WORLD CULTURE & THE UNITED NATIONS

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
April 2024

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Abstract

In preparation for the 2022 United Nations (UN) conference *Stockholm+50*, a UN-sponsored policy report was prepared by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and the Council on Energy, Environment, and Water (CEEW) titled *Unlocking a Better Future*. The report sought to guide leaders on sustainable development with scientific evidence and actionable ideas and centers the idea that system-wide change requires new social norms. Drawing on Sewell's 1999 treatise on culture, and the research programme of World-Society Theory (WST), I ask what factors constrain the UN as a sociocultural institution, one that develops and propagates norms, principles, and shared social understandings, and how are they expressed in *Unlocking a Better Future*? I find that the UN's norm-building is constrained by its ability to be coherent across complex political arrangements and policy domains; by lacking real authority in a 'polycentric' governance system; by contradictory/conflictual elements inherent to norms that create change faster than they can be resolved; and by using rationalized logics that are cumulative and do not account well for alternative social understandings and worldviews. The factors I identify can be understood as generalized problems that exist beyond the report, on subjects such as policy coherence, jurisdiction, accountability, multilateralism, and sovereignty. These sociocultural dynamics at play in *Unlocking a Better Future* need to be accounted for to understand why some international norms are effective and others are not.

Acknowledgements

This research was possible due to the continued support and expertise of my academic advisor, Dr. Karen Foster. I would like to acknowledge Dr. Elizabeth Fitting and Dr. Christopher Helland for their time and effort helping me refine this thesis research. I would also like to acknowledge the late Dr. Jean-Sébastien Guy for encouraging me to write about World Culture. And I would like to thank my parents Susan & Eric and my sister Sarah for their unending support in my academic journey.

Part 1: Introduction

"[…] the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about."

David Foster Wallace

Following the 1946 dissolution of the League of Nations, which was a more limited international security organization (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 163), the ensuing United Nations (UN) began on a much-expanded project of global norm-building and collective action. Today, the UN and its affiliated bodies have areas of concern spanning economy, education, humanitarianism, health, human-rights, law, peacekeeping, environment, and more. The year 1972 in particular was a landmark in the UN's multidisciplinary growth and development, as the first environment-focused *Conference on the Human Environment* established the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) set in motion an era of multilateral environmental agreements, and began a dialogue linking economic growth to pollution, and the well-being of people around the world (UNEP & UNEMG 2022). Therefore, on the 50-year anniversary of the 1972 conference, in June of 2022, a commemorative UN conference was held in Stockholm, Sweden titled: *Stockholm+50: a healthy planet for the prosperity of all – our responsibility, our opportunity*.

Stockholm+50 brought together UN member states and invited a broad set of stakeholders, including other UN affiliated bodies and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), international financial institutions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, philanthropic organizations, and science and academic institutions, to take part and contribute to discussions on global issues (Noronha 2022). The conference was unique in its open format and 'architecture of engagement', whereby the goal was not to

negotiate a specific outcome or action plan but to have a “collective pause for an open, unfettered reflection on what needs to be addressed today for a healthy planet for all […] [and allow] the global community to make their voices and views known” (Noronha 2022). In this way, *Stockholm+50* signalled a ‘back to the drawing board’ approach; to focus on ways to rebuild international trust, accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and rethink multilateralism, and measures of progress and well-being (Noronha 2022).

My thesis analyzes a UN-sponsored policy report titled *Unlocking a Better Future*, which was written to provide a scientific basis and recommendations for action for *Stockholm+50*, and to “stimulate an informed debate on why change towards a sustainable future is not happening at pace with the challenges humans and the planet face” (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 2). With funding from the Swedish Ministry of the Environment,[1] *Unlocking a Better Future* was prepared by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), and the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW).[2] Based on the background papers of SEI & CEEW researchers (p. 25), and guided by an advisory panel of 27 experts in the field of sustainable development science and policy, including those working in UNEP and other UN agencies, the report sought to present up-to-date scientific evidence and actionable ideas – to “guide leaders to actions they can take now, informed by relevant science” (p. 2). *Unlocking a Better Future* addresses a range of entwined issues including ‘unprecedented change to our climate and ecosystems’, inequality and unbalanced economic growth, human-nature connectedness,

[1] The report also received partial funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), and the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research (MISTRA).
[2] The SEI and the CEEW are policy research institutions based in Stockholm (SEI) and New Delhi (CEEW).

‘transformation of socioeconomic systems’, institutional barriers to change, and more (p. 8-9).

The overarching message in *Unlocking a Better Future* is the need for ‘system-wide transformation’. With unprecedented challenges of climate instability and biodiversity loss 50 years on from the first environment-focused *Conference on the Human Environment*, and at the time of its publishing in the midst of heightened social and economic stress caused by the COVID-19 crisis increasing insecurity and creating long-term economic risks – the interconnectedness of problems facing humanity has growing salience. Further, weakened multilateral cooperation and decreased trust in institutions (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 130) pose new challenges for the UN, while policymaking takes place in a context that has “shifted even more toward multi-level, polycentric governance, where we have a complex set of actors, institutions, and agency” (p. 16). Though continuing to build on the ‘2030 Agenda’ and the SDGs, the report encourages a refocusing of the wider system – a ‘thinking about one’s thinking’ and adopting a viewpoint external to any single existing UN initiative, institutional domain, or ‘silo of challenges’ (UNEP & UNEMG 2022).

More important than any set of functional or internal conflicts and inefficiencies within the UN, *Unlocking a Better Future* centers the idea that system-wide change depends on new social norms, rules, principles, value systems (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 90), all of which embed policymaking and inform ultimately what is pursued and what is not. For example, the report states that to ensure “lasting prosperity for all […] requires a complete rethink of our ways of living and a shift in social norms and values that drive human behavior” (p. 14). And it means norms and value systems spanning *all* social

behaviors, including production and consumption patterns, lifestyle change, green urban planning, goals of global finance, modes of governance, relations between the Global North and South, metrics for measuring progress and success, patents, technology, and knowledge transfer, and more (SEI & CEEW 2022).

For these reasons, at a time when the UN is seeking upheaval and system-wide change while refocusing the role of norms as driving human behavior, *Unlocking a Better Future* serves as a timely expression of the UN as a social and cultural or 'sociocultural' institution – one that develops and propagates norms, principles, and shared social understandings (Finnemore 1996, p. 338) in order to 'unlock' and realize desired forms of change (Meyer & Strang 1993, p. 495). As the UN seeks to align member states and a broad set of stakeholders, norms and shared understandings work to establish the parameters in which alignment becomes possible (Frank, Hironaka & Schofer 2000). And in the context of *Unlocking a Better Future*, they work toward alignment of institutional and governance systems, and on global issues of sustainability, human progress and development, equity, and justice (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 122).

Drawing on two theories – William H. Sewell Jr.'s (1999) "The Concept of Culture", and the institutionalist research programme of World-Society Theory (WST) – I analyze factors that constrain or limit the UN as a sociocultural institution, and its ongoing work to create alignment across difference. The factors I identify can be understood as generalized problems that reach far beyond the report on subjects such as policy coherence, jurisdiction, accountability, multilateralism, and sovereignty. These problems are often alluded to in the report, but not addressed in detail. My research question is therefore: what factors constrain the UN as a sociocultural institution, one that

develops and propagates norms, principles, and shared social understandings, and how are they expressed in *Unlocking a Better Future*?

Any integrated and holistic understanding of the factors that constrain the UN would need to account for the ways in which economic, political, social, and cultural forces operate and interoperate today.[3] In general, analyses of global institutional change tend to focus on one mechanism while holding the others constant (Dobbin 2004, p. 4). For example, to understand why and how UN policies change over time, a coevolution of the role of institutions, power, networks, and cognition (Dobbin 2004, p. 4; Fourcade 2006, p. 155) would need to be accounted for in some capacity, and therefore in many instances this means holding them in place. In this way, my thesis centres how institutions drive global political change.

I bring in Sewell's (1999) "The Concept of Culture" and the institutionalist research programme of WST for three related reasons. First, because truly grasping these theories allows for a deeper look into the 'ubiquitous realities' of *Unlocking a Better Future* – the features that may be taken for granted, or that seem natural or inevitable, especially to those of us embedded in Western-style rationality (Finnemore 1996, p. 330).[4] Second, because they provide a framework to analyze the role of norms, principles, and social understandings, and their operation across institutional domain and social boundary. And third, because Sewell's (1999) framework helps to clarify the 'culture' that WST investigates. For example, Sewell (1999) provides a more specific and

[3] See Waters (2001); cultural globalization has to do with "social arrangements for the production, exchange and expression of symbols (signs) that represent facts, affects, meanings, beliefs, commitments, preferences, tastes and values" (p. 17).
[4] "Today we re-enact most conventions with an understanding of their rational purposes, but this is not to say that we actually make rational calculations every time we act. Our conventions may revolve around rationality and self-interest, but they are conventions just the same" (Dobbin 2004, p. 5).

operationalizable definition of 'culture' and 'institutions', whereas WST is more concerned with documenting the effects of certain cultural and institutional trends (Finnemore 1996, p. 339). As I discuss in parts 2 & 3, the main proposition of WST is that an institutional environment or 'world culture' has been built up, particularly in the postwar period, with the quintessential UN at its heart, and which operates as a meaning system constructing agency, identity, and activity (Meyer 2010, p. 4). This proposition is highly compatible with Sewell's (1999) framework of culture as 'systems of meaning' stabilized by institutions.

Part 2: On Culture

'The Concept of Culture'

"Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language."

Raymond Williams

In William H. Sewell Jr.'s (1999) paper 'The Concept of Culture,' he argues that the concept of culture has generally been written about or used in one of two ways, and that the two ways are often confused or conflated. In the first meaning, culture is a theoretical category used in the singular form. Culture is an abstracted aspect of social life that is contrasted to other equally abstract aspects including economy, technology, politics, biology (Sewell 1999, p. 39). In this first meaning, Sewell (1999) writes, "to designate something as culture, or as cultural is to claim it for a particular academic discipline or subdiscipline, for example, anthropology, or cultural sociology – or for a particular style or styles of analysis" (p. 39). Examples include Claude Levi-Strauss's structuralism, which sees cultural meaning as structured by systems of oppositions (p. 40); or more broadly the 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences which attempted to "specify the structures of human symbol systems and to indicate their profound influence on human behavior" (p. 44).

In the second meaning of culture, culture is a "concrete and bounded world of beliefs and practices […] commonly assumed to belong to or be isomorphic with a 'society' or with some clearly identifiable sub-societal group" (Sewell 1999, p. 39). In this second meaning, culture is used in the plural form and is used to describe and differentiate between groups such as American and French culture, or middle-class and

upper-class culture (p. 39). For example, in classic ethnographies, cultures were depicted similarly as well-bounded and highly integrated 'worlds of meaning' (p. 39). However, in contemporary anthropology this depiction is seen as untenable; cultures today are understood as highly contradictory, loosely integrated, contested, subject to constant change and weakly-bounded (p. 55).

I use 'culture' in the first meaning outlined by Sewell (1999); as an abstracted category of social life, and more specifically, as the *semiotic dimension of social life* (p. 48). Culture in this sense, is not a kind of activity confined to certain contexts like the arts or expressive social customs etc.[5] but is rather "the semiotic dimension of human social practice in general" (p. 48). Sewell (1999) argues that social life, "in all contexts and institutional spheres, is structured simultaneously both by meanings and by other aspects of the environment in which they occur – by, for example, power relations or spatiality or resource distributions" (p. 48). Every action regardless of context, is rendered meaningful according to a semiotic logic, in language or some other form of symbols (or signs) (p. 48). Thus, like other aspects of the social environment, culture can be thought of as autonomous; as a "network of semiotic relations cast across society, a network with a different shape and spatiality than institutional, or economic, or political networks" (p. 49).

Further, Sewell (1999) shows that linguistic symbols are transcendent by nature and interrelated, writing:

> The meaning of a symbol always transcends any particular context because the symbol is freighted with its usages in a multitude of other instances of social

[5] Also referred to as 'expressive culture' (Meyer 2000, p. 242 as cited in Buhari-Gulmez 2010, p. 254)

> practice […] A given symbol – mother, red, polyester, liberty, wage labor, or dirt – is likely to show up not only in many different locations in a particular institutional domain (motherhood in millions of families) but in a variety of different institutional domains as well (welfare mothers as a potent political symbol, the mother tongue in linguistic quarrels, the Mother of God in the Catholic Church) (p. 49).

In other words, the meaning of symbols jump contexts, and are therefore subject to being redefined by all contexts in which they are employed, by dynamics entirely foreign to any single institutional domain or spatial location (Sewell 1999, p. 49). Culture as an abstracted category of social life, and one to do with the "meaningful aspect of human action" (p. 44) therefore has a different shape and spatiality, affecting social practice in ways that are autonomous from other influences on action including "demographic, geographical, biological, technological, economic, and so on – that they are necessarily mixed with in any concrete sequence of behavior" (p. 44).

For example, the symbol of 'citizen' – which in part, forms a mutually legitimating relationship between individuals and states, and other political institutions (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 171) – carries certain recognized meanings including sets of rights and responsibilities. However, the meaning of 'citizen' is subject to a range of other influences which derive from outside of the citizen-to-state domain – from the institutions of other nation-states by way of globalization, but also legal statutes, academic scholarship, strikes and social movements, economic treatises (Sewell 1999, p. 48) and so on. The additional meanings of 'citizen' carry over into to the citizen-to-state domain, which in turn, helps to shape and reshape local possibilities of action (p. 49), however

constrained they may be in practice. Again, the 'carrying over' or "importation of meanings from one social location or context to another" (p. 51) is what defines culture's spatiality and relative autonomy, affecting social practice by way of *semiotic* influence.

The importation of meanings from one social context to another also occurs in direct and less direct ways. For example, in recent decades in the domain of human rights, there has been a great expansion of the idea of the 'right to a healthy environment'. Boyd (2012) writes about how this new right emerged, primarily, from the "interactions between judges, lawyers, ENGOs, constitutions, legislation and court decisions" (Boyd 2012, p. 78). Importantly, it has added new popular meaning and scope to the symbol of 'citizen' as it combines national citizenship with an environmental consciousness that is dynamic and transnational. Indeed, in Boyd's (2012) broader analysis of the environmental rights revolution, he writes that the field of 'global environmental law' has facilitated the importing of social and environmental meanings into local contexts everywhere: that "legal developments (constitutional, legislative, or judicial) at any level or in any region contribute to further recognition of the right to a healthy environment at all levels and in all regions" (p. 78).[6]

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The semiotic logic that Sewell (1999) describes, implies having 'thin' coherence (p. 49); it is coherent in that "the meanings of a sign or symbol is a function of its network of oppositions to or distinctions from other signs in the system" (p. 49). In other

[6] "National environmental law is 'uploaded' into international law, while international principles and precedents are 'downloaded' into national and regional systems. The result is what Yang and Percival describe as "global environmental law" – a field of law that is international, national, and transnational in character all at once" (Boyd 2012, p. 78).

words, meaning systems are weakly-bounded; the meaning of a linguistic symbol is always shaped by what it is contrasted to, opposed to or different from (p. 50). Groups of people form a 'semiotic community' or share in their meaning systems "in the sense that they will recognize the same set of oppositions and therefore be capable of engaging in mutually meaningful symbolic action" (p. 49).[7]

However, the kinds of statements and actions constructed by those in a semiotic community are not *determined* by its network of signs (Sewell 1999, p. 50), nor do members of a semiotic community who recognize the same set of symbolic oppositions need to "agree in their moral or emotional evaluations of given symbols. The semiotic field they share may be recognized and used by groups and individuals locked in fierce enmity rather than bound by solidarity, or by people who feel relative indifference to each other" (p. 50). Coherence simply requires "that if meaning is to exist at all, there must be systematic relations among signs and a group of people who recognize those relations" (p. 50).

Institutions

There is a common dual meaning of the term 'institution' that tends to go undifferentiated, but the meanings are imbricated, nonetheless. Generally, in sociology, an 'institution' refers to "sectors of society [i.e., the state, the market, economy, the family, the media] […] Sociologists use the term when talking about particular conventions, some defined by law and some by tradition" (Dobbin 2004, p. 5) and "range

[7] Martin Shaw (1992) similarly writes that a society entails 'human relationships' involving 'mutual expectations and understandings with the possibility of mutually oriented action' (as cited in Navari 2017, p. 13).

in complexity from simple customs of exchange to elaborate modern states" (p. 5). Further, institutions define conventions[8] "large and small, [they] shape human behavior not only by providing behavioral scripts, but by representing the relationships among things in the world" (p. 5). A second but related meaning of 'institution' is when referring to real-world institutions that are relatively populous, resourced, and formal, such that they are codified in law or by-law, like the UN for example.

The imbrication of the two meanings of 'institution' is simply that, whether we are talking about sectors of society, or conglomerations of people and ideas operating 'under the same roof', both meanings involve the implicit and explicit development of conventions, norms, and shared meaning systems across typically large populations of people. For example, the two main theories that spell out the 'institutions' of world society – WST and English School institutionalists[9] – agree on the ways in which institutions like the UN define conventions: the UN provides an arena for aggregation and voice (Navari 2017, p. 18), directs policy through shared goal setting, mobilizes resources toward selected topics and issues, convenes in conferences that serve as forums and which stimulate government commitments, standardizes and theorizes best-practices, and affirms certain principles, values, and forms of knowledge to guide collective action (Hironaka 2014; Lechner & Boli 2005). These qualities of the UN encompass both a real-world institution and 'arena of action',[10] and a highly complex sector of global society.

[8] Conventions at the collective level and cognitive schemas at the individual level (Dobbin 2004, p. 4)
[9] See the work of Barry Buzan.
[10] "Sociologists capture this idea by referring to societal sectors, or social fields, or arenas of action. Institutions, in these senses, are complex and often coherent mixtures of cultural and organizational material" (Greenwood et al. 2017, p. 792)

Culture & Institutions

Another way in which Sewell's (1999) treatise on culture is compatible with WST, is how 'institutions' are operationalized. WST emphasizes, for example, the cognitive modelling features of institutions (Finnemore 1996, p. 327), and Sewell (1999) writes about how institutions stabilize systems of meaning. Both views imply convention, and how institutions regulate and pattern social action across space and time.

For example, Sewell's (1999) use of culture as the "semiotic dimension of social life" (p. 48), also posits that despite, theoretically speaking, endless possibility for redefinition[11] through the "the importation of meanings from one social location or context to another" (p. 51), the meanings of many symbols exhibit stability over time. In other words, despite the dynamism of meanings – first, that they can always transcend any single context, and second, that the meanings of signs are a function of their opposition to and distinction from other signs (and therefore influenced by the signs they exclude) (p. 49) – the meanings of most signs tend to hold together.

To explain further, one of the reasons it is useful to conceptualize culture as Sewell (1999) has, is "to disentangle, for the purpose of analysis, the semiotic influences on action from other sorts of influences" (p. 44). Though of course, in any concrete sequence of behavior, influences on action, be they economic, political, social, spatial, and so on (p. 51) are always necessarily entangled. Therefore, to answer why meanings hold together (and why some do, and others do not), Sewell (1999) argues that it is the ways in which semiotic structures are interlocked with other structures, which stabilizes

[11] "[…] the meaning of a text or utterance can never be fixed; attempts to secure meaning can only defer, never exclude, a plethora of alternative or opposed interpretations" (Sewell 1999, p. 50).

the meaning of certain symbols over time. When interlocked with other structures, the meaning of a symbol can become highly unambiguous and constraining (p. 50).

The power of institutions, and quintessentially, institutions like national governments, media corporations, multinationals, and international organizations, is that they are all "relatively large in scale, centralized, and wealthy, and are all cultural actors; their agents make continuous use of their considerable resources in efforts to order meanings" (Sewell 1999, p. 56). In other words, institutions are concentrated cultural sites – interlocking economic, political, and social discourse, and creating a more consistent and stable set of relations between a given set of meanings.

To return to my example of 'citizen'; when nation-states and political and economic institutions, or international organizations and associations, converge or 'interlock' on a set of meanings for 'citizen' and its symbolic relations, it becomes entrenched and therefore much harder to upend its meaning or drastically alter its cultural evolution over time. WST scholar Anne Hironaka (2014) writes about institutions similarly, in that they shape basic understandings about the world and what exists; they make certain meanings salient or relevant to individuals and society at large; and they "promote and motivate patterns of social action" (p. 107).

Culture as a "network of semiotic relations cast across society" (Sewell 1999, p. 49), is then punctuated by 'weighted points' (as I refer to them), in that, institutions 'weigh down' and stabilize systems of meaning. The analogy of weightiness is just to say that much like the gravitational pull of mass in space, a heavier object keeps lighter objects in orbit, thus stabilizing their movement across space and time. Sewell (1999) and Hironaka's (2014) depiction of semiotic relations and their interlocking at the site of

institutions, depicts how institutions stabilize systems of meaning, while shaping patterns of human thought and social action. Further, institutions as concentrated cultural sites or 'weighted points', are ever engaged in setting standards and making an "official scheme of things" (Sewell 1999, p. 56). Institutions in effect tell people where their ideas and practices fit with the mainstream and its deviations (p. 56); others must, to some extent, orient their local systems (p. 56) of meaning to the institutional ones. Indeed, oppositional groupings that contest the dominant meanings of institutions, "itself implies a recognition of their centrality" (p. 57).

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With the above conceptualization of culture and institutions, we can also return, albeit with fresh understanding, to Sewell's (1999) second meaning of culture (discussed on pages 12-13), which sought to distinguish between different 'cultures' (plural) – cultures as "worlds of meaning" (p. 39). Despite being contradictory, loosely integrated, contested, subject to constant change and weakly-bounded (p. 55), when institutions converge on (embed; interlock) a system of meanings, that system becomes less instable over time, and holds together a mainstream and its deviations. The mainstream and its deviations define a culture with an autonomous cultural content (Buhari-Gulmez 2010, p. 254), even if that content is changing and influenced by what it excludes. A culture or cultural system is also *practiced*; people use cultural systems to accomplish some end – to do something in the world (p. 47). Thus, 'culture' implies both system and practice.[12]

[12] "The employment of a symbol can be expected to accomplish a particular goal only because the symbols have more or less determinate meanings – meanings specified by their systematically structured relations to other symbols. Hence practice implies system. But it is equally true that the system has no existence apart

In sum, if we posit the existence and analytical force of a 'world culture', as WST does, we may conceptualize *what it is* in the following way: a "generalized system of meanings" (Sewell 1999, p. 46); that is weakly-bounded (influenced by what it excludes) (p. 50); stabilized by global institutions, and recognized by people everywhere and in many countries,[13] fostering their engaging in "mutually meaningful symbolic action" (p. 49); which helps to empower certain ways of organizing thought, knowledge, and social action;[14] and which is practiced by those embedded in it – instantiated, reproduced, and transformed (p. 47).

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from the succession of practices that instantiate, reproduce, or – most interestingly – transform it. Hence system implies practice" (Sewell 1999, p. 47).

[13] Similarly, WST scholars Drori, Jang & Meyer (2006) define globalization as "the dual process of a global consolidation of a field and of a shared script, as well as the penetration of that globalized script into a growing number of countries" (p. 220).

[14] A great deal of WST writing is about how 'world culture' is constitutive of things like agency and actorhood; how action itself is autonomously "constructed, scripted, legitimated" by the wider cultural system, shaping the perceptions and preferences of actors (Buhari-Gulmez 2010, p. 254). For example, the individual as having universal rights and responsibilities, and rational choice (p. 254).

Part 3: World-Society Theory

While Sewell's (1999) framework addresses the question of what culture *is*, WST brings into view a particular culture, a 'world culture', and the extent to which it influences people everywhere. Meyer (2010) points out that in the modern world, and especially in the West, characterized by a politics and ideology of a liberal society and history, there are strong biases toward more 'realist' models of behavior – where political life is seen as built on the natural and prior choices of actors and assessed based on how it benefits their needs (p. 5).[15] In realist models, which are central to most theories of economic behavior,[16] for example (Dobbin 2007, p. 1), discussion of any broader culture *driving the choices* of actors is obscured or disappears entirely from view (Meyer 2010, p. 5). This is the culture which WST, and other phenomenological theories seek to bring into view.[17] And it is the same culture that I zero in on, as expressed in *Unlocking a Better Future*. First, however, I explain the main propositions of WST's 'world culture' or 'world society'[18] – its content, structure, and modes of expansion.

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Sociologist Ulrich Beck (2000) claimed that in our global world there are an increasing number of social processes indifferent to national boundaries; that a 'world society' is indeed a fitting point of departure for sociological and other research (p. 80).

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[15] In contemporary sociology, this is compounded by the hegemony of a strongly causalist methodology and philosophy of science, whereby demonstrating causal efficacy gains recognition (Sewell 1999, p, 45).
[16] "Economic life […] as a complex mass of decisions of autonomous consumers, workers, investors, entrepreneurs, innovators, and so on" (Meyer 2010, p. 5).
[17] Demaria & Kothari (2017) echo this point about culture-obscured, when they write that in newer conceptions of the 'Green Economy': "culture, ethics, and spirituality [is] side-lined" (p. 2591).
[18] 'World society' is used interchangeably with other labels such as 'world culture', 'world polity' and 'global culture'.

At the turn of the 21st century, Beck (2000) explained that his concern is with "what is beginning, with new institutions, and the development of new social science categories" (p. 81). Like Beck (2000), WST begins from the positing of a 'world society' and its utility to explain diverse social phenomena today.

The concept of world society has many associations and has been incorporated into different research programs in international law, political science, history, anthropology, sociology (Finnemore 1996, p. 325). Popularly speaking, world society may evoke the idea of a "transcendent community" (Navari 2017, p. 11), one that is beyond the "limits of stateness, boundaries and confined national identities" (p. 11).[19] WST and its world society is part of, more broadly, sociology's institutionalism, which examines the cultural norms and conventions that constitute modern actors – modern actors, being "individual persons, national states and the organizations created by persons and states" (Greenwood et al. 2017, p. 789).

Sociology's institutionalism is also different from how institutions are researched in political science or international relations for example, by the discipline's emphasis on the social and cognitive features of institutions (Finnemore 1996, p. 326). John Meyer, Brian Rowan, Anne Hironaka, and others in WST, have worked to elucidate the substantive content of world society and culture; its norms, rules, and cognitive modelling features which in their view permeates to varying extents, all aspects of political and social life and in all states (p. 327). Research on norms in political science has tended to be issue-specific and studied in isolation, whereas in sociology, 'world society' is used to identify an integrated system of norms in different areas of social and

[19] Similarly, Nederveen Pieterse (2020) defines globalization as the trend of greater worldwide connectivity of people over time and the awareness of this happening (p. 236)

political life and seeks to explain how they all fit together (p. 327). World society, therefore, predicts 'isomorphisms' – similar and coordinated behaviors between states, organizations, and individuals everywhere (p. 325) because of their embeddedness in a shared sociopolitical culture. Isomorphisms, for example, in "organizational construction, managerial ideas, educational programs, etc., which manifest across different cultures, states and regions, and irrespective of different levels of development" (Navari 2017, p. 14).[20]

However, despite the widespread codification of world-cultural norms and conventions, there is high variability in their deeper integration, which is referred to in WST as 'decoupling'. For example, Meyer et al. (1997) argue that states exhibit decoupling – discrepancies between their formal models and observable practices (p. 155) – and "a good deal more structuration[21] than would occur if they were responsive only to local, cultural, functional or power processes" (p. 173). In other words, states adopt more structures, policies, and plans (Meyer 2010, p. 14) than they have the resources and organizational capacity to integrate, because they are seeking legitimacy and responding to signals from the broader institutional environment. And the broader institutional environment is a cultural and value system; it supports and legitimates "some organizational forms and not others, some social activities and not others" (Finnemore 1996, p. 329).

[20] "The Stanford School has been particularly impressed by the spread across states with different political cultures and levels of development of human rights advocacy, and the near-global environmental movement" (Navari 2017, p. 14)

[21] 'Structuration' means "the formation and spread of explicit, rationalized, differentiated organizational forms" (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 156).

Further, WST emphasizes the prevalent political ideas and social norms being signalled at a given time in history[22] (Finnemore 1996, p. 328), and argues that these define the sociocultural parameters in which other political and economic forces operate (Frank, Hironaka & Schofer 2000, p. 111).[23] Prevalent norms are *constitutive;* the global institutional environment that has been built up, particularly in the postwar period, Meyer (2010) writes, "operates more as a cultural or meaning system, penetrating actors far beyond their boundaries and constructing agency, identity, and activity" (p. 4). In this way, WST analogizes modern actors (i.e., individuals, organizations, states) to actors in the theatre, adopting scripted identities and enacting scripted action (p. 4), an analogy that arguably emphasizes structure at the expense of agency (i.e., see Finnemore 1996, p. 342).

It is important to note that the institutionalism of WST emerged, in part, *as a corrective to* the predominant 'realist' frameworks about participants in modern society (Meyer 2010, p. 4), which alternately viewed actors as "prior to and autonomous from the limited institutional rules that constrain and empower them" (p. 2). Predominantly realist and actor-centered models of behaviour implied an agentic actor and one who is "bounded, autonomous, coherent, purposive, and hard-wired" (p. 3). WST emphasizes the opposing causal relationship: how the greater institutional environment constitutes,

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[22] The historical situatedness of social norms and conventions. For example, Dobbin, Simmons & Schofer (2000) write about global political culture as "comprising broad consensus on the set of appropriate social actors (individuals, organizations, and nation-states have replaced clans, city-states, and fiefdoms), appropriate societal goals (economic growth and social justice have replaced territorial conquest and eternal salvation), and means for achieving those goals (tariff reduction and interest rate manipulation have replaced plunder and incantation) (p. 451).

[23] "[…] we do not suppose that world sociocultural forces work in isolation from world economics and political forces, merely that the latter typically operate within parameters established by social reality, including definitions of the "nation-state" and "environmental protection" (Frank, Hironaka & Schofer 2000, p. 111).

and gives meaning to, modern actors and their actions. WST's broader approach brings attention to what is referred to as the 'new institutionalisms', or the "patterns that constrain and empower very agentic, autonomous, bounded and purposive actors" (p. 3). For example, in the terms of social control, the new institutionalisms define what is required to "create and stabilize systems of actors" (p. 3), and to facilitate coordination, moderate conflict, and manage interdependence between conceptually bounded and agentic actors.

History & Social Structure

According to Meyer et al. (1997) world society has a 'stateless'[24] structure insofar as it lacks a central control or supranational authority such as a world-state.[25] This structure is a result of result of historical forces, as Tilly (1990) explains. Though alongside the rise of the nation-state system, many intellectuals, and others, envisioned the need for a supranational or world-state, to organize interdependence and moderate conflict (as cited in Meyer 2010, p. 6), early post-WWII conditions made this an overly constraining and unviable project (p. 6). The major events of the first half of the twentieth century, including two world wars, the Great Depression, the Holocaust, the use of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had led to the weakening and delegitimizing of "a world order built on charismatic and corporate nation-states as ultimate units of authority, with national citizenship as the master human identity" (p. 6).

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[24] "models of governance […] emphasizing active coordination and cooperation around impersonal rules more than the dominance of an overall state-like center" (Drori, Jang & Meyer 2006, p. 207).

[25] For example, regarding environmental organization: "[…] the core intellectual problem is how so much organized collective action has arisen in a world society that so clearly lacks a strong central actor (or state), that organizationally resembles an anarchy, and in which the dominant state organizations until recently formed few and weak environmental agendas" (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 625)

Therefore, in the place of a nationalistic order, broader conceptions of society that transcended national ones, gained legitimacy. In the postwar context of no world-state, coupled with dramatic economic, sociopolitical, and military globalization, humanistic ideas then arose that people and groups everywhere must become “the carriers of responsibility and capacity” (Meyer 2010, p. 6) to enact world society. Humanistic and universal ideas placed individuals as agents of universal principles; people were to assume roles as builders of history and society (p. 7). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, for example, helped to flip the script, so to speak, and reconstruct individuals: organizations and states became seen as *deriving from* the expanded rights of the individual (p. 7). The new individual is therefore empowered, they represent their self-interest, and “choose interests and even actively manage the rules of the social environment” (p. 3).

Universal principles of human rights and social and economic rationalization became increasingly codified into newly minted intergovernmental associations like the UN and European Union (EU). Human agency became rooted “in good part outside society, in a suprasocietal or transcendental cosmos, rather than in an empire or state” (Meyer 2010, p. 6). Global civil society emerged: professional and associational groups arose to fulfil universal principles such as rationality and progress, and pursue universal goods such as world peace, human rights, models of economic growth, environmental consciousness (Meyer & Jepperson 2000; Meyer 2010).

Further, the stateless, more anarchic structure of world society is made analogous to de Tocqueville’s 1830s observations of America in ‘Democracy in America’, whereby he:

> […] described the federal and centralized government at all levels of the American political system as weak [at the time], and he ascribed much of the ordinary governing and administrative functions to what he called 'associations' – citizen groups that carried out and replicated governing functions on a local and associational instead of hierarchical basis (Navari 2017, p. 16)

At the world level and without central control, more pluralist (albeit thinly) international associations emerged to define norms and prescribe best-practices. These associations were and continue to be formally non-hierarchical, pluralist and solidarist, and comprise equal members with policy mandates that must be negotiated (Navari 2017, p. 16). Similarly, Drori, Jang & Meyer (2006) write that international organizations arose to fulfil the roles of 'moral entrepreneurs' and 'teachers of norms'; to set "normative expectations, celebrate the normal, and denounce the deviant" (p. 222).

In the postwar period, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of international governmental organizations (IGOs) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), as well as professional, consultant and advisory groups (Beckfield 2010). And they are networked; the UN, for example, is closely tied to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank Group, the UN Education, Science and Culture Organization, the International Labor Organization, the World Health Organization (Navari 2017, p. 16) and others. WST sees such highly networked associational and organizational bodies, which in some cases have nearly every nation-state as member, as "central transmission belts" (Navari 2017, p. 17) through which global models are developed and propagated.

International Institutions

WST analyses have found evidence that IGOs are key to the transmission of global culture, for example, in studies that show that states with shared memberships in IGOs – including states with otherwise low levels of interaction and at different levels of industrial development – displayed patterned behavior[26] in diverse policies related to democratization, economic planning and trade, social security design, constitutional human rights, and social movement organizations (Beckfield 2010; Drori, Jang & Meyer 2006; Strang & Meyer 1993). A study by Wotipka & Ramirez (2007) examined how states with shared IGO and INGO memberships and participation in global conferences displayed patterned behavior in their timing of ratification and content of women's constitutional rights.[27] These studies highlight primarily the force of culture: that despite potentially great differences in domestic social life, disparate nations who participate in international organization have presented themselves, their stated purposes, and goals, in very similar ways. Whether nations achieve their stated goals or make real attempts to achieve them is another question and is at the core of the concept of 'decoupling'.[28]

WST provides, as Finnemore (1996) notes, a very useful "system-level theoretic framework with which to analyze international politics and generates testable hypotheses about international behavior" (p. 326). Such hypotheses generally posit that the more embedded a nation-state is with the greater institutional environment, through global

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[26] Similar mobilization agendas and strategies (McAdam and Rucht, 1993, as cited in Meyer et al. 1997).

[27] "John Boli's work shows that constitutional articulations of citizen rights have changed in a coordinated way across the international system of states over the past century. The pattern of rights expansion he documents suggests that whether or not a state codifies suffrage for women or economic rights for citizens has little to do with the status of women or economic conditions in a state, but it has a great deal to do with international cultural norms about women's suffrage and economic rights at the time the constitution was written" (Finnemore 1996, p. 335).

[28] The difference between how an organization, bureaucracy, or state is 'supposed' to work, versus how it does work.

organizational ties and global logics (Drori, Jang & Meyer 2006, p. 220) the more it will act in unison with that greater system,[29] even in cases when it "runs contrary to expressed national interests – because it embodies some set of values central to the larger world culture" (Finnemore 1996, p. 339). And a state with more 'receptor sites' – or "social structures with the capacity to receive, decode, and transmit information from the outside to local actors" (Frank, Hironaka & Schofer 2000, p. 103) – is more prone to enact policies in line with the broader world society[30] (Drori, Jang & Meyer 2006, p. 219). For example, in the environmental realm, 'receptor sites' include science-based organizations, state-science organizations, laboratories, private scientists, universities, and research centres (Frank, Hironaka & Schofer 2000, p. 103). These cultural nodes are seen as connectors of people and ideas to the greater institutional environment or world society, and vice-versa.

WST highlights how international associations like the UN bring together many different political actors under one 'cultural canopy' (Meyer 2010, p. 8). INGOs, expert groups, professional affiliations, policy think tanks, advocacies, and other small organizations come together to develop and proliferate socially sanctioned forms of policy. IGOs like the UN aggregate representatives across whole states, but also parts of state governments including their parliaments, central banks, and environmental departments (Lechner & Boli 2005). And the more numerous but less resourced INGOs – composed of experts and other credentialed figures in technological, medical, economic,

[29] "[…] the more they are linked to the external world, the more pressures come on" (Strang 1990, McNeely 1995, as cited in Meyer 2010, p. 10).

[30] Beckfield (2010) examines the possibility that world society is fragmenting into more regional entities, or that world society may be expanding and deepening globally, while simultaneously growing in regional strength.

and academic know-how – cooperate and compete to promote collective benefits, public goods, and the welfare of certain beneficiaries (Lechner & Boli 2005, p. 124). An important cultural difference between non-governmental organizations (INGOs & NGOs) and states is that states are accountable to citizens and have internally competing interests (Lechner & Boli 2005). Alternately, non-governmental organizations are more 'culturally free': free to engage in the ever-advancement and developing anew of "principles, rules, ethical codes, technical know-how, philosophical precepts and many other types of world cultural abstractions" (Lechner & Boli, p. 123). As a result, world-cultural models and cognitive frames evolve at a fast pace; faster than participatory states can digest and integrate them into their modes of governance. This is another sociopolitical dimension to 'decoupling' and is explored in Part 4.

Diffusion of Policies

In addition to particularizing the structure and content of world society, WST brings attention to the idea that 'diffusion' (or spreading out, expansion, globalization etc.) of policies and behaviors in many sectors, is driven by a process of cultural legitimation. Diffusion can mean the adoption of a certain policy at a specific point in time, or the adoption of modes of governance and larger political structures over longer periods. WST contrasts, again, with more 'realist' frameworks dominant in international relations and political science, which alternately emphasize local needs and domestic demand[31] as explanations for the diffusion of certain policies (Finnemore 1996, p. 337),

[31] "They all need money, so they all have finance ministries. They all need coercive apparatuses to collect money from their populations, so they all have police. They all need to control and/or provide services for internal populations, so all have home or interior ministries" (Finnemore 1996, p. 335).

or coercion and power resulting in forced adoption by weaker states. In practice, both have empirical standing. In many instances, the mechanisms are comingled, and the lines blurred (Dobbin, Simmons & Garrett 2007, p. 450).

Following the works of Max Weber, on the rise, form and spread of rationalized bureaucratic structures,[32] hypotheses about diffusion tended to fall into one of the following two broader categories: one, coercion and competition between more and less powerful actors, and two, what is referred to as 'functional rationality', whereby adoption of certain policies is understood as a process of learning – to coordinate in the most efficient way the complex relationships of modern technical work (Finnemore 1996, p. 329). WST emphasizes a third, less intuitive category and explanatory mechanism for diffusion: namely, the cultural legitimation that comes from going along with global mainstream precepts and scripts. For example, through the collecting of quantitative data sets on many units, and usually states, WST analyses have found that the behaviors of states and the kinds of policies they adopt very often correlate with the attributes and behaviors of other states, or with worldwide phenomena including international conferences, treaties, and world historical events, rather than the internal and domestic task demands of those individual states (Finnemore 1996, p. 338).

Before institutionalist arguments were made, it was generally understood that diffusion occurred through direct and observable network connections and relationships (Dobbin, Simmons & Garrett 2007, p. 451; Meyer & Strang 1993). In other words, more tangible lines of interaction between populations, and particularly economic, political,

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[32] Weber (1968) defined rational bureaucratic organization, or 'rationalization' as "the explicit organization of clearly defined social entities and their roles, relationships, and activities around clear and general rules and toward clear and general purposes (as cited in Drori, Jang & Meyer 2006, p. 206).

military, and technological interdependence, was seen as together producing organizational isomorphism, or similarity in structure and policy.[33] As mentioned above, the earlier logic of diffusion was greatly influenced by the work of Max Weber: with the expansion of new markets and technologies, and as "rationalized bureaucratic structures were the most efficient way to coordinate the complex relations involved in modern technical work" (Finnemore 1996, p. 329), bureaucratic organizational forms needed to also expand, to "coordinate these activities across more and more aspects of society" (p. 329).[34]

However, in the mid-1970s, key institutionalist analyses began to emerge, observing that rational bureaucratic organization often *outpaced* markets and technologies (Finnemore 1996, p. 329). Using cross-national and time-series data to control for internal characteristics of nation-states (Dobbin, Simmons & Garrett 2007, p. 454), it was found that "the world was being bureaucratized and organized much faster than it was being developed economically or technologically" (Finnemore 1996, p. 329). The findings implied that rational bureaucratic organization may or may not expand because of domestic task demands (Finnemore 1996, p. 330), by competition or coercion, or as Weber proposed, as an efficiency response to complex market and technological conditions.[35] Greater recognition of the cultural dimension was needed, that "the wider environment supports and legitimizes rational bureaucracy as a social good" (p. 329). Rational bureaucratic organization, Meyer and others have argued, is a blueprint of world

[33] "Isomorphism is not homogeneity; it does not create identical behavioural outcomes" (Finnemore 1996, p. 342)
[34] "The increasing complexity of modern systems – of trade, of political scope and responsibilities, of production and social reproduction — requires that the governance of these systems be rationalized so as to enhance capacity and efficiency" (Drori, Jang & Meyer 2006, p. 208).
[35] For a discussion, see Waters (2001, p. 31-32) on the logic of industrialism.

culture; the socially sanctioned and appropriate way to organize social tasks in general (p. 330). WST therefore locates causal force in an expanding and deepening world culture (p. 325),[36] one which produces Weberian rational bureaucratic organization,[37] and which may occur independent of real market and technological conditions.

Further, if states are embedded in a shared sociopolitical culture, self-reinforcing and cumulative effects[38] become easier to imagine. Considering the historical situatedness of modern states – as having standardized identities and purposes, with integrated principles of a universalistic moral order, using purposive rationality and means-ends causal logic, the same teleological assumptions about the trajectory of policy (Dobbin, Simmons & Garrett 2007, p. 451), and with the same conceptualization of basic resources and technology (Meyer & Strang 1993, p. 495) – then the further diffusion of social material becomes more plausibly a process of cultural sharing and exchange. In plain terms, states, and other modern actors, in various ways copy one another's structures and policies because they are a part of the same culture. A foundational paper by DiMaggio & Powell (1983) wrote about this copying as a kind of pure 'mimeses' of the policies of others based on fads, 'psychological proximity' (Rose 1993), revered examples from leading countries and experts, and abstract evidence (Dobbin, Simmons & Garrett 2007, p. 451).

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[36] "The dual process of a global consolidation of a field and of a shared script, as well as the penetration of that globalized script into a growing number of countries" (Drori, Jang & Meyer 2006, p. 220).
[37] For an extensive study on the rationalization of national governments between 1985-2002, see Drori, Jang & Meyer (2006).
[38] Also referred to as 'path dependence'. For example, "the rationalization of national governance is path dependent, in that countries that began the study period with relatively high levels of rationalized national governance ended the study with relatively higher levels of rationalization (Drori, Jang & Meyer 2006, p. 219).

As I analyze in Part 4, a cultural view of diffusion has important implications for how inequality manifests. World culture and local contexts everywhere are tied together through a variety of linkages, which means that global models *may or may not* enter as a result of local need and/or measures of coercion and power. While offering tools to resist world culture in certain specific ways, global models subjugate local contexts to the centrality of science and other rationalized logics, and to the expertise of professionals who most often operate externally to poor and weaker states. As Meyer et al. (1997) write, "goals outside the standard form while still common enough, are usually suspect unless strongly linked to these basic goals of collective and individual progress" (p. 153).

Part 4: *Unlocking a Better Future* & Dynamics of Institutional Change

The Problem of Coherence

"What is the point of centrism when the center does not hold? What is the point of convergence thinking when convergence on what isn't clear?"

Jan Nederveen Pieterse

"Which globalization? Unless it is informed by such a conversation, no scheme of global governance can hope to endure."

Roberto Unger Mangabeira

Despite the popular view and partial truth that the UN is politically weak or 'without teeth', WST has shown the diffuse cultural effects of international associations like the UN and its affiliated bodies – as aggregators of states and other actors, as 'teachers of norms' where collective forms of knowledge and social action are channelled, and more. In the legal realm, we can think of the concept of 'soft law' as applying similarly, which is defined as "principles with potentially great political, practical, humanitarian, moral, or other persuasive authority, but which do not strictly speaking correspond to extant legal obligations or rights" (Boyd 2012, p. 79). Boyd (2012) for example, makes a compelling argument about the historical significance and success achieved through soft law in the context of the 'environmental rights revolution', and specifically, the 'right to a healthy environment'.

However, *Unlocking a Better Future* – a policy report prepared by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), and written to provide a scientific basis and recommendations for action for the

UN conference *Stockholm+50* – concedes that the UN's effectiveness has been limited on such concerns as transboundary environmental issues (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 124). Specifically, multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) continue to be the core means to regulate and set norms of conduct, yet despite a high number of MEAs, they have not effectively "closed the gap" (p. 124) on measures set out in the 'Framework for Environmental Action' of the 1972 *Conference on the Human Environment* (p. 35). With increasing impacts of climate change and other transboundary issues that "serve to push and merge predefined governance mandates of multilateral institutions" (p. 127), the need for policy coherence and multilaterism are rising at a time when the predominant norms of environmental organization are falling short. Despite the unprecedented growth and significance of international environmental organization since the landmark *Conference on the Human Environment*, the report argues that new ideas, types of multilateral engagements, and conceptual frameworks are indeed needed.

Mainstream environmental policy is falling short, the report argues, in part because the organizational context has changed dramatically, and continues to change at a pace much faster than solutions are seen and implemented. Specifically, at the global level, "relatively centralized and single multilateral institutions have morphed to a state of polycentric governance (Ostrom, 2009, 2012) and regime complexity (Abbott, 2012; Biermann & Kim, 2020; Bulkeley et al., 2014; Keohane & Victor, 2011), in which multiple stakeholders take part" (as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 122). A wide range of actors, spanning public and private sectors, and including for example, states, corporations, financial institutions, and civil society organizations (p. 122), and each with their own interests, sources of legitimacy, and expertise – cooperate, compete and

conflict (Lechner & Boli 2005, p. 124). Indeed, this kind of 'stateless' globalization – without central control or limit – and 'open organizational frame' of the UN (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 645) has produced a highly dynamic political landscape whereby broader coherence is lost in the process.

Unlocking a Better Future notes that positively, a 'polycentric' system of governance can mean "many more opportunities and routes are available to accelerate global action than through multilateral institutions and agreements alone" (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 124). Parallel to a gridlocked UN for example, global civil society groups, NGOs, philanthropic organizations, academic and science institutions, and more, can use their leverage and form alternative alliances to force competition and create change. Indeed, beginning around 2015 there has been a "proliferation and groundswell of multi-stakeholder cooperative initiatives, partnerships and pledges announced outside of legally binding agreements" (p. 137). Negatively, however, 'polycentric governance' has helped create issues surrounding "incoherent and conflicting incentives" (p. 126) and inefficiency. And without a central control or limit with procedures to create a level playing field for different interests (p. 128), organized and well-resourced 'corporate-commercial actors' (p. 124) and other private actors can maintain disproportionate influence unabated.[39]

Further, in a dialectical fashion, contradictions inherent to highly valued principles[40] such as solidarism (to act together) and pluralism (together and apart), and

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[39] See Waters (2001) for a discussion. For example, globalization is characterized in part by "[…] transnational corporations that operate independently of political arrangements and indeed can achieve economic domination over them" (p. 61-62).
[40] For example, contradictions in valued sociocultural goods like progress and justice, which are two ends toward which Western societies structure their rational action (Finnemore 1996, p 331).

the legitimate claims to these principles by different and conflicting actor-groups, means that problems accumulate much faster than solutions[41] – and solutions only ever yield partial successes (Frank, Hironaka & Schofer 2000, p. 111). Very often "economic growth policies, trade and industrial policies, environmental policies etc., [will] conflict with each other or exist in a vacuum" (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 125),[42] representing both a functional challenge to pursue 'win-win' or 'synergistic' policies,[43] and importantly, a challenge about "competing values and understandings of what is good, desirable, and appropriate in our collective communal life" (Finnemore 1996, p. 342).

There is also the problem of what I call 'organizational sprawl', whereby policy domains are subdivided and differentiated to such an extent that broader coherence is lost. Within environmental organization for example, there are many components, partnerships, and initiatives, with differing degrees of interaction – including biodiversity, chemicals, oceans, and other subdomains broadly adhering to sustainability goals (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 122). And within subdomains, with environmental treaties for example, there are further separations by topic and geography (p. 124). The report makes clear that this plurality of divisions, and stakeholders, has created "fragmented and diffused governance structures – leading to overlapping and conflicting negotiations" (Azizi et al. 2019, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 124).

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[41] "A sector arising out of a highly legitimated but essentially unlimited discourse and association, rather than a fixed and limited state interests or a fixed and limited world order, is a factory that creates and defines problems at a rate faster than that at which feasible solutions can be organized" (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 647).

[42] "Other examples of instances where environmental goals and policies co-exist with environmentally harmful subsidies include those for fisheries, pesticides and fertilizers, and fossil fuels – where reduced costs for an industry undercut goals of marine protection, ecosystem and species preservation, and land use conservation" (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 125-6)

[43] For example, to address contradictory policies between economic growth and environment, states will make plans to use economic gains for the overarching goal of environmental sustainability.

The problem of 'sprawl' has therefore resurfaced more holistic questions about the appropriate roles and identities of different actors: about where the loci of problem-solving should be; where and how to mediate between what can be described as a 'flurry' of competing interests[44] and stakeholders (p. 124); the appropriate scope of transboundary issues and where one's jurisdiction ends and the next begins. The political response in *Unlocking a Better Future* is to recentre the state and the will of national leadership;[45] that states should be "central actors that shoulder unique responsibilities and powers to shape voluntary action, at the national and global levels" (Betsill et al. 2020; Giessen et al. 2016; Mazzucato 2015, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 124) – and a central arena for organizing the competing interests of stakeholders.

As we will see, however, there are of course contradictions between the control capabilities of states and the potential for alternative political forms and alliances – what Mangabeira Unger (2022) refers to as 'democratic experimentalism' or "latitude for experiment in […] institutional arrangements" (p. 31). Indeed, certain beneficiaries will promote the fact that with less possibility for coherence or sustained political consensus on a range of issues as per 'sprawl' and conflicting interests, in this new sociopolitical context, opportunities also arise for alternative alliances and on perhaps more grassroots or democratic grounds, to form and gain influence.

At its core, there is a sociocultural tension that is alluded to, but its real scope is left unaddressed in *Unlocking a Better Future*. The following two paths are not mutually exclusive, but on the one hand, the report advocates state-centred, stronger leadership and

[44] Interests such as "voting power, legislative power, financial resources, business influence, innovation capacity, consumer pressure and discursive power" (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 124).
[45] The report finds that most research on policy coherence has highlighted political will as a critical factor (Nilsson & Persson 2017; Persson & Runhaar 2018, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 126).

political will: to see, in a holistic and strategic way, a context of organizational sprawl and the conflicting nature of issues that cannot be easily 'managed away' (Brand et al. 2021, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 126), and to provide an alternative path through it, using smart policy design and compensatory measures (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 126). On the other hand, in this new sociopolitical context of 'regime complexity', heightened competition between many actor-groups, rapid change, sprawl, and where older organizing principles have broken down, aged-out, or perhaps lost their legitimacy – there is also opportunity for alternative alliances and conceptual frameworks, seeking to restructure the very problem and solutions in the first place. The tension is that there is no stable normative solution (Finnemore 1996, p. 342), no "obvious or equilibrium set of arrangements" (p. 341), and therefore in practice "explicit and controversial trade-offs between the two" (p. 341) have to be made – between for example, state-led coherence, and 'democratic experimentalism' (Managabeira Unger 2022, p. 31).

At the world level, the real political limitations of the UN also pose the question: coherence on what grounds? It is often the case that authoritative actors and institutions attempt to impose coherence and alignment – to turn sprawl into an ordered field (Sewell 1999, p. 56). However, at a time when "public trust in institutions and social trust is low in many contexts" (BP Dellmuth & Fornborg; Edelman, 2022, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 63), coherence in the form of 'hard law' and binding agreements is harder to establish and maintain across difference. Indeed, *Unlocking a Better Future* notes that there has been a growing move away from 'hard law' approaches, culminating in more 'soft law' and 'governance by goals' with the SDGs today (Kanie & Biermann 2017, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 130). Ways to form international alignment are also

shifting emphasis; for example, goal setting based on ‘common aversions’ and ‘chronic risk outcomes’ that all countries would want to avoid (rather than goals they seek to achieve) have gained in value (Ghosh 2020, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 131), such as “avoiding new pandemics, climate-change induced extreme weather events, and a collapse in agricultural output” (Adams et al. 2021, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 131).

‘Post-Materialism’ & Governance

Sociologist Malcolm Waters (2001) wrote about the potential consequences of a system governed by more fragmented and diffuse structures and draws many parallels to the international system of governance today. In his writing on ‘post-materialism’ (a term coined by Ronald Inglehart) Waters (2001) writes: the “state’s effectivity will recede from being the predominant form of political organization to being a dominant form and from there to being one of a number of players jockeying for position in political arrangements” (p. 158). There would be more numerous and competitive local, national, regional, and global levels of political organization (p. 158). While I do not go into detail on the relative strengths and weaknesses of states in today’s global political system,[46] it is fair to say that modern nation-states have seen both, a loss of some effectivity, while at the same time, a great expansion in their “bureaucracies, agendas, revenues, and regulatory capacities” (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 157).

Further, Waters (2001) writes that with more numerous and competitive political actors, from local to global levels, values shift to how the *global system* inhibits, and

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[46] For one discussion, see Walby (2003).

allows for, one's right to "community, self-expression and quality of life" (p. 155). While the more "traditional focus of politics in liberal democracies was material values, issues to do with the distribution and redistribution of goods and services" (p. 155) and the ways in which states and political parties represent the interests of one class or another (p. 156),[47] 'post-materialism' implies a politics and set of motivations about the human experience in general and is a globalizing force (p. 156). For example, on how post-materialism influences politics everywhere, Waters (2001) writes:

> The state is [seen as] problematic across the political spectrum: the new right regard it as a transgressor against individual freedoms and a distorter of markets; the new left views it as an agent of rampant materialism and a means for the juridical control of populations and their minorities. More importantly, post-materialism focuses political attention on trans-societal issues […] It indicates such phenomenologically globalizing items as 'the individual', 'life', 'humanity', 'rights', and 'the earth' that indicate the universality of the condition of the inhabitants of the planet rather than the specific conditions of their struggle with an opposing class about the ownership of property or the distribution of rewards (p. 156)

In other words, a set of social conditions arise where national governments must absorb conflicts between more numerous political actors, and often-contradictory arrangements of political actors with opposing social and political rights (more on this below) (Waters 2001, p. 221), and simultaneously, be accountable to a broader set of

[47] For a discussion about industrialization and value shifts, see Waters (2001), Chapter 2. For example, structural functionalism argues that the process of industrialization shifts a society's values in the direction of individualization, universalism, secularity, and rationalization (Waters 2001, p. 29).

value conflicts including trans-societal and planetary issues. *A la* Waters (2001), in more liberalist societies – those with higher degrees of social and economic openness, activity, and acquiescence to the international community, and in the case of the more powerful Western and industrialized states, assumed commitments of international leadership and responsibility – the social contract including roles and responsibilities of government has therefore expanded, while its effectivity has arguably receded. One result is that liberal democracies face increased costs borne from fulfilling these responsibilities (i.e., through the role of courts).

Further, there is an observable tension between advocating for and protecting sociopolitical autonomy – resisting unwanted dilution or perceived dilution from the international into the national – and alternately, enacting obligations and differentiated responsibilities and capacities (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 125) to redress global inequality and other global problems. For example, the priorities of North American political parties in general, from conservative to liberal, map onto this tension between sociopolitical autonomy and broader international responsibility.

In addition to the globalization of public sector (i.e., IGOs and agencies) and private sector actors (i.e., companies, financial institutions, media) – more numerous civil society groups, including INGOs, professional, expert, consumer, and other associational groups that operate in the 'in between' spaces, have blurred national boundaries on a range of issues, whilst competing for influence in decision-making directly, and indirectly, through 'soft law' practices (Abbott & Snidal 2000, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 130) and by providing external support to national governments to coordinate on trans-societal issues.

However, this blurring of lines and the influence of non-state and non-elected actors can be used as a precedent for both left and right-wing reactionary and/or deglobalization movements, seeking to reassert political, economic, and sociocultural autonomy (i.e., protectionism; nationalism). Further, the scale of global inequality today has made international institutions' and other non-state actors' influence on national contexts more easily weaponized and wielded as political ammunition (i.e., see Flew 2021). As a result, in an attempt for a more bounded/unitary or nationalist system, deglobalizing trends can influence governments to 'reign in' their state departments and agencies (i.e., legislatures, banks), from their ties to the departments and agencies of other states through shared organizational logics and 'receptor sites' (Frank, Hironaka & Schofer 2000, p. 103), which WST has shown to make states acquiescent to each other (i.e., isomorphism) and to the broader institutional environment.

Unlocking a Better Future appeals to the need for repaired trust in international institutions, while moving against deglobalizing trends. To account for this juxtaposition, the report encourages policy measures that would provide transparency and higher standards for public participation in policymaking (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 22); and that there must be "effective organizations that radically improve coordination and collaboration, between government departments and between UN agencies to handle nexus issues in an integrated and systemic way" (p. 127). Through integrated and systemic approaches, and by further blurring the lines between national governments and international institutions, synergies can be located to 'unlock effective action' and 'trigger positive tipping points' (p. 22).

Importantly, in any highly integrated national and international system to handle nexus issues, inequality is of course material, but 'post-material' too – having to do with access to *cultural* capital in a *global* arena. Stratified globalization gives precedence to not only holders of economic and political power, but also "educated persons, holding professional occupations […] in a knowledge society" (Meyer 2010, p. 10). Educated experts including professionals, researchers, scientists, intellectuals, managers, legislators, policymakers etc. (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 174),[48] afford legitimacy as true 'actors' – legitimacy to assimilate and develop rationalized and universalistic knowledge (p. 165) and use it to service national and local interests (Meyer 2010, p. 10). Countries with greater institutional strength, strong governance, "research infrastructure, the critical intellectual mass, and well-developed connections between the policy world and various research nodes" (Dobbin, Simmons & Garrett 2007, p. 456) have agency and capacity to resist and/or conform with world culture in certain specific ways.[49] Alternatively, poor countries do not have the capacity to resist, and weak capacity to conform (Meyer 2010).

The 'Social Cloud' & Decoupling

In WST's view, globalization means that modern actors have increasingly come to define their identities, actions, and interests, through a dialectical process with *global* culture – its institutions, and cognitive models (Buhari-Gulmez 2010, p. 254). Modern actors instantiate, and reproduce (Sewell 1999, p. 47) global models of, for example,

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[48] "Thus, contemporary societies are increasingly filled with very highly schooled persons, at least ceremonially or culturally linking their highly empowered human rights and capacities to the comprehension of the universalistic laws of a very rationalized natural and social environment" (Meyer 2010, p. 10).

[49] Institutional strength: if weak governance, then private actors tend to drive development, leaving poorer parts of the population disconnected from key services, including green space (Mahendra et al., 2021, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 76).

sovereign authority, self-determination and responsibility, collective development, social justice, the protection of individual rights, authoritative law-based control systems, clear possession of resources and labor, and more (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 153). This dialectic between actors and global culture – of adopting global norms and cognitive models, using, and thus instantiating them, but also reproducing and reshaping them in the process – refers to what I call the 'social cloud'.

The 'social cloud' is a cognitive-theoretical space, global in scope, and is a process that *channels* social reality – of accumulating and developing information on hypothesized relationships between social variables, so as to order reality into 'comprehensible and meaningful regularities' (Kalberg 1980). Further, the social cloud is made up of what Haas (1980) refers to as 'social knowledge' or the "sum of technical information [,..] and of theories about that information which commands sufficient consensus at a given time among interested actors to serve as a guide to public policy designed to achieve some social goal" (p. 367-68). It is a process whereby "people add new data to prior knowledge and beliefs to revise their assessment of that knowledge […] and learning takes place as new data consistent with a hypothesized relationship accumulate, or fail to" (Dobbin, Simmons & Garrett 2007, p. 460).

The high interaction capacity of modern technology has only facilitated speedier and further reach of the 'social cloud', and the organizing of social reality into a more singular, global, and highly rationalized praxis. Centres of rationalized activity such as universities, and policy and expert organizations in particular, take social life and practices in different locales and bring them into a science-based relationship; into "universally applicable principles so that they can be 'rationally' adopted everywhere"

(Meyer & Strang 1993). Indeed, as Levy (1994) notes, experts are ever engaged in "encoding individually learned inferences from experience into organizational routines" (p. 287-289). The assumption of universality of rationalized knowledge systems, and empowered human agency in a global society, is deeply embedded in *Unlocking a Better Future*. For example, on the topic of sustainability, the report argues that "the use of policy labs and learn by doing experiments for sustainable lifestyles should be scaled up, where the individual is an active co-creator and network influencer" (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 20).

Of course, in the context of *Unlocking a Better Future*, the drive to dovetail all kinds of sociopolitical material comes from the recognition that the global system today is highly unsustainable, and therefore policies in economic growth, finance, trade and industry, environment, etc., (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 125) need to all be codirected towards a more sustainable future. However, the more instrumentalist incentives within the UN to have codirection and broader coherence is also deeply representative of a rationalized and universalistic culture.

It is a culture of assimilating and developing the rationalized and universalistic knowledge base (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 165). Every feature or aspect of rationalized social life is discussed as if interdependent and functionally integrated with every other rationalized aspect of social life (p. 163). The assumption being, that diverse forms of knowledge and social practice are dissolvable, translatable, and synthesizable. An expression of this in the realm of human rights law, as Boyd (2012) observes, is that "the distinctions between generations of rights, positive and negative rights, and civil and political rights on the one hand and social and economic rights on the other are gradually

eroding. In a growing number of nations, governments and courts treat all human rights as interdependent and indivisible" (p. 286).

Along the same vein, as economists and ecologists are primed to perceive their efforts as undermined by each other, reformulations that place the economy *within* a natural base (p. 172), like ecological economics, have gained in value. And 'the economy', however defined, is reformulated as being embedded within society (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 87) and not external or separate from it.[50] Economic logic and how 'the economy' is to be organized, is seen as if interdependent with the political structure and education of society; and together, codirected toward general principles of progress, justice, and today, sustainability.[51] The accumulation and development of social knowledge, and its exchange in the 'social cloud', gives direction to an ever-idealized structure and vision of social reality. In world culture, Meyer et al. (1997) write:

> […] almost every aspect of social life is discussed, rationalized, and organized, including rules of economic production and consumption, political structure, and education; science, technique, and medicine; family life, sexuality, and interpersonal relations; and religious doctrines and organization. In each area, the range of legitimately defensible forms is fairly narrow. All the sectors are discussed as if they were functionally integrated and interdependent, and they are expected to conform to general principles of progress and justice. The culture of world society

[50] "There was also the project of divorcing the economy from society and polity, spearheaded by capitalists and politicians but also by philosophers and social observers. As Karl Polanyi argued in *The Great Transformation* (1944), British industrialization depended on the *idea* that the economy could be wrenched free of society – that a free labour market could be constructed by breaking traditional links between lords and serfs – as well as on the concrete public policies and capitalist practices" (Dobbin 2004, p. 2).

[51] This is also what March & Simon (1993) refer to as 'bounded rationality', meaning the connections between all sectors and all realms are to be constantly discovered, theorized, published, shared, and enacted.

serves as a 'sacred canopy' for the contemporary world (Berger 1967), a universalized and secularized project developed from older and somewhat parochial religious models (p. 163).

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In global culture, conflict abounds, creating highly expansionist social dynamics and culture (Meyer & Jepperson 1996 as cited in Meyer et al. 1997, p. 168).[52] There are conflicting elements in, for example, rights-based laws, whereby "individual actors are entitled to demand equality, […] [while] collective actors are entitled to promote functionally justified differentiation" (Meyer et al. p. 171), and in dichotomous concepts such as "equality versus liberty, progress versus justice, standardization versus diversity, efficiency versus individuality" (p. 172). The contradiction inherent to cultural principles themselves creates grounds for oppositional groups. And which importantly, attaches local contexts everywhere to global principles, and to global civil society. Indeed, there are many ways for world-cultural principles to be mobilized or implemented, and to enter new contexts. For example, "not only at their centres [i.e., of states], or only in symbolic ways, but also through direct connections between local actors and world culture" (p. 161).

As a result, widespread decoupling is produced – or gaps between formal goals, policies, and real practices – in turn, further instantiating global models and principles.

[52] "World cultural forces for expansion and change are incorporated in people and organizations as constructed and legitimated actors filling roles as agents of great collective goods, universal laws, and broad meaning systems, even though the actors themselves interpret their action as self-interested rationality. Cultural forces defining the nature of the rationalized universe and the agency of human actors operating under rationalized natural laws play a major causal role in social dynamics, interacting with systems of economic and political stratification and exchange to produce a highly expansionist culture" (Meyer & Jepperson 1996 as cited in Meyer et al. 1997, p. 168).

For one, because models and principles are standardized, and not strongly attached to any local circumstances (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 156), adoption exposes gaps or "failures in the implementation of world-cultural principles in particular locales", "demanding corrective action by states and other actors" (p. 165). Some elements are "easier to copy than others and […] are inconsistent with local practices, requirements, and cost structures" (p. 154). And between individuals and nation-states, for example, there are also many "interest and functional groups that have standing as legitimated actors due to their connections with individuals and states [including] religious, ethnic, occupational, industrial, class, racial and gender-based groups and organizations, all of which both depend on and conflict with actors at other levels" (p. 171) – generating "expansive structuration at the nation-state and organizational levels" (p. 156).

Neoliberalism & Global Logics

"Every method that leads to wealth by a shorter path, every machine that shortens work, every instrument that diminishes costs of production, […] seems to be the most magnificent effort of human intelligence."

Alexis de Tocqueville

"We cannot make the world better through expertise without also creating more and more means for people to destroy the world. Expertise is expertise."

Jaron Lanier

Many social critics have written about the ways in which neoliberalism has dominated globalization in the past 30-40 years. Led by the US and mediated through the

International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Chang 2008, p. 32), neoliberalism is a political-economic project that centred policies such as "fiscal discipline, public expenditure redirection, trade and capital account liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and secure property rights" (Dobbin, Simmons & Garrett 2007, p. 456). Rich country governments leveraged their "aid budgets and access to their home markets as carrots to induce the developing countries to adopt neo-liberal policies" (Chang 2008, p. 13). And financial institutions, including the IMF and World Bank who are largely governed by the rich countries, attached to their loans through various policy programmes, the condition that recipients adopt neoliberal policies (p. 13), and branched into previously unthinkable areas such as "government budgets, industrial regulation, agricultural pricing, labor market regulation" (p. 32), and more.

Coinciding with the political-economic policies of neoliberalism (briefly characterized above), sociocultural identities and roles have changed. For example, Drori, Jang & Meyer (2006) write that the "key thrust of neoliberal globalization, both in its ideologies and in its practical impact, is to tear public and private organizational structures loose from embeddedness in local sovereignty and tradition and force them to be 'actors' in a larger world" (p. 207). Instead, states and public agencies are to operate like highly rationalized firms in a world of open international markets, "with clear purposes, effective management, transparent accounting, and high-quality standards" (p. 205). In the 21st century, through financialization, and advancements in computing technology, data processing and storage, the standards for rationalized and efficient management are also dramatically raised.

However, many argue that the political-economic project of neoliberalism reached its apogee and is now in decline. I do not go into depth on the relative strengths and weaknesses of this argument. I agree with Ferguson (2009) when he says that there is not an automatic fit between the hegemonic neoliberal political-economic project, and the specific techniques, technologies, and logics which it helped bring to primacy (Ferguson 2009, p. 182). It follows that the political-economic project of neoliberalism may, arguably, be in decline, but its specific logics and techniques live on, and are "deployed in relation to diverse political projects and social norms" (Collier 2005, p. 2, as cited in Ferguson 2009).[53]

While not solely products of neoliberalism, we can think of predominant logics or techniques such as quantitative calculation, statistical analysis, mathematization, and economic precepts such as free choice, and price driven by supply and demand (Ferguson 2009, p. 182). Importantly, these logics share in the following characteristics: they are highly diffusible and reproducible (Fourcade 2006); expansive and have universal value (Fourcade 2006); assume fundamental sameness regardless of geographical location – not "vested in any specific local or historical experiences" (p. 156); quantifiable and rationally expressible and therefore "more easily perceived and communicated" (Meyer & Strang 1993, p. 501); and "inherently transferable both politically and institutionally, which authorizes easy replication and diffusion independently from the national context" (Fourcade 2006, p. 156). By way of coercion and conditionality on weaker actors, technological change, but also through sociocultural change, these logics have become

[53] "social technologies need not have any essential or eternal loyalty to the political formations within which they were first developed" (Ferguson 2009, p. 182)

the new ‘blueprints’ of world culture – the socially sanctioned and appropriate way to organize social tasks in general (Finnemore 1996, p. 330).

One expression of these changes in *Unlocking a Better Future*, is for advocating the use of computer analytical and process tools (i.e., SDG Synergies tool) to “help decision makers think systematically about how different policy proposals and interventions could avoid trade-offs between goals and instead maximize synergies across many goals” (Allen et al., 2021; Bennich et al., 2020, as cited in SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 127). Again, this approach to problem-solving and governance is in the context of codirecting policies in economic growth, finance, trade and industry, environment, etc. (p. 125) towards shared goals and the SDGs. But the underlying sociocultural assumption, of employing terms like ‘synergy’, ‘nexus issues’, or ‘wider system boundaries’ – which are all common in the report – is of a universally expressible project, achieved or at least progressed by means of efficient and rationalized management. Much like a computer processing data, the more data is inputted and shared, the larger certain patterns and efficiencies are seen and therefore tapped. One could argue that these logics are not *inherently* one way or another, positive or negative; they are all-directional – tools that can be used to very different ends. A rationalized and universally expressible view of the world is to some extent necessary to respond to transnational and global issues, and importantly, on grounds of defense from usurpation. However, simultaneously, global logics by their very nature crowd out alternative logics and worldviews, and especially those in ‘the periphery’.

The speed at which this class of logics has developed, facilitated by technology, has also created new dynamics of sociocultural inequality. Once an area of social reality

is interpreted and measured through highly rational means and brought into a science-based relationship, those relationships tend to entrench over time. A universalist lens brings together the work of experts and consultants who form an "international community of practitioners" (Fourcade 2006, p. 159), and, who "appeal to and further develop transnational accounts and models, yielding a self-reinforcing cycle in which rationalization further institutionalizes [their] professional authority" (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 166). Considering the complexity and ultimate uncertainty faced by governments and organizations in this global social environment, experts provide a stamp of legitimacy for certain courses of action. Further, in a rationalized institutional environment or world culture, highly diffusible and quantifiable forms of logic will outcompete other logics that are harder to standardize across difference (i.e., across national contexts).[54] For example, a rationalized frame of nature as an 'integrated and life-sustaining global ecosystem' very successfully enabled a global environmental movement built on scientific grounds (Bromley et al. 2011; Frank et al. 2000).

[54] "Theories or ideologies like those from the West that make claims about all people and all places have much more expansive potential than particularized and localized ideational frameworks like that of the Balinese theater-state documented by Clifford Geertz" (Finnemore 1996, p. 331).

Part 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I use Sewell's (1999) 'The Concept of Culture' and WST, to focus on the sociocultural layer of global politics today, and its expression in *Unlocking a Better Future*. Of course, any integrated and holistic theory of 'the global' must account for economic, political, and sociocultural factors shaping behavior. The sociocultural denotes the systems of meaning that overlay all behaviors, be they economic, social, political, technological, and so on – recalling Sewell (1999), a "network of semiotic relations cast across society" (p. 49). And, as WST posits, a meaning system with *global* significance: composing norms, principles, and shared social understandings (Finnemore 1996, p. 338) that makes possible "mutually meaningful symbolic action" (Sewell 1999, p. 49) between disparate peoples, which empowers certain ways of organizing thought, knowledge, and social action, and which is stabilized and 'held together' by institutions like the UN.

A sociocultural analysis also provides an important lens onto how we might rebuild or create anew a politics that more effectively addresses the problems of our time. In my view, this is what social critics of, for example, mainstream sustainability are indeed *doing* – they are seeking to undo, redefine, and reorganize the ideas and meanings which compose sustainability or 'sustainable development', emanating from institutional centres like the UN and its affiliated bodies – so as to change or provide an alternative to the exploitative relationships that currently mediate human groups, and humans and their environments. Changes in meaning systems developed at the global level in concentrated cultural sites such as the UN, can produce wave effects influencing peoples and policies everywhere and in historically crucial ways (Sewell 1999, p. 51). Changes can also help

to apply downward pressure on 'bad actors' and mobilize civil society groups in places otherwise closed off and hard to reach. From this point of view, the particular discourse of a UN policy report, matters greatly.

By critiquing modern sustainability, we also instantiate and reproduce its centrality. Sustainability or sustainable development – both major themes of *Unlocking a Better Future* – operate perhaps less as singular or definitive ideas, but as organizational ideas: they imply overarching visions, with associated concepts and principles to guide those visions. For critics, there are then two sociocultural projects, both always underway. One is to organize and advance alternative norms, conventions, configurations of meaning, and social understandings; to counterbalance and/or work to crowd out the most egregious and unsustainable practices in the world today. And two, to use existing organizational ideas and social norms and repurpose them for better ends, in an attempt to rediscover through rational means, a truer sustainability.[55]

For example, we can ask ourselves how to more effectively introduce to global culture – one that prioritizes rational action and choice – other guides to social behavior such as roles, rituals, duties, and obligations (Finnemore 1996, p. 331).[56] There are many pressures to build international and global coherence – to respond to climate change and other transboundary issues, to resolve goal conflicts, to coordinate different levels of government and civil society, and codirect policies in economic growth, technology, finance, trade and industry, environment etc., (SEI & CEEW 2022, p. 125) – and for these reasons, it is fair to assume that universalized and rationally expressible logics will

[55] Recalling Ferguson (2009), "social technologies need not have any essential or eternal loyalty to the political formations within which they were first developed" (p. 182).
[56] "There are many other ways to structure social action, […] that are not consequentialist in a Western rational way but are effective guides to social behavior nonetheless" (Finnemore 1996, p. 331).

only continue to grow. Which is also why there is a second sociocultural project: for better and for worse, alternative guides to social behavior will to some extent have to be repurposed from, and/or creatively translated into rational means.

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