequalities; threats to sovereignty; complex governance; financial constraints for development; dependence on material gains	Western influence; rapid urbanization; development pressures; dependence on fossil energy; institutional gaps & data deficiencies; dependence on external assistance; resource extraction	Small nation; globalization; transition from authoritarian to more democratic regime; natural resources preserved (untouched)
NEPAD	Persistent conflict; poverty; weak institutions; environmental degradation; marginalization from globalization; reduced global political and economic participation; brain drain; low economic growth	Colonial legacy and post-colonialist practices; poor governance; low capacity; structural impediments; external exploitation; political and economic global asymmetries; resource abundance with poverty; lack of opportunities; debt burdens; concentrated and undiversified markets	Post-colonial Africa; globalization; economic and political barriers; fragmentation and disunity between African countries
AIT	Planetary emergency of climate change; threats of extinction; political paralysis; communicative distortion	Human-caused emissions; denial and disinformation; disconnection between science and politics; false economy-environment choice	Presidential election period; organized fossil fuel propaganda; communicative distortion; ethical decline
LS	Cry of Earth and Poor; throwaway culture; inequality; rapid urbanization; social breakdown and rise of violence; environmental degradation and climate change	Anthropocentrism & relativism; maximization of profits; wealth concentration; short-term thinking and rapidification; weak international responses; disconnection of human-creation; loss of values & purpose; ecological debt vs financial debt; intensive use of fossil fuels	Post-2008 financial crisis; technocratic paradigm dominance; industrialization; moral decline

A3.3 Continued

Text ID	Problems	Causes	Contextual Factors
A2030	Widespread multidimensional poverty and hunger; persistent inequalities (economic, social, environmental); climate change & persistent environmental degradation; conflicts; health threats; humanitarian crises	Unsustainable consumption/ production; governance failures; corruption; poor implementation; resource depletion & inefficient use; fossil-fuels dependency; compartmentalized approaches; uneven and unsustainable growth	Post-2008 financial crisis; uneven progress; asymmetric capabilities; conflict and terrorism; unilateral economic measures; poor responses
PA	Urgent climate threat; unequal impacts; vulnerability gaps; insufficient mitigation/ adaptation efforts	Anthropogenic emissions; unambitious & asymmetric targets; insufficient finance flows; weak technology/capacity & low transfers; low transparency & coordinated accountability	Implementation deficits; transparency gaps; disparate national capacities; common but differentiated responsibilities
EGD	Environmental crisis; biodiversity loss; linear economy; energy poverty; fossil fuel dependency; social injustice	Resource extraction; unsustainable consumption; short-term corporate thinking; weak enforcement; linear economies; social asymmetries; unsustainable food system; unambitious regional targets; fossil-fuel dependency	Social vulnerabilities; carbon leakage risk; transition inequality; missed regional coordination & cooperation
V2050	Three interlocked crises: climate, nature loss, inequality; high costs of transition; investor and policymaker disinterest; short-termism; value extraction; polarization; misaligned finance	Capitalist model focused on value extraction; short-term self-interest; protectionism; corporate inertia	Post-pandemic exposure of vulnerabilities; COVID-19 impacts; trade wars; off-track SDG progress
CS	Overlapping crises (COVID, food, energy, care, climate, ecological); gender inequality; androcentric and anthropocentric development model; poverty; undervaluation of care; indigenous dispossession of land	Capital-centric economy; patriarchy; extractivism & post-colonial practices; self-reliance and individualism dominance; reduced participation (state and social); classism; disconnection with environment	Latin America/Caribbean context; historical gender hierarchies & macho societies; colonial legacies; multidimensional asymmetries

A5.1 Sample of Javier Milei Speeches

#	Date	Description	Speech ID
1	17/01/2024	At the Davos Forum, Switzerland.	20240117Davos
2	24/02/2024	At the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, DC.	20240124Washington
3	01/03/2024	Inauguration of the 142nd ordinary session of the Legislative Assembly, from the National Congress.	20240301BuenosAires
4	17/04/2024	El Camino del Libertario.	20240417ECL
5	19/05/2024	At the major Vox event 'Viva 24' in Vistalegre, Madrid, Spain.	20240519Madrid
6	05/06/2024	At the Latam Economic Forum.	20240605Medellin
7	12/06/2024	At the Cato Institute conference on Liberty and Progress.	20240612CATO
8	09/07/2024	Words at the signing of the May Pact.	20240709MayPact
9	28/07/2024	At the International Livestock, Agriculture and Industry Exhibition, in La Rural.	20240728LaRural
10	05/09/2024	At the Madrid Forum, Río de la Plata Edition, at the Libertad Palace, Buenos Aires City.	20240905CABA
11	23/10/2024	At a World Economic Forum event, Buenos Aires.	20241023WEF
12	18/11/2024	Speech at Session II of the G20 Leaders' Summit.	20241118G20
13	21/11/2024	At the Argentina–Israel Business Meeting.	20241121NY
14	05/12/2024	At the Conservative Action Policy Conference.	20241205Washington
15	23/01/2025	At the Davos Forum, Switzerland.	20250123Davos
16	21/02/2025	At the Inter-American Development Bank, U.S.	20250221BID
17	22/02/2025	At CPAC in Washington, D.C., 2025.	20250222CPAC

Note: *First 500 days of government (December 2023 – April 2025).*

A5.2 Sample of Claudia Sheinbaum Speeches

#	Date	Description	Speech ID
1	01/10/2024	Inauguration and message to the nation as President before the Union Congress. Attended by international representatives.	20241001Congress
2	01/10/2024	Inauguration speech at Zócalo, Mexico City.	20241001Inauguration
3	04/10/2024	Event commemorating the bicentennial of the Constitution of 1824, including a military parade at Mexico City.	20241004Constitution
4	06/10/2024	Speech in Tizayuca, Hidalgo, about water supply and management.	20241006Tizayuca
5	13/10/2024	Mexico–Querétaro train at Querétaro.	20241013Querétaro
6	19/10/2024	Speech in Escárcega, Campeche.	20241019Escarcega
7	20/10/2024	Universal disability pension and debut of 'Mujeres Bienestar', at Progreso, Yucatán.	20241020Progreso
8	25/10/2024	Inauguration of a hospital in Mulegé, Baja California Sur.	20251024Mulegè
9	26/10/2024	Meeting with the Baja California cabinet in Rosarito to define strategic programs, including guaranteeing access to water.	20241026Rosarito
10	27/10/2024	Report on hurricanes Otis and John in Guerrero and Oaxaca, held in Acapulco.	20241027Acapulco
11	09/11/2024	Inauguration of the Pata de Gallo–Teneraca road in Mezquital, Durango.	20241109Mezquital
12	10/11/2024	Meeting/speech in Zacatecas discussing the peace construction strategy in the state.	20241110Zacatecas
13	18/11/2024	Speech discussing Mexico's progress in poverty reduction, FDI, infrastructure, and welfare programs at a G20 event.	20241118G20
14	19/11/2024	Speech discussing global governance reform, people's rights, and Mexico's proposal for UN Security Council reform at a G20 event.	20241119G20
15	24/11/2024	Speech in Álvaro Obregón (AO), Michoacán, discussing interest in the judicial election.	20241124AO
16	25/11/2024	Signing of the Agreement for the Human Right to Water and Sustainability in Xochimilco, Mexico City.	20241125Xochimilco
17	06/12/2024	Speech in Tuxtla, about welfare programs and introducing three new programs.	20241206Tuxtla
18	07/12/2024	Speech in Santiago Astata, Oaxaca, discussing La Clínica es Nuestra, La Escuela es Nuestra, judicial election, and new welfare programs.	20241207SAstata
19	08/12/2024	Speech in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, discussing housing programs.	20241208Matamoros
20	10/12/2024	Security meeting in Acapulco with governors and security cabinet members.	20241210Acapulco
21	13/12/2024	Event at Palacio Nacional, Mexico City, discussing the history and strengthening of IMSS.	20241213IMSS
22	14/12/2024	Launches 'La Ceiba' ecopark linked to Tren Maya at Palenque, Chiapas.	20241214Palenque

A5.2 Continued

#	Date	Description	Speech ID
23	15/12/2024	Marks Tren Maya's first year at Othón Blanco.	20241215OBlanco
24	20/12/2024	Speech in Sierra Tarahumara, Chihuahua, discussing welfare programs, constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples, etc.	20241220Tarahumara
25	21/12/2024	Speech in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.	20241221CdJuarez
26	22/12/2024	Speech in Mazatlán, Sinaloa, discussing new welfare programs, strengthening the health system, and announcing a new IMSS hospital in Culiacán.	20241222Mazatlan
27	28/12/2024	Inauguration of the Bucerías–Puerto Vallarta highway section (Banderas).	20241228Banderas
28	28/12/2024	Speech about the new highway in Puerto Vallarta/Bucerías.	20241228Vallarta
29	29/12/2024	Speech in Panotla, Tlaxcala, discussing the Salud Casa por Casa program, and other welfare programs.	20241229Panotla
30	04/01/2025	Speech in Huauchinango, Puebla, discussing the constitutional status of welfare programs.	20250104Huauchinango
31	04/01/2025	Speech in Tepeapulco, Hidalgo, detailing the Salud Casa por Casa program.	20250104Tepeapulco
32	05/01/2025	Speech in Xochitepec, Morelos, discussing constitutional welfare rights and programs.	20250105Xochitepec
33	12/01/2025	Report on the first 100 days of government at the Zócalo, Mexico City.	20250112_100D
34	13/01/2025	Presentation of the first draft of 'Plan México' at the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City.	20250113PlanMéxico
35	16/01/2025	Meeting with municipal presidents at Acapulco.	20250116Acapulco
36	16/01/2025	Summit with governors and mayors, Encuentro Municipal Nacional.	20250116EMN
37	25/01/2025	Speech in Mitla, Oaxaca, highlighting the historical significance of direct budget allocation for indigenous communities.	20250125Mitla
38	31/01/2025	Speech in Nezahualcóyotl, State of Mexico, discussing housing improvement support and resource pooling for infrastructure projects.	20250131Neza
39	02/02/2025	Speech in Ixtapaluca, State of Mexico, discussing housing improvement support and Infonavit/Fovissste debt relief.	20250202Ixtapaluca
40	03/02/2025	Speech in Ecatepec, State of Mexico, detailing the Salud Casa por Casa program services and future Farmacias del Bienestar.	20250203Ecatepec
41	03/02/2025	Speech in Texcoco, State of Mexico, discussing housing improvement support, selection process, direct funds, etc.	20250203Texcoco
42	14/02/2025	Speech in Emiliano Zapata, Veracruz, confirming the start of medical visits for the Salud Casa por Casa program.	20250214EZapata
43	15/02/2025	Speech in Gutiérrez Zamora, Veracruz, discussing welfare programs as constitutional rights.	20250215GZamora

A5.2 Continued

#	Date	Description	Speech ID
44	21/02/2025	Speech in Pueblo Nuevo, Durango, discussing constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples, Justice Plans, and new welfare programs.	20250221PNuevo
45	22/02/2025	Speech in Guadalupe Victoria, Durango, detailing the three new welfare programs.	20250222GVictoria
46	25/02/2025	Presentation of the national 'Salud Feliz' program, focusing on health prevention in schools and for adult seniors.	20250225SaludFeliz
47	01/03/2025	Speech in Irapuato, Guanajuato, discussing security strategy, recognizing women's work, free medications, 'Salud Casa por Casa', and infrastructure work.	20250301Irapuato
48	01/03/2025	Speech at a new Combined Cycle Plant in Salamanca, Guanajuato.	20250301Salamanca
49	02/03/2025	Speech in Manzanillo, Colima, addressing local concerns.	20250302Manzanillo
50	16/03/2025	Speech in Macuspana, Tabasco, discussing the 'Crédito a la Palabra' program for food self-sufficiency.	20250316Macuspana
51	16/03/2025	Inauguration of the Carrizal II Water Treatment Plant in Villahermosa, Tabasco.	20250316Villahermosa
52	22/03/2025	Inauguration of the Tlaxcala Wastewater Treatment Plant.	20250322Tlaxcala
53	23/03/2025	Inauguration of the highway in Real del Monte, Hidalgo.	20250323RealDelMonte
54	29/03/2025	Announcement of the 'Sol del Norte' Program in Mexicali, Baja California.	20250329Mexicali
55	29/03/2025	Event regarding hospital construction in San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora.	20250329RioColorado
56	03/04/2025	Presentation of the 'Plan México' in Mexico City.	20250403CDMX
57	05/04/2025	Initiation of the Plan de Justicia for the P'urhépecha People in Michoacán.	20250405Purhepecha
58	05/04/2025	Beginning of the 'Cosechando Soberanía' program in Zinapécuaro, Michoacán.	20250405Zinapécuaro
59	06/04/2025	National Boxing Class in Mexico City's Zócalo.	20250406Boxeo
60	09/04/2025	IX CELAC Summit in Honduras (remote plenary session from Mexico City).	20250409CELAC
61	10/04/2025	Recognition of women as land owners in Ayala, Morelos.	20250410Ayala
62	12/04/2025	Announcement of programs in Zacatecas (beans, hospital, housing) in Guadalupe, Zacatecas.	20250412Guadalupe

Note: *First 200 days of government (October 2024 – April 2025).*

A3. DATA MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

The data used in this research consists exclusively of publicly available textual materials, including policy documents, institutional reports, political speeches, and official publications produced by governments, international organizations, and public actors. No primary data, human subjects, personal data, or sensitive information were collected or processed.

All materials were systematically identified and retrieved from official websites, institutional repositories, and public archives. Documents were selected based on their relevance to the research objective, namely the analysis of sustainability as a discursive construct. The dataset was stored in its original digital format and organized in a structured file system to ensure traceability and consistency throughout the analysis.

In addition to source materials, the research generated analytical data in the form of interpretative notes, coding schemes, and conceptual categorizations developed during the qualitative discourse analysis and deconstructive reading process. These materials reflect the iterative and interpretative nature of the methodology rather than constituting standalone datasets.

Given that all data are publicly accessible and non-sensitive, no ethical risks related to confidentiality, anonymity, or data protection arise. The study does not involve human participants and therefore did not require ethical approval or informed consent procedures.

All data were stored using secure, password-protected institutional storage systems provided by Radboud University, with automated backup procedures managed by the university's IT services. Access to the data was restricted to the researcher and, where necessary, supervisors through institutional systems.

Primary source materials remain accessible through their original providers and are fully referenced in the thesis. Researcher-generated materials are embedded within the analytical chapters and annexes. In applicable cases, data associated with individual chapters will be deposited in the Radboud University institutional repository. Public access to these materials will be granted only after the corresponding chapters have been formally published, in accordance with journal policies and institutional guidelines. Other data underlying the study may be made available upon reasonable request, subject to copyright and fair-use considerations.

In accordance with Radboud University's Research Data Management (RDM) policy, research data will be retained for a minimum period of ten years following completion of the project. Long-term preservation is ensured through the deposition of the final thesis and associated publications in the Radboud University institutional repository.

A4. DUTCH SUMMARY

Dit proefschrift vloeit voort uit de vraag: Wat is duurzaamheid? Conventioneel wordt de term gebruikt als een belofte voor de toekomst van de mensheid en de planeet; een discours dat ogenschijnlijk in staat is om economische, sociale en ecologische dimensies te harmoniseren tot een complete, evenwichtige en begrijpelijke eenheid (Purvis, 2018). Het spreekt de taal van vrede, continuïteit, inclusieve ontwikkeling en gedeelde doelen. Toch verbergt dit schijnbare universalisme de uitsluitingen, onzekerheden en tegenstrijdigheden die, bij nadere beschouwing, de fundamenten ervan destabiliseren. Duurzaamheid fixeert de betekenis niet; het verspreidt deze juist, terwijl het een illusie van coherentie ophoudt. Het lost spanningen niet op, maar organiseert ze. Wat zich voordoet als eenheid is in werkelijkheid een effect dat geconstrueerd is door hiërarchieën, stiltes en voortdurende daden van discursieve afsluiting en supplementatie. Een façade die het teken de ruimte geeft om niet tot één, maar tot meerdere duurzaamheden te leiden.

Deze dissertatie ontstaat precies op het spanningsveld tussen de veelvuldige vormen die duurzaamheid aanneemt en de hardnekkige verleiding om de term te behandelen alsof deze een enkele, essentiële en statische betekenis bezit. Geconfronteerd met de reikwijdte van deze uitdaging zagen wij ons genoodzaakt om ons onderzoek naar duurzaamheidsdiscoursen uit te breiden buiten de grenzen van de oorspronkelijke vraagstelling. Immers, als duurzaamheid wordt doorkruist door datgene wat het uitsluit en weigert te benoemen—als de betekenis ervan prolifereert via meervoudige en vaak onverenigbare definities—dan is de vraag niet wat duurzaamheid is, maar hoe het wordt geconstrueerd om mogelijk te worden. Het beantwoorden van deze nieuwe vraag vereist dat we verder kijken dan wat zichtbaar is in de uitgesproken articulaties. Het vereist dat we onderzoeken wat uitgesloten moet worden opdat duurzaamheid coherent kan lijken, welke discursieve architecturen bepaalde interpretaties autoriseren terwijl ze andere marginaliseren, en wat er naar de oppervlakte komt wanneer deze spanningen onopgelost blijven. Kortom: het vereist een studie naar de structuren, interne logica's en articulerende praktijken die sommige betekenissen stabiliseren terwijl ze andere uitstellen of uitwissen.

Op dit punt werd de noodzaak van een andere wijze van lezen evident; een wijze die zich niet beperkt tot het beschrijven van het duurzaamheidsdiscours, maar die in staat is de voorwaarden voor de mogelijkheid (conditions of possibility) ervan te bevragen. Om te traceren hoe duurzaamheid samenhangt door middel van uitsluiting, uitstel (deferral) en contingente daden van articulatie, hadden we een analytische benadering nodig met oog voor instabiliteit, ambiguïteit en de productiviteit van afwezigheid. Om deze reden hanteert dit proefschrift de deconstructie, niet als wetenschappelijke methode, maar als een leespraktijk die zich binnen het discours zelf ontvouwt. Ons gebruik van deconstructie volgt het fundamentele werk van Derrida, aangevuld met de discourstheorie van Laclau en Mouffe, kritische en postkoloniale benaderingen, en de sociale systeemtheorie van Luhmann. Samen maken deze perspectieven de vele ideeën rondom duurzaamheid leesbaar als discursieve praktijken van contingente, itereerbare en partiële articulaties, gestructureerd door differentiatie, equivalentie, uitstel en macht.

De noodzaak om onze leesbenadering verder te ontwikkelen leidt direct naar Hoofdstuk 2, waarin deconstructie wordt uitgewerkt als een aporetische en itereerbare praktijk van "dubbel-lezen" (double reading), bestaande uit twee bewegingen: een Dubbel Commentaar, dat dominante en gemarginaliseerde betekenissen binnen een discours reconstrueert; en een Disruptieve Lezing, die de binaire structuren die deze betekenissen ondersteunen, ontregelt (Derrida, 1967; Kakoliris, 2018). Deze benadering levert geen stabiele interpretaties op; in plaats daarvan opent het discoursen voor hun eigen onmogelijkheidsvoorwaarden, waarbij betekenis wordt onthuld als iets dat altijd uitgesteld, betwist en contingent is. Hoewel het hoofdstuk bijdraagt aan de literatuur door een model voor deconstructief lezen voor te stellen, is de belangrijkste functie ervan het vertrouwd maken van de lezer met deconstructie—niet alleen als leesstrategie, maar als een ethisch engagement en conceptueel kader dat ons onderzoek leidt.

Nadat de lens is gepresenteerd, richt Hoofdstuk 3 zich op de articulatie van de term in tien institutionele teksten, variërend van wereldwijde kaders zoals het Brundtland-rapport (WCED, 1987) tot religieuze articulaties zoals Laudato Si' (Francis, 2015), en bedrijfsagenda's zoals Vision 2050 (WBCSD, 2021). Het hoofdstuk laat zien dat duurzaamheid, ondanks de conceptuele "vaagheid" (fuzziness) (Shi, 2019), coherentie en legitimiteit verkrijgt via op backcasting gerichte architecturen. Deze ensceneren stabiliteit door visies op de toekomst te projecteren, het heden te diagnosticeren en trajecten voor actie voor te schrijven. Deze architecturen bakenen af wat gedacht, gezegd en gedaan kan worden in de naam van duurzaamheid. Ze onthullen tendensen naar afsluiting, dominantie en uitstel; mechanismen die duurzaamheid in staat stellen actie te motiveren en verantwoordelijkheden toe te wijzen, maar die tegelijkertijd prioriteiten opleggen, bepaalde stemmen tot zwijgen brengen en bepaalde toekomsten ondenkbaar maken.

Om de mechanismen die deze afsluitingen produceren nader te onderzoeken, analyseert Hoofdstuk 4 twee teksten: één hegemonische, de Agenda 2030 (VN, 2015), en één tegenhegemonische, de Care Society (ECLAC, 2022). Het doel was om vast te stellen of de eerder geïdentificeerde tendensen naar afsluiting blijven bestaan in verschillende ontologieën en geografieën (Stegemann and Ossewaarde, 2018). Onze lezing toont aan dat, ondanks hun contrasterende posities, beide teksten vertrouwen op vergelijkbare logica's van stabilisering. Ze organiseren betekenis via wat in dit proefschrift wordt geconceptualiseerd als Organisatorische Arrangementen (OA) en Morele Articulaties (MA). Dit zijn discursieve mechanismen die autoriseren, tegenstrijdigheden maskeren en alteriteit onder het tapijt schuiven . De bevindingen suggereren dat afsluiting niet beperkt blijft tot het hegemonische discours; het is een structurele voorwaarde van het duurzaamheidsdiscours zelf.

Deze bevinding onderstreepte de noodzaak om te onderzoeken of duurzaamheid gearticuleerd kan worden via alternatieve architectuur. Daarom richt Hoofdstuk 5 zich op het populistische discours als een plek waar stabiliteit zowel wordt gemobiliseerd als ontregeld. Aan de hand van een analyse van politieke toespraken van Javier Milei (Argentinië) en Claudia Sheinbaum (Mexico), ontdekten we dat

duurzaamheid hier niet verschijnt als een vaststaand discours, maar ook niet als een "leeg" of "zwevend" significant. In plaats daarvan komt duurzaamheid naar voren als een onbeslisbare (undecidable) articulatorische strategie; een strategie die zowel bevestigd als ontkend wordt, gemobiliseerd en betwist. Hierbij functioneert duurzaamheid als een pharmakon: medicijn en vergif, waarbij betekenis tegelijkertijd wordt geopend en gesloten. Dit verschuift ons begrip van duurzaamheid van een teken van afsluiting naar een veld van mogelijkheden.

De reis door deze hoofdstukken bracht ons terug bij de beginvraag, maar met een getransformeerd begrip. Wat kunnen duurzaamheden dan zijn? Hoofdstuk 6 verkent de verschillende benaderingen van een collectieve groep onderzoekers, wiens bevindingen suggereren dat wat een op het eerste gezocht een stabiel concept lijkt, in werkelijkheid gestructureerd, gesupplementeerd, gedifferentieerd en voortdurend open voor herziening is. Duurzaamheid verschijnt als een collectieve inspanning om door afsluitingen heen te lezen en te zoeken naar nieuwe openingen.

Alles overziend tonen de hoofdstukken in dit proefschrift aan dat duurzaamheid niet problematisch is omdat het een stabiele betekenis ontbeert, noch omdat het te open blijft. De spanning schuilt precies in het samenspel tussen beide. Duurzaamheid is noch een vaststaand concept, noch louter een open veld, maar een articulatie die voortdurend wordt geproduceerd door de dynamiek tussen logocentrische afsluiting en radicale openheid. Wat zich voordoet als coherentie is niet inherent; het is geconstrueerd via operaties die afbakenen wat als duurzaamheid telt en, even belangrijk, wat buiten de grenzen ervan moet vallen.

Afsluitingen zijn daarom geen vervormingen of ideologisch misbruik die gecorrigeerd moeten worden. Ze zijn de voorwaarden die duurzaamheid überhaupt mogelijk maken. Zonder afsluiting zou er geen object zijn om naar te verwijzen, geen beleid om te ontwerpen en geen toekomst om te verbeelden. Toch is deze noodzaak ook een beperking: elke afsluiting is partieel en inherent onstabiel. Ze is afhankelijk van uitsluitingen die ze niet volledig kan uitwissen, van betekenissen die eerder worden uitgesteld dan opgelost, en van sporen (*traces*) die het discours blijven bestoken. Duurzaamheid wordt aldus vergezeld door datgene wat de aanhangers ervan niet kunnen bevatten. Het concept wordt evenzeer gevormd door haar afwezigheden als door haar affirmaties, door wat er wel over gezegd wordt en door wat er niet over gezegd wordt. Om deze reden stelt dit onderzoek vast dat duurzaamheid functioneert als een *pharmakon*: een significant dat betekenis tegelijkertijd stabiliseert en destabiliseert. Afsluiting fungeert als medicijn door duurzaamheid communiceerbaar en actiegericht te maken; maar het fungeert ook als vergif door alternatieven uit te sluiten, alteriteit tot zwijgen te brengen en grenzen op te leggen die spanningen en incoherentie uitstellen. Deze dubbele beweging wisselt elkaar niet af; zij coëxisteert. Duurzaamheid verschuift niet van coherentie naar contradictie; zij bewoont beide tegelijkertijd, aangezien beide de term als het ware opjagen.

De bijdrage van deze dissertatie ligt dan ook niet in het oplossen van deze aporie, maar in het zichtbaar en onontkoombaar maken ervan door middel van deconstructieve lezingen. Lezingen die zich ertoe verbinden te traceren hoe duurzaamheid voortdurend wordt gestabiliseerd en gedestabiliseerd binnen verschillende discoursen, waarmee de aanname wordt uitgedaagd dat haar tegenstrijdigheden overwonnen kunnen worden door helderdere definities, bredere inclusie of een sterkere consensus. Dergelijke pogingen, hoe goedbedoeld ook, reproduceren vaak de logocentrische impuls waaraan ze proberen te ontsnappen: het verlangen om betekenis veilig te stellen, grenzen te bepalen en het interpretatieveld af te sluiten. In plaats daarvan toont deze dissertatie aan dat de inconsistenties en uitsluitingen van duurzaamheid geen obstakels zijn, maar uitdrukkingen van haar onbeslisbaarheid (*undecidability*), waarin zij alles en niets tegelijk kan zijn.

In plaats van betekenis te verlammen, maakt deze onbeslisbaarheid betekenis juist mogelijk. Duurzaamheid kan alleen gearticuleerd worden omdat zij niet volledig gedetermineerd kan worden. Elke poging om haar betekenis te fixeren blijft voorlopig, blootgesteld aan verschuiving en open voor herarticulatie. Om deze reden moet duurzaamheid gelezen worden sous rature (onder doorhaling): opgeschreven omdat zij niet vermeden kan worden, doorgehaald omdat zij nooit volledig met zichzelf samenvalt. Deze heroriëntatie heeft verstrekkende gevolgen. Als duurzaamheid niet kan worden afgesloten zonder geweld—zonder andere wijzen van weten, zijn en organiseren van het leven uit te sluiten—dan ligt haar potentieel niet in het bereiken van coherentie, maar in het alert blijven op haar eigen grenzen. Toch is een dergelijke openheid geen romantisch ideaal. Het elimineert conflict niet, noch garandeert het inclusiviteit, en het heft zeker geen machtsasymmetrieën op. Integendeel: openheid stelt ons bloot aan onbeslisbaarheid; aan de noodzaak om te handelen zonder laatste fundamenten (final grounds), te beslissen zonder zekerheid en om te gaan met betekenissen die niet voor eens en altijd gestabiliseerd kunnen worden. In dit samenspel wordt inclusie een daad van beslissing, en worden machtsasymmetrieën structurele voorwaarden waarover voortdurend onderhandeld moet worden.

Het deconstructief lezen van duurzaamheid wordt daarom noodzakelijk—niet om de definitie ervan te verfijnen, aan te vullen of de inclusiviteit ervan te vergroten. Het gaat erom bij de spanningen te blijven en te erkennen dat wat duurzaamheid uitsluit, constitutief is voor wat zij beweert te zijn. Radicale openheid is geen oplossing; het is een verbintenis om de impuls te weerstaan om betekenis voor eens en altijd te stabiliseren. Deze dissertatie sluit daarmee de studie naar duurzaamheid niet af. Zij geeft deze "anders" (otherwise) terug aan de lezer: ontregeld, gefragmenteerd en onherleidbaar open. Wat wordt aangeboden is geen conclusie, maar een uitnodiging om duurzaamheid te benaderen als een veld waarin de betekenis nooit veiliggesteld is, waar aanwezigheid altijd het spoor van afwezigheid met zich meedraagt, en waar elke articulatie de afdruk draagt van wat zij achterlaat. Lezen is dan ook niet het oplossen van deze dynamiek, maar het bewonen ervan.

A5. ENGLISH SUMMARY

This thesis arose from the question: *What is sustainability?* The term conventionally has being used as a promise for the future of humanity and the planet. A discourse seemingly capable of harmonizing economic, social, and environmental dimensions into a complete, balanced and intelligible unit (Purvis, 2018). It speaks in the language of peace, continuity, inclusive development, and shared purpose. Yet this apparent universalism conceals the exclusions, uncertainties, and contradictions that destabilize its foundations when examined closely. Sustainability does not fix meaning; it disperses it while performing an illusion of coherence. It does not resolve tensions; it organizes them. Therefore, what appears as unity is, in reality, an effect constructed through hierarchies, silences, and continuous acts of closure and discursive supplementation. A façade that allows the sign to give rise not to one, but to multiple sustainabilities.

This dissertation emerges precisely at the point of tension between the multiple forms that sustainability takes and their persistent temptation to treat the term as if it possessed a single, essential, and static meaning. And confronted with the scope of this challenge, we found ourselves compelled to expand our examination of sustainability discourses beyond the limits of our initial inquiry. For if sustainability is traversed by what it excludes and refuses to name, if it proliferates through plural and often incompatible definitions, then the question is not what sustainability is, but how it is constructed so as to become possible. Addressing this new question required moving beyond what is visible in its stated articulations, and instead also examining what must be excluded for sustainability to appear coherent, the discursive architectures that authorize certain interpretations while marginalizing others, and what surfaces when these tensions remain unresolved. In short, it required studying its structures, internal logics, and the articulatory practices that stabilize some meanings while deferring or erasing others.

It was at this juncture that the need for a different mode of reading became evident, one not limited to describing the discourse of sustainability, but capable of interrogating its conditions of possibility. To trace how sustainability coheres through exclusions, deferrals, and contingent acts of articulation, we needed an analytical approach attentive to instability, ambiguity, and the productivity of absence. For this reason, the dissertation adopts deconstruction, not as a scientific method but as a reading practice that unfolds within discourse itself. Our use of deconstruction follows Derrida's foundational work, supplemented by Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, critical and postcolonial approaches, and social systems theory. Together, these perspectives rendered sustainabilities legible as discursive practices of contingent, iterable, and partial articulations structured through differentiation, equivalence, deferral, and power.

The need to further develop our reading approach leads directly to **Chapter 2**, which elaborates deconstruction as an aporetic and iterable double-reading practice composed of two movements

(Derrida, 1967; Kakoliris, 2018): a Double Commentary, which reconstructs dominant and marginalized meanings within a discourse; and a Disruptive Reading, which unsettles the binary structures that sustain those meanings. This approach does not yield stable interpretations; rather, it opens discourses to their own conditions of impossibility, revealing meaning as always deferred, contested, and contingent. While the chapter contributes to the literature by proposing a model of deconstructive reading, its main function in this thesis is to familiarize the reader with deconstruction not only as a reading strategy, but also as an ethical commitment and a conceptual framework, approaches that are used in our research.

Having presented the lens through which we read sustainability, **Chapter 3** turns to the articulation of the term across ten institutional texts, ranging from global frameworks such as the *Brundtland* report (WCED, 1987) to religious articulations like *Laudato Si'* (Francis, 2015) and corporate agendas such as *Vision 2050* (WBCSD,2021) The chapter shows that despite the term's signification "fuzziness" (Shi, 2019), sustainability achieves coherence and legitimacy through backcasting-oriented architectures that stage stability by projecting envisioned futures, diagnosing present conditions, and prescribing pathways for action. These architectures delimit what can be thought, said, and enacted in the name of sustainability, revealing tendencies toward closure, imposition, and deferral, mechanisms that allow sustainability to motivate action and designate responsibilities, but in doing so also impose priorities, silence and marginalize certain voices, tensions, and elements, making certain futures unthinkable.

To examine more closely the mechanisms that produce these closures, **Chapter 4** analyzes two texts: one hegemonic, *Agenda 2030* (UN, 2015), and one counter-hegemonic, *Care Society* (ECLAC, 2022). The aim was to determine whether the tendencies toward closure identified earlier persist across different ontologies and geographies, including those historically marginalized within dominant sustainability discourses (Stegemann and Ossewaarde, 2018). Our reading demonstrates that, despite their contrasting positions, both texts rely on similar logics of stabilization. They organize meaning through what this dissertation conceptualizes as Organizational Arrangements (OA) and Moral Articulations (MA). Two discursive mechanisms that we explored through the articulation of "Leave No One Behind" and "Care", proving how they authorize certain interpretations while marginalizing others, mask contradictions, and defer alterity. The findings suggest that closure is not confined to hegemonic discourse, challenging the assumption that alternative or peripheral voices inherently provide more open or inclusive articulations of sustainability. Rather, the analysis shows that closure operates as a structural condition of sustainability discourse itself.

This finding highlighted the need to investigate whether sustainability can be articulated through alternative architectures and logics. Consequently, **Chapter 5** turns to populist discourse as a site where stability is both mobilized and unsettled, offering a space to examine possibilities for articulating sustainability otherwise. Through an analysis of political speeches by two ideologically divergent Latin American politicians: Javier Milei (Argentina), positioned on the right, and Claudia Sheinbaum (Mexico),

positioned on the left, we found that sustainability does not appear as a fixed and closed discourse. Yet it also does not behave like the "empty," "floating," or ambiguous signifiers typically associated with populist articulation (Laclau, 1985; Zicman de Barros, 2025; Rovira, 2013). Instead, sustainability emerges as an undecidable articulatory strategy (Derrida 1967; Laclau 1985; Luhmann 1995), one that exploits the apparent ideological mappings of both *Libertarianism* and the *Fourth Transformation* to be simultaneously affirmed and denied, mobilized and contested. And in doing so, we saw how sustainability can operate as a pharmakon: remedy and poison, opening and closing meaning at once. This does not resolve the term's tensions; it intensifies them, shifting our understanding of sustainability from a sign of closure to a field of possibilities.

In this way, the journey through these chapters brought us back to the initial question, not to repeat it, but because our readings had transformed what the question itself could mean. What, then, can sustainabilities be? **Chapter 6** explores the different approaches and interpretations advanced by a collective group of researchers (Martínez, 2025), whose findings reinforce our discoveries that what appears as a stable concept is instead one that is structured, supplemented, differentiated, and perpetually open to revision. Sustainability thus emerges as something that requires a collective and ongoing effort to read through its closures and search for new openings.

Taken together, the chapters in this thesis show that sustainability is not problematic because it lacks a stable meaning, nor because it remains too open. Its tension lies precisely in the interplay between both. Sustainability is neither a fixed concept nor only an open one, but an articulation continually produced through the dynamic between logocentric closure and radical openness. What appears as coherence is not inherent; it is constructed through operations that delimit what can count as sustainability and, just as importantly, what must fall outside its boundaries.

Closures, therefore, are not distortions or ideological misuses to be corrected. They are the very conditions that make sustainability possible. Without closure, there would be no object to reference, no policy to design, no future to imagine. Yet this necessity is also a limitation: every closure is partial and inherently unstable. It depends on exclusions it cannot fully erase, on meanings deferred rather than resolved, and on traces that continue to haunt the discourse. Sustainability is thus accompanied by what it cannot contain, shaped as much by its absences as by its affirmations. And because of this, we found sustainability functions as a *pharmakon*, a signifier that simultaneously stabilizes and destabilizes meaning. Closure acts as a remedy by making sustainability communicable and actionable; yet it also operates as poison by foreclosing alternatives, silencing alterity, and imposing limits that defer tensions and incoherences. This dual movement does not alternate. It coexists. Sustainability does not shift from coherence to contradiction; it inhabits both at once, as there is a trace always already haunting it.

The contribution of this dissertation thus lies not in resolving this aporia but in making it visible and inescapable through deconstructive readings. Readings that are committed to tracing how

sustainability is continuously stabilized and destabilized across discourses, challenging the assumption that its contradictions can be overcome through clearer definitions, broader inclusion, or stronger consensus. Such efforts, however well-intentioned, often reproduce the logocentric impulse they seek to escape: the desire to secure meaning, fix boundaries, and close the field of interpretation. Instead, this dissertation demonstrates that sustainability's inconsistencies and exclusions are not obstacles but expressions of its undecidability, where it can be everything, anything, all at once.

Rather than paralyzing meaning, this undecidability makes it possible. Sustainability can be articulated only because it cannot be fully determined. Every attempt to fix its meaning remains provisional, exposed to displacement, and open to rearticulation. For this reason, sustainability must be read *sous rature*: written because it cannot be avoided, crossed out because it never fully coincides with itself. This reorientation carries significant implications. If sustainability cannot be closed without violence, without excluding other ways of knowing, being, and organizing life, then its potential does not lie in achieving coherence, but in remaining attentive to its own limits. Yet such openness is not a romantic ideal. It does not eliminate conflict, nor does it guarantee inclusiveness, and it certainly does not reverse power asymmetries. On the contrary, openness exposes us to undecidability: to the necessity of acting without final grounds, deciding without certainty, and engaging with meanings that cannot be stabilized once and for all. In this interplay, inclusion becomes an act of decision, and power asymmetries become structured conditions that must be continually negotiated.

To read sustainability from a deconstructive approach, therefore, becomes necessary—not to refine its definition, supplement it, or expand its inclusiveness. It is to remain with its tensions, recognizing that what sustainability excludes is constitutive of what it claims to be. Radical openness is not a solution; it is a commitment to resist the impulse to stabilize meaning once and for all. This dissertation does not close the study of sustainability. It returns it to the reader otherwise: unsettled, fragmented, and irreducibly open. What is offered is not a conclusion but an invitation to engage sustainability as a field in which meaning is never secured, where presence always carries the trace of absence, and where every articulation bears the imprint of what it leaves behind. To read, then, is not to resolve these dynamics but to inhabit them.

A6. SPANISH SUMMARY

Esta tesis se originó en la pregunta: *¿qué es la sostenibilidad?* El término convencionalmente se presenta como una promesa para el futuro de la humanidad y del planeta. Un discurso aparentemente capaz de armonizar las dimensiones económica, social y ambiental en una unidad completa, equilibrada e inteligible (Purvis, 2018). El término promueve la paz, la continuidad, el desarrollo inclusivo y la prosperidad compartida. Sin embargo, este aparente universalismo oculta las exclusiones, las incertidumbres y las contradicciones que desestabilizan sus fundamentos al examinarlo de cerca. La sostenibilidad no fija el significado; lo dispersa creando una ilusión de coherencia. No resuelve tensiones; las organiza. Por lo que lo que aparece como unidad es, en realidad, un efecto construido mediante jerarquías, silencios y continuos actos de clausura y suplementación discursiva. Una fachada que le permite dar lugar no a una, sino a múltiples sostenibilidades.

Esta tesis surge precisamente en el punto de tensión entre las múltiples formas que adopta la sostenibilidad y la persistente tentación de tratar al término como si poseyera un significado único, esencial y estático. Y ante la magnitud de este desafío, nos vimos obligados a ampliar nuestro análisis de los discursos sobre sostenibilidad más allá de los límites de nuestra pregunta inicial. Porque si la sostenibilidad está marcada por lo que excluye y se niega a nombrar, si prolifera a través de definiciones plurales y a menudo incompatibles, entonces la pregunta no es *qué es la sostenibilidad*, sino cómo se construye para que sea posible. Abordar esta interrogante requirió ir más allá de lo que es visible, de lo que esta presente en sus articulaciones, y en su lugar también examinar qué debe excluirse para que la sostenibilidad parezca coherente, las arquitecturas discursivas que autorizan ciertas interpretaciones mientras marginan otras, y lo que emerge cuando estas tensiones permanecen sin resolver. En resumen, requirió estudiar sus estructuras, lógicas internas y las prácticas articulatorias que estabilizan algunos significados mientras postergan o borran otros.

Fue en esta coyuntura donde se hizo evidente la necesidad de un modo de lectura diferente: uno que no se limitara a describir el discurso de la sostenibilidad, sino que fuera capaz de interrogar sus condiciones de posibilidad. Y es que para rastrear cómo la sostenibilidad adquiere coherencia a través de exclusiones, diferimientos y actos de articulación, requeríamos un enfoque analítico atento a la inestabilidad, la ambigüedad, el contexto, la intención autorial, y la productividad de la ausencia. Por esta razón, la tesis adopta la deconstrucción, no como un método científico, sino como una práctica de lectura que se despliega dentro del discurso mismo. Nuestro uso de la deconstrucción sigue la obra fundacional de Derrida, al tiempo que dialoga con la teoría del discurso de Laclau y Mouffe, la teoría crítica y poscolonial, y la teoría de sistemas sociales. En conjunto, estas perspectivas hicieron que las sostenibilidades fueran legibles como una práctica discursiva de articulaciones contingentes, iterativas y parciales, estructuradas a través de la diferenciación, la equivalencia, el aplazamiento y el poder.

La necesidad de profundizar en nuestro enfoque de lectura nos conduce directamente al **Capítulo 2**, donde se desarrolla la deconstrucción como una práctica de doble lectura, aporética e iterable, compuesta por dos movimientos (Derrida, 1967; Kakoliris, 2018): un Doble Comentario, que reconstruye los significados dominantes y marginalizados dentro de un discurso; y una Lectura Disruptiva, que inquieta las estructuras binarias que sostienen dichos significados. Este enfoque no produce interpretaciones estables; más bien, abre los discursos a sus propias condiciones de imposibilidad, revelando el sentido como algo siempre diferido, en disputa y contingente. Si bien el capítulo contribuye a la literatura al proponer un modelo de lectura deconstructiva, su función principal en esta tesis es familiarizar al lector con la deconstrucción no solo como una estrategia de lectura, sino también como un compromiso ético y un marco conceptual, enfoques que son usados en nuestra investigación.

Una vez presentados los lentes a través de los cuales leímos la sostenibilidad, el **Capítulo 3** aborda la articulación del término en diez textos institucionales, que abarcan desde marcos globales como el *Informe Brundtland* (WCED, 1987), hasta articulaciones religiosas como *Laudato Si'* (Francis, 2015) y agendas corporativas como *Vision 2050* (WBCSD, 2021). El capítulo demuestra que, a pesar de la "vaguedad" (*fuzziness*) en la significación del término (Shi, 2019), la sostenibilidad alcanza coherencia y legitimidad mediante arquitecturas orientadas al *backcasting*, la proyección retrospectiva. Estas arquitecturas escenifican la estabilidad al proyectar futuros imaginados, diagnosticar condiciones presentes y prescribir trayectorias de acción. Dichas estructuras delimitan lo que puede ser pensado, dicho y ejecutado en nombre de la sostenibilidad, revelando tendencias hacia la clausura, la imposición y el diferimiento; mecanismos que permiten a la sostenibilidad motivar la acción y designar responsabilidades, pero que al hacerlo también imponen prioridades, silencian y marginalizan ciertas voces, tensiones y elementos, tornando impensables determinados futuros.

Para examinar más de cerca los mecanismos que producen estas clausuras, el **Capítulo 4** analiza dos textos: uno hegemónico, la *Agenda 2030* (UN, 2015), y uno contrahegemónico, la *Sociedad del Cuidado* (ECLAC, 2022). El objetivo fue determinar si las tendencias hacia la clausura identificadas previamente persisten a través de diferentes ontologías y geografías, incluyendo aquellas históricamente marginalizadas dentro de los discursos dominantes de sostenibilidad (Stegemann and Ossewaarde, 2018). Nuestra lectura demuestra que, a pesar de sus posiciones contrastantes, ambos textos dependen de lógicas de estabilización similares. Organizan el sentido a través de lo que esta tesis conceptualiza como Arreglos Organizacionales (AO) y Articulaciones Morales (AM). Se trata de dos mecanismos discursivos que exploramos mediante la articulación de las nociones "No dejar a nadie atrás" y "Cuidado", demostrando cómo autorizan ciertas interpretaciones mientras marginalizan otras, enmascaran contradicciones y difieren la alteridad. Los hallazgos sugieren que la clausura no se limita al discurso hegemónico, y con ello desafían el supuesto de que las voces alternas o periféricas proporcionan inherentemente articulaciones más abiertas o inclusivas de la sostenibilidad. Por el contrario, el análisis muestra que la clausura opera como una condición estructural del propio discurso de la sostenibilidad.

Este hallazgo puso de relieve la necesidad de investigar si la sostenibilidad puede articularse a través de arquitecturas y lógicas alternativas. En consecuencia, el **Capítulo 5** recurre al discurso populista como un sitio donde la estabilidad es tanto movilizada como suplementada, ofreciendo un espacio para examinar las posibilidades de articular la sostenibilidad de otro modo. A través de un análisis de los discursos políticos de dos figuras ideológicamente divergentes en América Latina —Javier Milei (Argentina), posicionado a la derecha, y Claudia Sheinbaum (México), posicionada a la izquierda—, encontramos que la sostenibilidad no aparece como un discurso fijo y cerrado. Sin embargo, tampoco se comporta como los significantes "vacíos", "flotantes" o ambiguos típicamente asociados con la articulación populista (Laclau, 1985; Zicman de Barros, 2025; Rovira, 2013). En su lugar, la sostenibilidad emerge como una estrategia articulatoria indecidible (Derrida, 1967; Laclau, 1985; Luhmann, 1995); una que explota los mapeos ideológicos aparentes tanto del *Libertarismo* como de la *Cuarta Transformación* para ser, simultáneamente, afirmada y negada, movilizada y disputada. Al hacerlo, observamos cómo la sostenibilidad puede operar como un *pharmakon* (Derrida, 1979): remedio y veneno, abriendo y cerrando el sentido a la vez. Esto no resuelve las tensiones del término, sino que las intensifica, desplazando nuestra comprensión de la sostenibilidad de un signo de clausura a un campo de posibilidades.

De este modo, el recorrido a través de estos capítulos nos devolvió a la pregunta inicial; no para repetirla, sino porque nuestras lecturas habían transformado lo que la pregunta misma podía significar. ¿Qué pueden ser, entonces, las sostenibilidades? El **Capítulo 6** explora los diferentes enfoques e interpretaciones propuestos por un grupo colectivo de investigadores, cuyos hallazgos refuerzan nuestros propios descubrimientos: lo que aparece como un concepto estable es, en cambio, uno estructurado, suplementado, diferenciado y perpetuamente abierto a la revisión. La sostenibilidad emerge así como algo que requiere un esfuerzo colectivo y continuo para leer a través de sus clausuras y buscar nuevas aperturas.

En su conjunto, los seis capítulos de esta tesis demuestran que la sostenibilidad no es problemática por carecer de un significado estable, ni por permanecer excesivamente abierta. Su tensión radica, precisamente, en el juego entre ambos extremos. La sostenibilidad no es un concepto fijo ni exclusivamente abierto, sino una articulación producida continuamente a través de la dinámica entre la clausura logocéntrica y la apertura radical. Lo que se presenta como coherencia no es algo inherente; es una construcción mediante operaciones que delimitan qué puede contar como sostenibilidad y, al mismo tiempo, lo que debe quedar fuera de sus márgenes.

Las clausuras, por lo tanto, no son distorsiones o usos ideológicos erróneos que deban corregirse. Son las condiciones mismas que hacen posible la sostenibilidad. Sin clausura, no habría objeto al cual referirse, ni política que diseñar, ni futuro que imaginar. Sin embargo, esta necesidad es también una limitación, pues toda clausura es parcial e intrínsecamente inestable. Depende de exclusiones que no puede borrar por completo, de sentidos diferidos en lugar de resueltos, y de huellas (traces) que continúan

asediando el discurso. La sostenibilidad está, pues, acompañada por lo que no puede contener, moldeada tanto por sus ausencias como por lo que presenta visiblemente. Por ello, encontramos que la sostenibilidad funciona como un *pharmakon*, un significante que simultáneamente estabiliza y desestabiliza el significado. El cierre actúa como remedio al hacer que la sostenibilidad sea comunicable y accionable; sin embargo, también opera como veneno al clausurar alternativas, silenciar la alteridad e imponer límites que defieren tensiones e incoherencias. Este doble movimiento no se alterna. Coexiste. La sostenibilidad no transita de la coherencia a la contradicción; habita ambas a la vez, pues siempre ha habido un resto que le persigue.

La contribución de esta disertación no reside, por tanto, en resolver esta aporía, sino en hacerla visible e ineludible mediante lecturas deconstructivas. Lecturas que están comprometidas con exponer cómo la sostenibilidad se estabiliza y desestabiliza continuamente a través de distintos discursos, cuestionando la suposición de que sus contradicciones pueden superarse mediante definiciones más claras, mayor inclusión o consensos. Tales esfuerzos, por bien intencionados que sean, suelen reproducir el impulso logocéntrico que buscan superar: el deseo de estabilizar el significado, fijar sus límites y cerrar el campo de la interpretación. En cambio, esta disertación demuestra que las inconsistencias y exclusiones de la sostenibilidad no son obstáculos, sino expresiones de su indecidibilidad, donde puede ser todo, cualquier cosa, todo al mismo tiempo.

Lejos de paralizar el sentido, esta indecidibilidad es lo que lo hace posible. La sostenibilidad solo puede articularse porque no puede determinarse plenamente. Todo intento de fijar su significado permanece como algo provisional, expuesto al desplazamiento y abierto a la rearticulación. Por esta razón, la sostenibilidad debe leerse *sous rature*: escrita porque no puede evitarse, tachada porque nunca coincide plenamente consigo misma. Esta reorientación conlleva implicaciones significativas. Si la sostenibilidad no puede cerrarse sin violencia, sin excluir otras formas de conocer, ser y organizar la vida, entonces su potencial no reside en alcanzar la estabilidad y coherencia, sino en permanecer atenta a sus propios límites. No obstante, tal apertura no es un ideal romántico: no elimina el conflicto, no garantiza la inclusividad y, ciertamente, no revierte las asimetrías de poder. Al contrario, la apertura nos expone a la indecidibilidad; a la necesidad de actuar sin fundamentos últimos, de decidir sin certezas y de lidiar con significados que no pueden estabilizarse de una vez por todas. Y en este juego, la inclusión se convierte en un acto de decisión, y las asimetrías de poder en condiciones estructurales que deben ser negociadas continuamente.

Leer la sostenibilidad desde un enfoque deconstructivo, por lo tanto, se vuelve necesario, pero no para refinar su definición, suplementarla o ampliar su inclusividad. Se trata de una lectura que busca identificar y permanecer con sus tensiones, reconociendo que lo que la sostenibilidad excluye es constitutivo de lo que pretende ser. La apertura radical no es una solución; es un compromiso para resistir el impulso de estabilizar el significado de una vez por todas.

Esta tesis no cierra el estudio de la sostenibilidad. Se lo devuelve al lector de otra manera: inquieto, fragmentado e irreductiblemente abierto. Lo que se ofrece no es una conclusión, sino una invitación a abordar la sostenibilidad como un campo en el que el significado nunca está asegurado, donde la presencia siempre lleva la huella de la ausencia, y donde cada articulación porta la huella de lo que deja atrás. Leer, entonces, no es resolver estas dinámicas, sino habitarlas.

A7. ACKNOWLDEGEMENTS

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Radboud University welcomed me, trusted my vision and aims, letting me become the contributor to shared knowledge I am today. Here, I found room to think, to hesitate, to unlearn, and to begin again. It was here that ideas were tested, discussed, stretched, and sometimes allowed to remain unruly long enough to become a dissertation. For that opportunity, for the institutional one, but above all for the human one, I will always be deeply grateful.

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The people who made this journey possible are René ten Bos and Sjors Witjes. They welcomed a project that was closely aligned with their own research while simultaneously standing at a distance from it. Despite this paradox, they remained consistently open to what was, at times, a deeply political and discursive approach. This gesture mattered. For it is often in such actions, easily overlooked, that knowledge exceeds its assigned margins, transgresses its own limits, and, at times, even learns to betray them. But that does not happen on its own. It happens when thought is met with curiosity, with shared madness, and with care. In both of them, I encountered precisely this disposition. Deconstruction entered my thinking through René ten Bos, who, in the most generous sense, made an "idiot" out of me. Through him, I learned that thinking is not the performance of certainty or rigor, but a willingness to become disoriented, to lose one's footing, and to remain there long enough for another kind of reading to emerge. The postcolonial perspective on sustainability, in turn, took shape through Sjors Witjes, who, as a Latin American companion in thought and in practice, became far more than a supervisor over the course of this process, but rather a co-creator. His energy, generosity, and steady support made possible many of the achievements and formative experiences that unfolded during my PhD. For that, *muchas gracias*. By the end of this adventure, both forms of supervision had become mentorship, and mentorship gradually gave way to something rarer in academia: intellectual friendship. I hope that this bond endures long after this dissertation recedes into the background, remaining one of the most meaningful outcomes of this journey.

Andrej Zaslove joined this journey as an unofficial supervisor, offering clarity, generosity, and invaluable guidance. His engagement strengthened the populism analysis in this dissertation and helped refine its

core arguments. His support also enabled a research visit that profoundly shaped both this work and my academic trajectory.

It was during my fellowship at the Democracy Hub of the Central European University that Levy Levante and Kirk Hawkins opened another intellectual door. Working with them allowed me to briefly think alongside scholars I had long admired. Their collaborative, attentive, and open-minded approach to research has shaped both this dissertation and my professional practice. *Köszönöm*.

Academic work often presents itself as solitary labor, as though ideas were produced in isolation by disciplined minds alone. But thought is social and relational. This dissertation bears the traces of many conversations and encounters along the way. I am especially grateful to Juan Tellería, Shoko Yamada, and Yannis Stavrakakis, whose feedback, collaboration, and support enriched this work and the projects that grew around it. I also thank the ISDRS community, which, through conferences, workshops, and conversations, provided a network of support extending far beyond formal events and programs.

Then there are the everyday companions, whose willingness to listen to frustrations, discuss drafts and ideas, share beers and laughter, and simply be there made this process not only lighter, but far more enjoyable. In particular, I want to thank the PhD community in Business Administration, especially my second-floor peers and officemates, past and present, as well as my fellow OPUS members and colleagues in Budapest. You all became more than networks of support, you became intellectual and affective companions for this dissertation, for my PhD journey, and for my life beyond these pages. On a more personal note, thank you to Eli, Juan, my 8M girls, my Italian friends and roomies, and lxs Bichotxs (including Han) for walking this path with me.

And then there is the before. Before the PhD and this dissertation. Grace y César, gracias por hacer posible una vida en la que pensar, cuestionar y persistir pudieran volverse imaginables. Su esfuerzo, su generosidad, su apoyo y su fe en mí son inconmensurables, y la única manera que conozco de honrarlos es mostrar, a través de lo que hago, aquello que ustedes hicieron posible. Magnolia, mi otra yo, gracias por habitar mi vida con una cercanía que desborda toda lógica. Tú conoces la ciencia, y la vida nos regaló la oportunidad de compartir la experiencia del doctorado, inspirándonos y sosteniéndonos mutuamente en el camino. Qué privilegio. A mis hermanos y a mi carnalito, espero que al ver lo que estoy construyendo puedan reconocer lo que se vuelve posible cuando una se atreve a soñar y a convertir la posibilidad en vida. Al resto de mi familia, ustedes son mi motor. Gracias por su energía y su apoyo constante. Y finalmente a León, que se fue durante esta aventura; a Norberto, que nos dejó antes; y a Tere, a quien le habría llenado de orgullo verme llegar hasta aquí. Qué ridículo resulta que no estén para ver este logro.

To everyone at this university and beyond, and to everyone at home in Mexico, in the Netherlands, and around the world: thank you for walking this journey with me. I have felt your presence throughout.

Even in the most difficult moments, I knew there were people who believed in me, who rooted for me, and who entrusted me with their confidence, not as pressure, but as an act of care and hope. That kind of support carries both responsibility and possibility. I carry both with me, and I will continue striving to be worthy of them. This dissertation is one expression of our collective effort, and of the love that made it possible.

A8. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS, CONFERENCES, GRANTS & OTHER ACTIVITIES

Journal Articles

- Martínez Aguilar, E. D., Witjes, S., & Bos, R. ten. (2025). Deconstruction as a Research Strategy for Discourse Studies: An Aporetic and Iterable Model for Opening Discourses. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24, doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251349470
- Martínez Aguilar, E. D., Witjes, S., & Bos, R. ten. (2025). Opening closures: Organizational arrangements and moral articulations in institutional global hegemonic and local counter-hegemonic sustainability discourses. *Current Research in Environmental Sustainability*, 10, doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crsust.2025.100304
- Witjes, S., Martínez Aguilar, E. D., & Shoko, Y. (2026). Reinterpreting Sustainability Discourses Around the World. *Current Research in Environmental Sustainability*, 11, doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crsust.2026.100334
- Witjes, S., Martínez Aguilar, E. D., & Shoko, Y., Leef, E. (2025-2026). Special Issue: Reinterpreting Discourses Around the World. *Current Research in Environmental Sustainability*, URL: https://www.sciencedirect.com/special-issue/100DDJXL1BG

Media Articles

- The Sustainability Conversation Is Missing a Lot of People, World Politics Review (2024), URL: https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/climate-change-populism-sustainability/
- The Moral Populist Legacy of Laudato Si, RevDem (2025), URL: https://revdem.ceu.edu/2025/06/19/the-moral-populist-legacy-of-laudato-si/
- Why Do Sustainability Plans Keep Failing Us?, RevDem (2025), URL: https://revdem.ceu.edu/2025/12/02/how-cop30-fell-apart/
- Venezuela And the "Sustainable Wars" Ahead, RevDem (2026), URL: https://revdem.ceu.edu/2026/01/09/venezuela-sustainability-wars/
- In the Name of Freedom: The Dismantling of Decent Work in Argentina, RevDem (2026), URL: https://revdem.ceu.edu/2026/03/26/in-the-name-of-freedom/
- Trump's Oil War and the Renewable Energy Order Coming, RevDem (2026), URL: https://revdem.ceu.edu/2026/06/12/trumps-oil-war-and-the-renewable-energy-order-coming/

Peer Review

- Current Research in Environmental Sustainability (2025). IDs: (1) 91cd3700-34f8-460f-a9bf-231937f061d8; (2) 4d244dd1-35d1-4080-b149-851ecf658ba5; (3) 346baa33-5672-4db5-9f5f-a76e04148684; (4) 2267d12d-825c-4154-b83e-0610e1e53997; (5) 25d3fdf7-23d7-4365-a85d-e9af9463f11a.
- Journal of Political Ideologies (2026).

Conferences

- Presentations, Leading Workshops, and Track Chair 1b at the International Sustainable Development Research Society (Nepal 2024; Hungary 2025; Brazil 2026).
- Presentation at Populism Specialist Group Workshop (Thessaloniki 2025).

Grants

- Microgrant, Sustainable Democracy Research Group, Radboud University (2024).
- Erasmus+ Staff Mobility 2025/2026 (2025).

Other Activities

- PhD Council Member (2024-2025). Institute of Management Research, Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands.
- Guest Editor (2024–2026). Current Research on Environmental Sustainability, Remote.
- Research Fellow: Populism, Ideology, and Discourse in the Global South: Sources of Polarization and Their Mitigation (2024–2025). Democracy Institute, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary.
- Steering Committee Member (2025–present). OPUS Young Scholar Initiative, Team Populism, Brigham Young University, Utah, Remote.
- Guest Lecture: A Framework for Religious-Green Populism: A Reading of Laudato Si' (2026). Peace University, New York, Remote.
- Speaker: Sustainability and Populist Discourse in Latin America (2026). International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS). Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands.

A9. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Deborah Martínez Aguilar (Mexico City, 1993) is a researcher, journalist, and political analyst whose work moves along the shifting borderlands between politics, sustainability, and the stories societies tell themselves to make sense of reality. Trained first as an internationalist and later as a political journalist, she has cultivated a professional path that brings together rigorous academic inquiry, multilingual communication, and a sustained engagement with public debates across continents.

She joined Radboud University as a PhD candidate to examine sustainability discourses, developing an analytical approach that blends discourse analysis, deconstruction, and critical theory. Her doctoral work forms part of a broader intellectual commitment: understanding how ideas about the environment, ethics and collective futures become politically articulated, sometimes with emancipatory force, sometimes with exclusionary or populist undertones.

Before entering academia, Martínez Aguilar developed an extensive career in international journalism and policy research. She reported on political and economic developments in Latin America for Russia Today, wrote analytical columns on geopolitics and technology for Eje Central and IDC México, and supported editorial and research teams at Nikkei Inc., ISI Emerging Markets, and TV Azteca. These roles sharpened her ability to translate complex processes into accessible narratives while maintaining analytical depth and methodological rigor.

Her academic and editorial work has led her to collaborate with institutions such as the Democracy Institute at Central European University and Team Populism at Brigham Young University. She has also served as a reviewer and guest editor for Current Research in Environmental Sustainability, coordinating international scholarly initiatives and special issues. Her publications, appearing in journals including World Politics Review, RevDem, Current Research in Environmental Sustainability, and the International Journal of Qualitative Methods, reflect her ongoing interest in political and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

Across her trajectory, Martínez Aguilar has remained anchored in a principle that guides both her academic and journalistic practice: understanding the world demands an attentive listening to the plurality of voices, conflicts, and aspirations that compose it. She regards herself as a skeptical researcher, in the Pyrrhonian tradition, convinced that assumptions, categories, and conventional explanations must remain perpetually open to interrogation. Her work, situated at the intersection of research and public engagement, seeks to illuminate the practical and discursive closures and openings that shape contemporary global governance, societal challenges, political discourses, and frameworks.



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