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Bruno Pimenta Starling

 Igepri
Instituto de Gestão Pública e
Relações Internacionais

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Collapsing system: economy-oriented neoliberalism and environmental crisis

Bruno Pimenta Starling¹

Abstract: In this article, we demonstrate how the contemporary international system has collapsed due to its institutions inability to respond to both economic and environmental crises. We argue that guided by economic and individualistic principles, matured during the 1980s according to economy-oriented neoliberalism paradigm, institutions were unable to implement policies and actions that would meet real social demands and environmental limits. Institutional mentality of the organizations at domestic and international level is based on the neoliberal paradigm, and proved to be obsolete and counterproductive in combating the current crises. One of the main characteristics of this inability to respond institutionally is environmental degradation, whose growth is mainly due to the primacy of economic growth over the social and environmental dimensions.

Keywords: Neoliberalism. Environmental crisis. International System. Realism.

Resumo: Neste artigo, demonstramos como o sistema internacional contemporâneo entrou em colapso devido à sua incapacidade de suas instituições em responder à crise econômica e ambiental. Pautadas por princípios economicistas e individualistas, já que amadurecidas desde os anos 1980 de acordo com princípios neoliberais economicistas, elas não conseguiram implementar políticas e ações que atendessem às reais reivindicações sociais e aos limites impostos pelo meio ambiente. A mentalidade institucional das organizações em nível nacional e internacional, que se baseia no paradigma neoliberal, mostrou-se obsoleta e contraproducente no combate às crises atuais. Uma das principais características dessa incapacidade de resposta institucional é a degradação ambiental, cujo crescimento se deve principalmente à primazia do crescimento econômico sobre as dimensões social e ambiental.

Palavras-chave: Neoliberalismo. Crise ambiental. Sistema Internacional. Realismo.

¹ Bacharel em História pela Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais – UMFG. Mestre em Relações Internacionais pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais – PUC MINAS. Especialista em Estudos Diplomáticos pelo Centro de Direito Internacional – CEDIN e em Ensino de História pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais – PUC MINAS. Autor do livro “Por um Lugar ao Sol: a construção da política externa alemã, de Bismarck a Guilherme II (1871 – 1914), publicado em 2021 pela editora Alameda e de diversos artigos em periódicos especializados. História Contemporânea e das Relações Internacionais, História Ambiental e Organizações Internacionais Contemporâneas são as principais áreas de interesse. Atualmente, é servidor público da Prefeitura Municipal de Belo Horizonte, onde atua na Diretoria de Relações Internacionais desde 2014.

1. Introduction

In his opening speech to the United Nations Conference on Climate Change - COP-25, held in Madrid in November 2019, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres (2019), reminded everyone that

“by the end of the coming decades, we will be on one of two parts – one is the part of surrender where we have sleep walked past the point of no return, jeopardizing the health and safety of everyone on this planet; the other option is the path of hope, a path of sustainable solutions, where more fossil fuel remain where they should be, in the ground, and where we are in the way of carbon neutrality by 2050.”

At the time of pronouncing them, COVID-19 was not yet a threat and the “new normal” was not yet a reality. However, his concerns remain extremely pertinent, since they have been our reality for decades. Indeed, the environmental crisis has been an integral part of the agendas of the most diverse international meetings, within the scope of the UN system or not, carried out in the last five decades.

It is already a consensus among scientists that the anthropic actions intensified throughout the 20th century and especially in the last 40 years, directly influence planetary climate changes (Marques, 2018; Le Prestre, 2005). It is not by chance that the last decades have been dominated by an economy-oriented neoliberalism; an ideology linked to economic and market freedom, profit maximization and the rule of transnational capital. In addition to the acceleration of climate change and environmental deterioration mentioned by Guterres, “today’s environmental reality is linked powerfully with other realities, including social inequality and neglect and the erosion of democratic governance and popular control” (Speth, 2008, XI).

The history of neoliberalism begins before World War II, when scholars such as Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek, began to spread their values and concepts (Slobodian, 2018). However, it was only from the 1980s on, with Ronald Reagan and Margareth Thatcher’s arrival to power in the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, that neoliberalism came to dominate West mentality, extending its influence not only to states, but also to international organizations. In fact, institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, among others, started to count on economists from the American neoliberal school in their highest positions, so much so that we can say that since then we have lived in an international system dominated by a neoliberal order (Chodor, 2015).

In this article, we will demonstrate that the current international system dominated by the neoliberal order is collapsing. Its values and principles, once considered irreproachable, have threatened the environment, democracy and society itself through an “economicization” of political

and social thought and values, therefore jeopardizing institutions legitimacy both at domestic and international levels. We will seek to establish a connection between the global environmental crisis and neoliberalism. There is a patent disconnection between citizens and institutions, the latter dominated by values increasingly detached from reality, and no longer seen as representative of popular anxieties. On the contrary, they have provoked an obvious elitization of society, increasing social inequalities, and growing environmental degradation.

Therefore, what are these neoliberal values contested by part of the society? How were they introjected into the population in such a way as to become dominant to the point of being considered a true socioeconomic paradigm of the contemporary Western world? How did these values ended up leading to a loss of institutions legitimacy? And what is the relationship between these values and the loss of institutional credibility with the environmental crisis and its upsurge?

2. The state as the environmental issues main player

Much is said that neoliberalism defends the minimum state, which should be understood as a state that does not intervene (or intervene as little as possible) in the economy, leaving it under the market self-regulation. Quinn Slobodian (2018) argues that on the contrary, neoliberals are not really against the state. In fact, they aim at the development of a complex system of relations between globalizing institutions and a state that protects the market: “the real focus of neoliberal proposals is not on the market per se but on redesigning states, laws, and other institutions to protect the market” (Slobodian 2018, p. 6). In a word, they defend a state that acts not on behalf of the population, but of the global market, transnational corporations and international capital (Harvey, 2014). From this perspective, the idea of the state gains new guise and importance from neoliberal point of view.

On the other hand, environmental problems go beyond territorial borders, making the international diplomatic field a privileged space for negotiations. However, diplomatic actions are fundamentally aimed at defending their own countries’ national interests (Ribeiro, 2019). This way, our analysis goes accordingly to the institutional reality that now presents at us: an international system whose sphere of decision-making is located at the level of international organizations, which, in turn, are composed and ruled by states.

Differing states and corporations is crucial for Anthony Giddens (1991), who understands that the latter, despite controlling immense economic power and having the capacity to influence political systems, do not have a specific area of control where they can exert sovereign power, as a state does.

Giddens stresses that a state power comes from its sovereign capability, and they act conscious of its territorial rights, aiming to promote their own national interests.

Hans Morgenthau (2003) argues that international politics objective is the defense of national interest and its sovereignty. Thought this way, it does not sound strange, for example, when the United States refuses to sign the Kyoto Protocol arguing that the treaty would interfere with its sovereignty and was not of American people interest. In this sense, it becomes clear that negotiations involving environment issues are dominated by political realism. The state, therefore, remains the main actor of the international system, since decisions, even if taken in institutional spheres, are subject to their will. "There is no way to compel states to sign international agreements and, even if they choose to do so, the implementation of any agreement will be largely the responsibility of each state" (Giddens, 2010, p. 23)².

Wagner Costa Ribeiro (2019) highlights international environmental debates and treaties as

“(...) the reaffirmation of political realism, a realism that does not need weapons, but arguments and ability to promote alliances even with non-state sectors, such as the environmental movement and its numerous and active organizations, only to impose its basic premise: the consignment of national interests” (Ribeiro, 2019, 49)³.

We will also rely on state-corporation concept as proposed by Luiz Marques (2018). According to Marques, a change in the state's nature is underway from the end of the 20th century on, a period that coincides with the rise of neoliberalism. From this moment on, little by little states and corporations interests are mixed and the complementary relations between them deepen in such a way that it is practically impossible to distinguish between one another.

State-corporation concept does not conflict with realist theory. Over the past few decades, corporations have increasingly infiltrated the state body, and their members have increasingly occupied important positions in such a way that corporation representatives become state representatives. Therefore, there is an appropriation of the state power, mixing both state and corporation interests. Ultimately, however, it is technically the state power that manifests itself, because even when its maximum representative is a great businessman, like Donald Trump, or a banker, like Emanuel Macron, decision making is carried out as a representative of the state not of corporations.

² Do original: “Não há como obrigar os Estados a assinarem acordos internacionais e, mesmo que optem por fazê-lo, a implementação de qualquer acordo será responsabilidade, em larga medida, de cada Estado”

³ Do original: “a reafirmação do realismo político, um realismo que não precisa de armas, mas de argumentos e capacidade para promover alianças até mesmo com setores não-estatais, como é o caso do movimento ambientalista e de suas numerosas e ativas organizações e para impor sua premissa básica: a consignação dos interesses nacionais”.

No matter how much corporations influence grows, and regardless the international organizations as privileged space for debating environmental issues, there is no doubt that the decision making continues to be made by states and their representatives – whoever they may be – prioritizing national interests, a core concept in realism.

3. The collapse of the neoliberal capitalist system and the loss of institutional legitimacy

The origins of capitalism date back to the 18th century Industrial Revolution. Since then, it has become the dominant ideology, expanding its influence to a greater or lesser extent across the globe. Along this period, it has undergone mutations, theories have been developed to explain it and also to criticize it. Above all, capitalism has gone through cyclical crises that, at times, have turned into global depressions that overturned paradigms (Coggiola, 2009).

Currently, the dominant paradigm of capitalism is neoliberalism. Quinn Slobodian (2018), Wendy Brown (2020) and Grégoire Chamayou (2020) see the rise of the neoliberal state as a traditionalist and conservative political reaction to the labor and civil rights movements that occupied much of the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, neoliberalism has been adopted not only by states, replacing to a large extent the European welfare state, but has also shaped the thinking of the main international organizations, such as the Troika⁴, which saw its bureaucratic body dominated by neoliberals.

“Academic universities in the United States were and are training grounds for many foreigners who took what they learned to their home countries - for example, the main figures in Chilean and Mexican adaptation to neoliberalism were trained economists in the United States - as well as for international institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and the UN” (Harvey, 2014, p. 64)⁵.

However, what is neoliberalism? Brown (2020) defines it as a set of policies aimed at the privatization of property, the reduction of the welfare state, the deregulation of work, the globalization and the financialization of the economy, ultimately meaning the supremacy of the free market. According to Slobodian (2018), neoliberalism focuses not exactly the market, but the reconfiguration of the state, its laws and other institutions targeting the protection of the market. In other words, neoliberalism is an economy-oriented ideology, which neglects social and environmental aspects of human life.

⁴ Namely the European Commission, the World Bank, and the IMF.

⁵ Original: “As universidades acadêmicas dos Estados Unidos foram e são campos de treinamento para muitos estrangeiros que levaram aquilo que aprenderam para seus países de origem – por exemplo, as principais figuras da adaptação chilena e mexicana ao neoliberalismo eram economistas treinados nos Estados Unidos –, assim como para instituições internacionais como o FMI, o Banco Mundial e a ONU”.

Since it establishes a considerable distance between the society real needs and environmental limits, global domination by economy-oriented neoliberalism is environmentally unsustainable and harmful to social development, (Chesney, 2020; Matias, 2014). Reacting to the labor and civil rights expansion movements from the 1960s and 1970s, neoliberal thinking began to inhabit conservative political class mentality. The idea was to fight anything that threatened the smooth running of business and compromised economic growth, adopting tactics of depoliticizing society and introjecting the neoliberal economic mentality into citizens (Chamayou, 2020).

In order to dismantle the welfare state so that companies, banks and other capitalist corporations have more freedom of action, economy-oriented neoliberalism launched a project attacking social, political and labor rights, privatizing the state and delegating its responsibilities to private entities. Seen as an obstacle to the good functioning of the market, workers lose their political and social rights, and political power is monopolized by economic power (Brown, 2020; Chamayou, 2020).

On the other hand, economy-oriented neoliberalism was boosted in a global level in order to dominate the field of ideas as well. First, a particular idea of freedom based on individual freedom and traditional morals was established. A notion favorable to those who do not need to improve their income and living conditions, in a way denying the idea of collectivity, and ultimately the possibility of man as a social being. In this sense, the neoliberal concept of freedom excludes from its domain fundamental issues such as equality and social justice, whose functioning is dependent on solidarity and submission of individual freedoms to the wishes of the collective (Harvey 2014). Therefore, the idea of freedom is set apart from those of equality and society:

“(…) freedom without society destroys the lexicon by which freedom becomes democratic, combined with social conscience and nested in political equality. Freedom without society is a pure instrument of power, devoid of concern for others, the world or the future” (Brown, 2020, p. 57-58)⁶.

Second, neoliberal theorists were suspicious of the political. They organized a derogatory attack on society's political values and participation. According to neoliberal thinking, interests sheltered by the political would threaten society's moral values, individual freedoms and the free market (Brown 2020). An “economicization” of the social fabric was carried out by reducing social and political values to economic values, transforming society into a depoliticized whole with no social

⁶ Original: “a liberdade sem a sociedade destrói o léxico pelo qual a liberdade torna-se democrática, combinada com a consciência social e aninhada na igualdade política. Liberdade sem sociedade é puro instrumento de poder, despida de preocupação com os outros, o mundo ou o futuro”.

consciousness. According to Grégoire Chamayou (2020, p. 258), a “pedagogy of submission to the economic order” was thus instituted.

In this sense, neoliberalism becomes a threat to democracy itself. According to Slobodian (2018), for neoliberals like Friedrich Hayek, democracy meant mass demonstrations and popular demands, which implied a serious difficulty for the perfect functioning of the market. Neoliberalism conceptual origins recognized, in certain situations, the need for authoritarianism to contain workers in their political aspirations in order to guarantee the smooth functioning of the free market. Therefore, Hayek and Milton Friedman’s cordial visit to the newly installed dictatorial regime of Augusto Pinochet, in Chile, or the fact that some of their neoliberal colleagues have approached and even praised South African apartheid and certain Nazi initiatives (Slobodian, 2018) do not surprise us. Neoliberal hypocrisy resides in the fact that while as a theory they saw freedom and democracy as contradictory concepts, in practice they sold the idea of neoliberalism as a promoter of individual freedoms and democratic rights (Chamayou, 2020).

Economy-oriented neoliberalism, which gave rise to expressions such as “sanctity of the economy” and “market sovereignty” (Slobodian, 2018, p. 222-234), tends to ignore other development dimensions, such as proposed, for instance, by Amartya Sen (2010). According to Sen, "development must be related mainly to the improvement of the life we lead and the freedoms we enjoy" (Sen, 2010, p. 29). Development would be the elimination of barriers that limit people's freedoms in their choices and opportunities to be agents of their own destiny. Besides the economical dimension, Sen conceives development also linked to the social, civil and political rights, which should interrelate in harmony and on equal footing.

Therefore, the almost inseparable relationship between development and economic growth is essential to understand why the neoliberal capitalist system has become socially and environmentally unsustainable. We live in a system that promotes an undesirable reality - environmentally, politically and socially - which limits the efficiency and effectiveness of the proposed actions. It is a free market advocate system whose mentality is essentially capitalist and individualistic, which sees economic growth as an end in itself and disregards other development dimensions. Worse, there is a belief that economic growth is not only necessary, but also arguably beneficial in any context (Speth 2008). In a word, it does not conceive development without economic growth, thus becoming an incompatible model with the environment (Marques, 2018).

In fact, the historical period dominated by neoliberalism proved harmful for social relations, for nature and for social justice and equality, precisely because it does not understand (or does not want to understand) that economic growth at any cost is environmentally and socially damaging.

David Harvey (2014) points out that neoliberal ideology is exclusive and segregationist in its nature. It favors the rich and those in power over the poor and the workers, thus producing social inequality growth.

“In the event of conflict, the typical neoliberal state tends to side with business instead of supporting either the collective rights (and quality of life) of work, or the environment's capacity for self-healing. The second field of additions comes from the fact that, in the event of conflict, neoliberal states typically favor the integrity of the financial system and the solvency of financial institutions and not the population well-being nor environmental quality” (Harvey, 2014, p 81)⁷.

Thus, in economy-oriented neoliberalism, the state changes its function from protector of the people to protector of the market (Slobodian, 2018). The 2008 crisis is a study case, as states have been forced to commit billions of dollars to refinance the banking system and rescue their companies, some of which are responsible for the crisis itself, only to safeguard economic stability. (Chesney, 2020). At the international level, peripheral countries have been forced to adjust their economies accordingly to neoliberal principles led by the United States and demanded "by the large international conglomerates in times of crisis" (Sampaio Jr., 2009)⁸. Meanwhile, an anti-worker and anti-social policy is promoted. All of this is supported, if not imposed, by a group of international organizations led by the World Bank and the IMF, whose demands for establishing fiscal austerity and public spending restraints are historic.

By controlling such international organizations as early as the 1980s, British and American neoliberal schools began to exercise enormous influence over the governments of the so-called “periphery” countries, especially in Latin America, in the midst of the “lost decade” crisis. In a severe economic recession, these countries had no alternative but to submit to the requirements of fiscal austerity on the part of the IMF and the World Bank, among other organizations, in order to obtain the necessary loans to retake control of their economies and to position themselves properly (according to neoliberal precepts) in the free market (Slobodian, 2018).

The policies adopted in Latin America throughout the 1980s laid the foundation for the Washington Consensus. Coming from a meeting that involved the cream of neoliberal thinking of the period, in 1989, the Washington Consensus established a series of recommendations to encourage the development and expansion of neoliberal policies in the global periphery, especially in Latin America.

⁷ Original: “Em caso de conflito, o Estado neoliberal típico tende a ficar do lado do clima de negócios favorável em detrimento seja dos direitos (e da qualidade de vida) coletivos do trabalho, seja da capacidade de autorregeneração do meio ambiente. O segundo campo de vícios vem do fato de que, em caso de conflito, os Estados neoliberais tipicamente favorecem a integridade do sistema financeiro e a solvência das instituições financeiras e não o bem-estar da população ou a qualidade ambiental”.

⁸ Original: “pelos grandes conglomerados internacionais em tempos de crise”.

Among its basic principles, we highlight fiscal discipline, containment of public spending, privatization of state-owned companies, softening of trade protectionism and deregulation of labor laws (Barbieri, 2020).

As a result, this process spread British and American neoliberal models not only through international organizations, but also through a good bunch of Western states. In addition, people were convinced that the Washington Consensus guidelines were the only way out of the crises that dominated the 1990s towards economic growth (Harvey, 2014).

The Washington Consensus recommendations extend over a long period. During the 2008 crisis, its principles were brought back once again to guide countries in establishing extreme fiscal austerity, even against their own citizens will. That is how the Greek State found no alternative but to yield to Troika demands, which prevailed even over democratic decisions: “people must vote, but their governments must respect certain 'recommendations' [of the Troika]” (Chesney, 2020, p. 46)⁹.

Gradually, citizens began to distrust their leaders and, when they are replaced by others who continue to bend to neoliberal institutions demands, this distrust starts to be aimed at the state itself. We can say, then, that the crisis of institutional legitimacy begins with a crisis of political legitimacy. It is linked to neoliberal democracy failures that, in the end, has a political and powerful system that ends up becoming subjective, in which the political class defends only its own private interests instead of answering the expectations of the societies it should represent. Therefore, people feel they are not represented either by politicians or by international organizations, what generates indignation, mistrust, and, consequently, loss of institution legitimacy (Castells, 2018).

With globalization, challenges faced by the state are increasingly distant from its individual capabilities. Theoretically, international organizations comprised by states should fill this power vacuum and become responsible for generating and organizing coordinated actions among their members. However, there is a huge diversity of interests and each member state seeks to maintain its decision-making sovereignty, aiming to achieve what it considers best for itself. Realism fits perfectly into this interpretative scope, since it understands that the international system, even if overcrowded by institutions, remains dependent on state-oriented decision-making.

The distance between citizens and the supranational level of decision-making means that people do not recognize the legitimacy of the decision-making process because they no longer perceive their interests represented there. Alternatively, they seek security in institutions and ideologies that are more familiar to them, such as nationalism. Wendy Brown (2020) argues that the neoliberal attack on the political contributed to the advance of today's undemocratic nationalism. Converging her approach

⁹ Original: “os povos devem votar, mas seus governos devem respeitar certas ‘recomendações’ [da Troika]”.

to Slobodian's (2020), Brown emphasizes that liberals built politically fragile, depoliticized supranational institutions and states, whose regulations were essentially aimed at protecting global trade and the market, with their “governance based on business principles and subjects oriented by interest and disciplined by the market and morals” (Brown, 2020, p. 70)¹⁰.

In fact, globalization gives rise to several issues that overlap the contemporary world, such as multiculturalism and immigration. People find themselves adrift, since those institutions that they hoped to represent them are increasingly distant and debating issues that are not theirs. Manuel Castells (2018, p. 37) states that “mistrust in parties and institutions, built around the values and interests of another era, stems from the search for new political actors in whom it is possible to believe” and that “fear of globalization urges to seek refuge in the nation”¹¹.

Like immediately before the First World War, it is an extremist, xenophobic, racist and anti-democratic nationalism, whose origins are rooted within the memory and culture of contemporary society (Eatweel and Goodwin, 2020). For a time, nationalism seemed to be asleep, but it was awakened by the financial collapse of 2008, followed by the austerity policies imposed on states by international institutions and the immigration crisis, which hit Europe strikingly. In addition, formation of groups such as the G20, created as a space for debate on crisis control, as a matter of fact constitutes an exclusive club, producing an even greater restriction in decision-making.

In this context, several countries have opted for authoritarian and nationalist governments, such as Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey and, more recently, the United States and Brazil. Others decided on a more independent political route disconnected from economic blocs, as in the case of Brexit. Such decisions, whose strength lies in the importance of identity politics, reflect the loss of political legitimacy of contemporary organizations, both domestically and internationally (Castells, 2018).

The formation of authoritarian governments coupled with the rise of so-called emerging powers - many of which are currently ruled by despots and extremely authoritarian leaders - such as China, India and Brazil, for example, undermine the legitimacy of international institutions in their current format. In challenging decisions and the constitution of the decision-making bodies of such institutions, these countries question the very legitimacy of the international system, whose structure is based on international organizations dominated by neoliberal ideology. An alternative that has been widely used by these countries is the formation of regional economic blocs led by them and the creation

¹⁰ Original: “governança baseada em princípios de negócios e sujeitos orientados pelo interesse e disciplinados pelo mercado e pela moral”.

¹¹ Original: “a desconfiança nos partidos e nas instituições, construídos em torno dos valores e interesses de outra época, deriva em busca por novos atores políticos nos quais seja possível crer (...) temor da globalização incita a buscar o refúgio na nação”.

of new institutions that are more connected to their own interests and beliefs. According to Oliver Stuenkel (2018, p. 31),

“(...) just as the West used international institutions like the World Bank and the IMF to project its power and attract countries to its sphere of influence, China and other non-Western powers will use their new institutions to cement their newly acquired centrality, strengthening economic ties with other countries and, finally, engendering stronger political influence”.¹²

Mariana Mazzucato (2020) summarizes the international system's current moment, placing the loss of institutional legitimacy origins back at the 2008 financial crisis. According to her, both the financial institutions, main responsible for the collapse of the economy, and the state, which chose to inject more than 3 trillion dollars into the financial system instead of supporting the “real economy”, are guilty of their own collapse and for the population's loss of trust on them. There is something rot within the system: “for too long, governments have socialized risks and privatized rewards: the public has paid the price for cleaning up messes, but the benefits of those cleanups have accrued largely to companies and their investors” (Mazzucato, 2020, p. 51).

Mazzucato (2020) points out three features that prove the connection between systemic failures and the emergence and / or the upsurge of the current crises: (1) financial market self-financing, (2) the priority given to short-term gains at the expense of long-term investments and (3) the state's inability to act beyond supporting market policy.

Hence, we speak of a failure of the neoliberal system. Oliver Stuenkel (2018), for example, argues that the international institutionalism promoted by neoliberalism was key to the expansion of Western values. With the structural collapse of the system, Stuenkel believes in replacing the world order dominated by Western¹³ countries led by the United States by the imminent emergence of new powers, especially China, and in the creation of a post-western multipolar world. This does not necessarily mean that there will be a shift of paradigm or of shared values; it just implies that Western principles, especially the dominant neoliberalism of the past four decades, will not be prevalent, and may be overwhelmed or joined by other principles. However, he considers that a multipolar order will tend to be “more democratic than any previous order. It will open up possibilities for higher levels of

¹² Original: “assim como o Ocidente usou instituições internacionais como o Banco Mundial e o FMI para projetar seu poder e atrair países para sua esfera de influência, a China e outras potências não ocidentais usarão suas novas instituições para cimentar sua recém-adquirida centralidade, estreitando laços econômicos com outros países e engendrando, enfim, uma influência política mais forte”.

¹³ Stuenkel adopts a broader and more contested definition of the concept of West, considering the diversity and the “porous borders” of the term.

open dialogue and knowledge dissemination and enable ways to deal more effectively with the main global challenges of the 21st century” (Stuenkel, 2018, p. 216)¹⁴.

4. Neoliberalism and environmental crisis: exposing institutional failures

COVID-19 only highlighted the environmental problems that economy-oriented neoliberalism produces: the prevalence of investments in the financial market instead of supporting sustainable development and the improvement of clean energies. International organizations, such as

“The G20 and the G7, have been unable to reach even basic decisions on the global economy recovery. Most glaringly, the World Health Organization (WHO) – the organization tasked with leading the international response against the virus – was low to act under intense politicization (Pickering and Trivedi, 2020)”.

Furthermore, scientific evidence that links the appearance of epidemic outbreaks and new diseases, such as COVID-19, to anthropic actions in the environment is neglected. In July 1996, WHO presented a report that connects global warming to epidemic outbreaks (Le Prestre, 2005). In his 1997 book, *Weapons, Germs and Steel*, Jared Diamond (2019) had already studied the relationship between man-made environment and the emergence and proliferation of diseases caused by close contact between humans and different animal species. According to María Neira, WHO director of Public Health and Environment,

“The practices of intense deforestation, always done in the name of the short-term economy, have devastating effects for the future of humankind. By cutting down the forest to replace it with intensive and polluting agriculture, the animals that live in places where man has not entered undergoes profound changes. Species that we were not in contact with and that can transmit diseases to us are closer to humans. Moving from a tropical forest to a crop, with fertilizers and pesticides that had never entered this ecosystem, changes the type of vectors capable of transmitting viruses. Deforestation is a way to break down this environmental barrier between species that protects us in a natural way (Neira, 2021)”¹⁵.

Therefore, the current COVID-19 health crisis may be the mercy shot at the international system of neoliberal order. “The institutional and political vulnerabilities that COVID-19 (...) has

¹⁴ Original: “mais democrática do que qualquer ordem anterior. Ela abrirá possibilidades para níveis mais elevados de diálogo aberto e de disseminação de conhecimento e habilitará modos de lidar mais efetivamente com os principais desafios globais do século XXI”.

¹⁵ Original: “As práticas de desmatamento intenso, feitas sempre em nome da economia de curto prazo, têm efeitos devastadores para o futuro da humanidade. Ao derrubar a floresta para substituí-la por agricultura intensiva e poluente, os animais que vivem nesses lugares nos quais o homem não havia entrado sofrem profundas transformações. Aparecem espécies com que não estávamos em contato e que podem nos transmitir doenças. Passar de uma floresta tropical para um cultivo, com adubos e pesticidas que nunca tinham entrado nesse ecossistema, altera o tipo de vetores capazes de transmitir os vírus. O desmatamento é uma forma de derrubar essa barreira ambiental entre espécies que nos protege de forma natural”.

exposed in multilateral organizations are real” (Pickering and Trivedi, 2020). It is becoming increasingly evident that such an arrangement no longer sustains itself. Elements such as competitive market, consumer society and materialistic values act together to produce a highly predatory reality for the environment (Speth, 2008). Given the almost exclusive predominance of the economic agenda and the defense of economic growth at any cost, unsustainability manifests itself by disregarding the social and environmental dimensions that, gradually, are depredated by economy-oriented neoliberalism.

It is especially after the Stockholm Conference, in 1972, that environmental issues take on a relevant place on the international agenda. As soon as the “Brundtland Report” was published in 1987, sustainable development became the United Nations (UN) flagship. Although a very flexible concept, the formulation proposed by the report remains the most endorsed: “sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).”

Since then, politicians and opinion leaders have become aware of the importance of environmental issues, recognizing the risks imposed by them and the need to respond to them. However, the agenda has served more to “political pantomime - grandiloquent projects, almost always devoid of content” (Giddens, 2010, p. 20)¹⁶ - than to carry out actions that generate effective changes in the market, in society itself and in our *modus vivendi*.

Clearly, there has been some progress since then. For example, the 1992 “Rio Declaration” recognizes the environment as an indispensable material condition for any form of human development. Add to that the concept of sustainability, which, however, came to be misrepresented by politicians and businessmen who sliced it into a tripod: the economic, the environmental and the social pillars. “Instead of being treated on an equal footing with development, a subterfuge was created of attributing sustainability to just one of the components of a 'brand new holy trinity’” (Veiga, 2010, p. 21)¹⁷.

All the same, economy-oriented neoliberalism disrespected and outraged the so-called sustainability tripod. According to this theory, the three pillars should be met in equal measure, but the almost exclusive dedication to neoliberal economic values means that the concept of sustainability has been used as a political tool in order to hide neoliberalism’s devastating effect on the environment and on the society.

¹⁶ Original: “pantomima política – projetos grandiloquentes, quase sempre desprovidos de conteúdo”.

¹⁷ Original: “Em vez de ser tratada em pé de igualdade com o desenvolvimento, criou-se o subterfúgio de se atribuir à sustentabilidade apenas um dos componentes de uma ‘novíssima santíssima trindade’”.

Consequently, over the past few decades, the economic pillar has exceeded the other two in practical terms, and the neoliberal wave has taken the reins of the environmental issues. It seems fateful the fact that the environment assumes relevance on the international agenda at the same time that the rise of neoliberalism as a dominant political-economic paradigm takes place.

Neoliberal cynicism appears disguised as a critique of state intervention to individual freedoms. However, its real fear lies in social and environmental regulations that would restrict production, profit and still operate a social redistribution of wealth (Chamayou, 2020). This has repercussions on the institutions themselves, increasingly dominated by the economic, taken away from their main purposes and far from finding answers to contemporary crises.

Although Pickering and Trivedi recognize that institutions are not working well, they also point out that the same institutions depend on state power to respond accordingly to crises. “At the heart of the problem is the failure of the world’s leading powers, starting with the United States and China, to invest in and empower the multilateral system” (Pickering and Trivedi, 2020).

Oliver Stuenkel (2021) argues that the lack of an adequate response by the main neoliberal power, the United States, to the coronavirus crisis is an evidence that the post-Western world is already a reality. In line with this thought, Thomas Gommart (2021) argues that the new coronavirus is a catalyst for a new post-American world order whose mutations were already underway. For both authors, the COVID-19 crisis has been relatively favorable to the rise of Chinese leadership, since it exposes the collapse of the neoliberal international system and its inability to find a solution to it.

Speth (2008) stresses that the United States, given its position as a global leader, should be part of the answer. However, it requires a radical internal change, as US is a country steeped in values such as individualism, consumerism, acceptance of market strength and commitment to capitalism - neoliberal principles that are part of the problem not the solution. US lack of example and leadership is not exactly a novelty when it comes to the environmental agenda. Throughout history, in contexts such as the refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol, for example, American position has been endorsed by national interest, which should be read as the interest of the private capital of large US greenhouse gas emitting corporations. The collapse of American hegemony, a structural component of the international system, is yet another symptom of a crisis that is increasingly showing its systemic side.

Comprised of sovereign states that do not wish to give up their particular interests in favor of a coordinated response, it is evident that international organizations have not been able to address a question whose international nature exceeds territorial limits. “Practically all advances were not sufficient to solve the problems they aimed at, since the subsequent protocols that would give them effectiveness almost always depended on a minimum common denominator among signatory states”

(Veiga, 2015, p. 19)¹⁸. States seldom achieve this common denominator, overturning international agreements and understandings.

Individualized actions by states make their indifference for joint solutions increasingly transparent, and weaken international organizations (Patrick, 2020). The UN report “Shared responsibility, global solidarity”, dedicated to pointing out solutions and responses to the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, calls on member states to prepare and carry out joint actions to respond to the crisis. It also makes a self-assessment, at the same time that it directs a fundamental criticism at member countries contempt, recognizing that the actions proposed by the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are far from reach. In fact, the UN regrets that its members have not devoted due attention to the SDGs, especially regarding public health and environmental demands. The report reveals the UN's awareness of public spending, aimed at bailing out banks and companies and not at developing public health.

“Instead, most countries have underinvested in health systems, facilities are insufficient for the level of the unexpected demand and rely heavily on imports. Most countries are characterized by weak, fragmented health systems that do not ensure the universal access and capacity needed to face the COVID-19 health crisis (United Nations, 2020, p. 11)”.

Countless high-level congresses and meetings have taken place in several international organizations - not just the UN. They have been nothing more than a political *mis en scène* in which state representatives, instead of being there with the aspiration to act cooperatively towards a common future, respond only to their own countries interests, which are increasingly mingled with those of capitalist corporations (Marques, 2018).

International anarchy shows itself stronger than ever in the COVID-19 crisis in the race for the vaccine. States are fight in the international arena for faster access to the immunizer, giving clear demonstrations that states are not willing to cooperate when survival is at stake (Bollyky and Bown, 2020). Individualism and competitiveness promoted by neoliberal ideology contest the “Shared responsibility, global solidarity” report. It is clear that the main environmental problems, including health crises such as COVID-19, are the result of systemic failures. The solution can only be found through a radical paradigm shift, in which the main characteristics that dominate the contemporary economy-oriented neoliberal mentality would be revised and modified.

¹⁸ Original: “Praticamente todos os avanços não se mostraram suficientes para a resolução dos problemas que visavam, pois os subsequentes protocolos que lhes dariam a efetividade quase sempre dependeram de um mínimo denominador comum entre os Estados signatários”.

Crisis management would be better if capitalist corporations, which interests are linked to profit maximization and threaten democratic values, did not dominate states. In fact, when state interests are mingled with capital interests, the former becomes prominent and ends up distorting national will itself (Marques, 2018). For Noam Chomsky (2020), we reached a point where what could be done to contain the disaster, such as state intervention, ends up being prevented due to neoliberal ideological reasons.

Largely, this response must necessarily come from the state. Firstly, because international organizations depend on state power and will to enable coordinated responses demanded by environmental and health crises such as the COVID-19. Secondly, the state must act as not only an economy and market regulator, but as a promoter of greater equality, social justice and better wealth distribution. It must also impose itself, pointing out companies' responsibilities for their actions harmful to the environment. It does not lack the means to do it: state information and assessment on social development and climate change are more assertive and reliable than those available to the market, which have a limited interest in investments and capital accumulation. (Harvey, 2014).

Anthony Giddens' (2010) *ensuring state* idea is a concept necessary to support social movements and groups - the true vectors of change (Chomsky, 2020) - towards the development of a positive environmental policy. "The ensuring state is one that has the capacity to produce definite results, a state that not only its citizens can trust, but also that the leaders of other states can count on" (Giddens, 2010, 27)¹⁹. All in all, a state that is willing to cooperate internationally and represent society's true interests.

5. Conclusion

Noam Chomsky (2020) defines COVID-19 health crises as a resounding failure of the market due to the collapse of neoliberal institutions that should be able to respond to the crisis. However, they are not working satisfactorily considering the profound socioeconomic problems caused by neoliberalism itself.

Nonetheless, it was not the disease that caused the system to collapse, it only exposed a broken system. Socially and environmentally speaking, economic activities and policies - aimed essentially at maximizing profit and economic growth at any cost which are taken as a panacea, a true universal remedy for crises - are out of control. Social and environmental costs are socialized and profits are privatized. The transformation of the state's nature into state-corporation means that state interests are

¹⁹ Original: "o Estado assegurador é aquele que tem capacidade de produzir resultados definidos, um Estado em que não apenas seus cidadãos podem confiar, mas também com o qual podem contar os dirigentes de outros Estados".

mixed with corporate interests. Governments abdicate their responsibilities to correct market failures because economic mentality and capitalist power have taken control, and corporate representatives are increasingly holding its main positions. They act accordingly to neoliberal values of facilitating business action, creating subsidies and other market practices that do not include environmental and social costs, exacerbating the problem.

The current neoliberal crisis has a systemic and multilevel character. Its domestic aspect is characterized by the challenge and suspicion of the legitimacy of national institutions, which are fragile when facing pressure from international organizations. On their part, institutions interference in democratic decisions of member countries and the imposition of economic austerity policies disregard the will of the population, thus collecting people's wrath. Add to this a multilevel aspect that goes beyond territorial and political limits, since it encompasses environmental issues. However, the very ideological and conceptual nature of neoliberalism is blind to the incompatibility between economic growth and environment preservation (Matias, 2014).

Realism argues that international systemic changes are only possible when there are structural shocks. As we have seen, a severe disagreement outlines the development model currently adopted. A progressive wing is challenging the current system structure, whereas a conservative reaction aims at maintaining certain aspects of economic neoliberalism at the expense of an involution in the socioenvironmental branch (Le Prestre, 2005).

This last aspect makes environmental issues even more urgent and threatens the possibility of a satisfactory solution. Democracy remains the main counterbalance to the market's will, and the conservative reaction, which we have witnessed in astonishment, can tear everything down, as its flags are the promotion of economic neoliberalism and political authoritarianism.

Governments have been much more representative of the economic demands of global and corporate capitalism than of social and environmental interests, generating social instability and loss of institutional legitimacy. Moreover, from the moment the state responds only to the demands of a very small part of society, democracy itself is at risk. Indeed, the rise of authoritarian governments in key countries - from the hegemonic power to the global periphery - makes democracy increasingly vulnerable.

Therefore, the tragic irony of the almost concomitant rise of economy-oriented neoliberalism and the environmental issues on the international agenda does not go unnoticed. On the one hand, there are initiatives such as the SDGs, aimed at preserving the environment, international cooperation and reducing inequalities in order to safeguard the planet and human society for our children. On the other hand, an economic policy based on individualism, consumerism and competition unfolds

incongruously over the same period. Stimulated by a peculiar idea of freedom summarized by a mere defense of free will that has become socially, politically and economically dominant, the result is the intensification of inequalities and environmental degradation.

Bruno Latour (2019, p. 213) reminds us about the hierarchy of choices and priority themes debated by society. According to him, this hierarchy varies over time, and depends on the context. It is up to the decision makers to identify the priorities of each situation. Given the current circumstances, it seems obvious that environmental issues must take precedence in international and domestic debate. It would only take us to recognize the incompatibility between the current growth model and the preservation of the environment.

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