
THE PROCESS OF POLITICIZING CLIMATE CHANGE AND PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT DURING THE RISE OF NEOLIBERALISM

O PROCESSO DE POLITIZAÇÃO DAS MUDANÇAS CLIMÁTICAS E DE
PROMOÇÃO DO DESENVOLVIMENTO SUSTENTÁVEL DURANTE A
INSTITUCIONALIZAÇÃO DO NEOLIBERALISMO

EL PROCESO DE POLITIZAR EL CAMBIO CLIMÁTICO Y PROMOVER EL
DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE DURANTE LA INSTITUCIONALIZACIÓN DEL
NEOLIBERALISMO

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Abstract

In this article, I seek to present some constituent elements of the process that resulted in the politicization of climate change and the idea of sustainable development during the period of institutionalization of neoliberalism. The application of Sustainable Development as a concept is relatively recent. Its first use appeared in the Brundtland Report in 1987 and was ratified years later at Rio-92. The term climate change, in turn, seemed to appear almost in the same period. Its first record appears in Resolution 43/53, the result of the 70th plenary meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in 1988. The appearance of these terms and the discussion surrounding their political meanings coincide with the implementation of neoliberalism at the beginning of the 1980s as a new ideological paradigm of capitalism. This work aims to understand the politicization of these two issues at that time, with neoliberal precepts as a political atmosphere. The methodological approach undertaken in this work is qualitative, and its main tools are the review of the bibliography on the topic and documentary analysis. The conclusion I present at the end of the article is that the oil companies, the main political and economic forces in the initial phase of neoliberalism, strategically incorporated the criticisms arising from the environmental movement and politicized, from a neoliberal perspective, the discussions around climate change and the construction of the BARROSSustainable development.

Keywords: Neoliberalism; Climate Change; Sustainable Development.

Resumo

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Neste artigo, busco apresentar alguns elementos constitutivos do processo que implicou na politização das mudanças climáticas e na ideia de desenvolvimento sustentável durante o período de institucionalização do neoliberalismo. Como se sabe, a aplicação do Desenvolvimento Sustentável enquanto conceito é relativamente recente. Seu primeiro uso apareceu no Relatório Brundtland, em 1987, e foi ratificado anos mais tarde, na Rio-92. O termo mudanças climáticas, por sua vez, apareceu quase no mesmo período. Seu primeiro registro consta na Resolução 43/53, fruto da 70ª reunião plenária da Assembleia Geral das Nações Unidas, realizada em 1988. Não só a aparição desses termos como a discussão em torno dos seus significados políticos, coincidem com a implementação do neoliberalismo, no início dos anos 1980, como novo paradigma ideológico do capitalismo. O objetivo deste trabalho é compreender de que forma essas duas questões foram politizadas naquele momento, tendo como atmosfera política os preceitos neoliberais. A abordagem metodológica empreendida neste trabalho é de natureza essencialmente qualitativa, e teve como principais ferramentas a revisão da bibliografia sobre o tema e a análise documental. A conclusão que apresento ao final do artigo, é a de que as companhias de petróleo, principais forças políticas e econômicas na fase inicial do neoliberalismo, estrategicamente incorporaram as críticas advindas do movimento ambientalista, e politizaram, desde a perspectiva neoliberal, as discussões em torno das mudanças climáticas e da construção do conceito de desenvolvimento sustentável.

Palavras-Chave: Neoliberalismo; Mudanças Climáticas; Desenvolvimento Sustentável.

Resumen

En este artículo busco presentar algunos elementos constitutivos del proceso que resultó en la politización del cambio climático y la idea de desarrollo sostenible durante el período de institucionalización del neoliberalismo. Como sabemos, la aplicación del concepto de Desarrollo Sostenible es relativamente reciente. Su primer uso apareció en el Informe Brundtland, en 1987, y fue ratificado años después, en Río-92. El término cambio climático, por su parte, apareció casi en el mismo período. Su primer registro aparece en la Resolución 43/53, resultado de la 70ª sesión plenaria de la Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas, celebrada en 1988. No sólo la aparición de estos términos, sino también la discusión en torno a sus significados políticos, coinciden con la implementación del neoliberalismo, a principios de los años 1980, como nuevo paradigma ideológico del capitalismo. El objetivo de este trabajo es comprender cómo se politizaron estos dos temas en ese momento, con los preceptos neoliberales como ambiente político. El enfoque metodológico adoptado en este trabajo es de carácter esencialmente cualitativo, y sus principales herramientas fueron la revisión de bibliografía sobre el tema y el análisis documental. La conclusión que presento al final del artículo es que las petroleras, principales fuerzas políticas y económicas en la fase inicial del neoliberalismo, incorporaron estratégicamente las críticas surgidas del movimiento ambientalista y politizaron, desde una perspectiva neoliberal, las discusiones en torno al cambio climático y la construcción del concepto de desarrollo sostenible.

Palabras Clave: Neoliberalismo; Cambio Climático; Desarrollo Sostenible.

INTRODUCTION

Without the long-term support offered by the business sector, particularly US companies with businesses in oil, petrochemicals, mining, and other highly polluting industrial activities, the aspirations of the intellectuals of the Mont Pèlerin Society would never have acquired the influence and prominence that neoliberals enjoy today (WALKER, 2020, p. 17).

One of the characteristics of studies dedicated to the neoliberalization of nature is based on the attempt to understand neoliberalism as a process (CASTREE, 2006; 2008a). These studies recognize the main features that help to describe it, such as commodification, privatization, deregulation, and the unrestricted liberalization of social life based on the premises of the market. However, despite their definition on a political-ideological level, these studies are interested in what goes on behind the scenes of the neoliberal political agenda and what makes its implementation possible. By understanding it as a process, these approaches to neoliberalism seek the actors, institutions, and contact networks established between them and how the different assemblages correlate in pursuit of the same objective (PARR, 2015).

Thought of as a political project, neoliberalism is never uniformly implemented and tends to incorporate criticism and different forms of resistance (CIPLET; ROBERTS, 2017). In addition, trying to define neoliberalism is beyond the usual scope of its description because, as an analytical category, it brings together complex ideological commitments, a myriad of discursive representations, and differentiated institutional practices (CASTREE, 2008b). These strategies are generally elaborated and propagated by concrete class alliances and organized at multiple geographical scales, the high point of which translates into a solid ideological commitment from the various sectors to disseminate neoliberal ideals (McCARTHY; PRUDHAM, 2004).

Hence, thinking about neoliberalism as a process is the most effective way to approach the topic I propose to discuss. Without losing sight of its central foundations already mentioned above, the idea is to establish the correlations that made possible the implementation of neoliberal ideas while discussions on climate change emerged and the concept of sustainable development was consolidated. But, more than that, the intention is to explain how disparate and, in a way, antagonistic issues and interests converged at a particular historical moment around a common goal. I am interested in

understanding the process that legitimized the market sphere as the primary political force to address environmental issues.

To this end, three aspects – or three movements – seem to be fundamental and vital for the argument I intend to present. The first concerns the emergence of the environmental movement and environmentalism as the main force to antagonize developmentalism and the economic growth paradigm in the 1960s and 1970s. The second refers to the reaction of the world's financial elites, notably large corporations and oil companies, to subvert the negative impacts of the criticism directed at them. Finally, the shift made around eco-development to sustainable development is understood as a capitulation of the critique arising from environmentalism and its consequent incorporation into the neoliberal agenda as a strategy for the reproduction of capital.

Therefore, this paper aims to understand the politicization of these two issues at that time, with neoliberal precepts as a political atmosphere. The methodological approach undertaken in this work is predominantly qualitative, and its main tools were the review of the bibliography on the topic and documentary analysis.

In addition to this introduction, this article is divided into six more sections. The following section presents the historical origins of neoliberalism and environmentalism and how these two currents once had a shared past. In the third section, I discuss aspects related to the so-called development process and its establishment as a paradigm of the capitalist mode of production. In the fourth section, I discuss how large oil companies directly involved in climate change contribute to incorporating environmental criticism from a neoliberal perspective. In the fifth section, I seek to address the formulation of the concept of sustainable development as an offshoot of the original idea of eco-development. In the sixth section, I seek to discuss how the environmental movement was captured by neoliberal theses, helping to consolidate the concept of sustainable development. Finally, I present the final considerations and point out possibilities for future discussions within this research theme.

NEOLIBERALISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM: A COMMON PAST

As Walker (2020) points out, these two schools of thought – environmentalism and neoliberalism – emerged around shared interests. According to this author, they

are tributaries of two scientific fields that appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, notably neoclassical economics and systems ecology. These sciences were interested in developing an approach to understanding how the available physical energies could be better harnessed for human enjoyment. Thus, light, heat, mechanical force, chemical affinity, magnetism, electricity, and the structure of the atom became objects of interest and dispute between these fields.

Also, according to Walker (2020), this dispute was accentuated at the turn of the twentieth century, when the neoclassical began to appropriate the statements of thermodynamic physics. According to this author, from 1870 onwards, the neoclassicists adopted a more orthodox stance linked to the precepts disseminated by authors such as Leon Walras, William Jevons, Vilfredo Pareto, and John Clark. As a result, the mathematical assumptions that supported the laws of conservation of energy defended by physicists began to be interpreted based on "market forces" through the general principle of optimal equilibrium. This semantic shift contributed to the model of the idea of subjective utility among neoclassical, which argues that the appropriation of available resources is made in terms of the supply of individual desires (FERGUSON, 2008).

This conduct of the neoclassical gradually made the physical postulates defended by the ecology of systems assume secondary importance. Automatically, this movement allowed the positioning of neoclassical economists as scientists endowed with prestige and epistemic authority to take a position on the subject. Although at that time this was not made explicit objectively, the incorporation of the laws of thermodynamics, similar to the laws of the market, aimed to remove the political component of the economy and give it a status of purity. In this way, it would be possible to portray economic science as the holder of the laws capable of governing society and investing the market with prerogatives of a natural and universal order to insert it into all spheres of social life (WALKER, 2020).

In the 1970s, these currents would meet again at radically opposite poles. Neoclassical economics strongly influenced the formation of the Chicago Economic School, one of the most important theoretical frameworks in building neoliberalism since the 1930s (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016). Systems ecology expanded its field of action and began to investigate – beyond the relations purely restricted to the physical

domains – how society and human populations are also related to the environment around them. Thus, the 1970s brought together the contradictions historically constructed by these disciplines since what was under discussion were the different perspectives referring to the civilizational model of development adopted until then. The tension between the two was due to the energy crisis of the time, the rise of climate change, and the dispute between the two models of society, which were defended by each current (WALKER, 2020).

THE IDEA OF DEVELOPMENT AS A PARADIGM

In political terms, the intensification of the contradictions exposed by ecologists and neoclassicists dates back to the first half of the twentieth century. After the Second World War ended, international geopolitics reconfigured, in which political and economic elements assumed a fundamental role (IANNI, 1994). Led by the U.S. government in conjunction with the Bretton Woods institutions, it sought, based on the reconstruction of Europe, the fight against communism, and the need to insert countries located outside the U.S.-Europe axis, a model of global leadership that could govern everyone (BELLUZZO, 2016). At the center of this discourse was the idea of development² and its dependent variable, economic growth.

The development concept is problematic in several ways and is attributed to U.S. President Harry Truman's first political use³ (ESPINOZA, 2016). In a speech in 1949, the term development aimed to establish a type of leveling between the different countries to mark the actions that would be necessary to be implemented for each one specifically. Taking the United States and the European continent as models of society to be copied, the Western way of life served as a parameter for the type of political-

² Originally coined by the field of natural sciences, development and growth referred to the processes observed in natural organisms, which, after their birth, would use available resources in order to fulfill their life cycle. Any interference that limited the availability of these resources was understood by natural scientists as impeding their growth and development. These two concepts were widely used by the Darwinian Theory on the origin of species, and helped to substantiate the success of some organisms in the evolutionary process.

³ The term was politically appropriated by the North American president, due to the influence exerted, at that time, by development ideologist Walt Rostow (1913-2003). In his main work entitled *The stages of economic growth* (1959), Rostow appropriates the term from natural sciences and incorporates it into economic science, his area of interest. In doing so, he reproduces one of the ideals that emerged at the end of the 19th century, Social Darwinism which, similar to Darwinist Theory, sought evolutionary stages among different peoples in society. Rostow's postulates, based on Social Darwinism, largely supported the idea that societies were also at different evolutionary stages, which led to the classifications into developed, underdeveloped, third and first world nations.

economic reordering desired to be established. Thus, the model of development to be universally pursued would be the one proposed and lived by the so-called advanced countries (SWEEZY, 1976).

President Truman's speech had several implicit objectives, including ratifying neo-imperialist positions with a democratic veneer (LIMA, 2006). Directed at the Soviet Bloc, the discourse was structured to polarize between the "communist model" and the "free world" intended to be built from then on. Moreover, this discourse was a precursor of the notion of Third World countries, which presented a picture of underdevelopment due to their endogenous characteristics and the evolutionary stage in which their societies were (LEGUIZAMÓN, 2007). For these countries, located mainly in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, where poverty appears as the primary element to be eradicated, development should aim at the standard of living achieved by the countries of the now First World, and economic growth should be the premise to *guide* the overcoming of backwardness. Countering this assertion, Layrargues (1997, p. 3) argues that,

The cultural differences between the countries would not be due to the various ways of appropriating and interacting with the environment but rather a consequence of the delays concerning modernization, understood as synonymous with evolution. This is a fatal blow to the planet's cultural diversity because the authentic culture would be represented by American society. The others, an obstacle to development but an endogenous resistance force, should be summarily eliminated.

After the end of World War II, the developmental race was launched through the so-called Great Acceleration. This period, which comprises the 30 glorious years of capitalism (HOBBSAWM, 1995), served to profoundly accentuate the pre-existing structural asymmetries between the different nations, strategically (re)conditioning the positions of the center and the periphery, as well as reaffirming the international division of labor. The historical differences experienced for centuries by the countries in this dynamic made it impossible for the developmental proposal to be implemented in conditions of equal opportunities. Thus, as this "uneven and combined development" model was insisted upon, structural inequalities between countries were reproduced and accentuated (LÖWY, 1998).

Central governments, financial institutions, and multilateral organizations have placed economic growth as the primary goal and objective throughout this period. Growth, from a socio-ecological perspective, meant the disproportionate advance of

the natural conditions of the planet as a way to ensure an improvement in society's quality of life in advanced economies. Because of that, at the end of the 1960s, the crisis that was being experienced was not limited to its political, economic, and social aspects but had nature as one of its key elements. This period also marks the consolidation of environmentalism and neoliberalism as the main political and ideological movements to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century (McCARTHY; PRUDHAM, 2004).

NEOLIBERALISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE: PACIFYING ENVIRONMENTAL CRITICISM

According to Ribeiro (2012), the environmental movement challenged the developmentalist ideal and the capitalist system in the early 1970s. According to the author, this was due to environmentalism's emergence in the late 1960s, a time of drastic weakening of labor struggles as the main confrontation with capital. Later, due to the recognition of Ecology as a disciplinary field belonging to the hard sciences and the forceful positions coming from this body of scientists, its main characteristic became the seriousness with which they denounced the aggressions of the development model to natural systems. Finally, the criticisms made by the movement during its emergence were considered radical⁴, which placed its militants and people linked to ecological research as belonging to a subversive movement (BARROS, 1996).

Environmentalism and Ecology came to be understood as a single body and, once unified, guided the political debate of the early 1970s, taking the place of historical intellectual references, such as those belonging to the field of Social Sciences (LOUREIRO, 2006a). On the other hand, the movement lacked a more accurate understanding of the structural processes constitutive of the capitalist mode of production, which were at the root of environmental degradation. A hallmark of the environmental movement of this period was to focus on the effects of the development model since the predominant affective relationship among its members has always been related to the intransigent defense of the natural conditions of the planet, that is,

⁴ The most radical criticisms coming from the environmentalist movement, in fact, came from one of its branches, known as Deep Ecology.

of nature, relegating to the background the social relations of production that exist behind the picture of environmental deterioration (FOLADORI, 1999; 2001).

Even so, since 1970, the consolidation of the environmental movement has called for the crisis of a system and Western society as a whole (VIOLA, 1992). The main target of the environmentalists was the oil companies and the indiscriminate use of this fuel, as it is the primary energy matrix used in economic activities. The very instability of the Keynesian model was marked by an energy crisis in the late 1960s, aggravated by the oil crises in the following decade (DUMÉNIL; LÉVY, 2002). Moreover, for the first time, global warming and climate change were beginning to be discussed and to link their cause to the use of fossil fuels. In this way, the environmentalist critique was not restricted to observing the problematic situation in which global ecosystems found themselves but became a call for replacing the energy sources used until then (LOUREIRO, 2006b).

A contradictory point of the environmental movement – and its radicalism – lies in the institutional frameworks attributed to this movement. As Leis and D'Amato (1994) pointed out, in the early 1970s, the movement was already quite expressive and had reached a certain notoriety. Thus, many people who identified themselves with "environmental causes" also participated in other social circles, being, as a rule, part of institutional bodies of governments, organizations, and private companies. These spaces, often resistant to environmentalist ideas and without a tradition of contestatory struggles, also began to coexist with people belonging to the movement. For Ribeiro (2012), this scenario helped to disseminate environmentalist ideas among the most conservative sectors, which contributed to institutionalizing environmentalism in other segments of civil society.

This is where the first controversy arises since, according to Walker (2020), the Meadows Report (1972) or *Limits to Growth*⁵ is considered one of the milestones

⁵ Limits to growth was the title of the book published months before the Stockholm Conference, by several authors, including D. H. Meadows, at the request of the Club of Rome. The Club of Rome still is a business institution, led by the president of the NATO Economic Committee, Aurélio Peccei, and sponsored by large automotive companies, such as FIAT and Volkswagen. Scientists, MIT academics, economists, other industrialists and members of public institutions from developed countries were also part of the Club. In general terms, based on a mathematical model, the conclusion was reached that population control in poor countries was the only alternative to contain the spread of poverty in these places. Furthermore, if industrialization, environmental degradation and population growth levels were maintained, the world would reach its growth limit within 100 years from the date of its publication.

expressed by the radicalism of the environmental movement. According to Walker (2020), the high point of the Report is the confrontation established between the Club of Rome – which signed the document – and neoclassical economists, ideologues of the developmental model, and supporters of neoliberal theses. As this author argues, the Report emphasized the need – given the conditions observed – for a rapid transition from the energy matrix and the Fordist model of production to alternative and clean energies, based, above all, on innovation and the insertion of technological apparatus. The neoclassicals, on the other hand, committed to developmentalist ideals, were staunch defenders of oil as the primary energy source since they depended on the power of companies to influence the transition between the welfare state and neoliberalism.

The Club of Rome predicted that unless there was a political agreement recognizing the need to replace exponential economic growth with some other form of a steady-state economy, the limits of growth would be catastrophically transgressed by the middle of the twenty-first century, causing drastic declines in the human population. The industrial economy needed to be regulated within fixed limits established by the geophysical logic of the depletion of this mineral and by the fragile balance of the global ecosystem. The report drew attention to the adoption of an urgent, albeit undefined, strategy to achieve global equilibrium, a situation in which population and capital would be essentially stable, with forces acting to increase or decrease them, keeping them in a hermetically adjusted balance (WALKER, 2020, p. 21)⁶.

The arguments raised and defended in the Meadows Report decisively influenced the debates at the Stockholm Conference⁷, which, for Walker (2020), was the last great breath of radicalism coming from the environmental movement. As he argues, the impact of the Report was such that, months after its publication, the main themes that would be debated at the Conference were reformulated to incorporate the main theses presented by the authors. For Walker (2020), due to the institutional, symbolic, and diplomatic nature of the Conference, it was the first time that representatives of the countries of advanced economies had their development model

⁶ The contradiction in considering the Club of Rome's proposal as radical lies in the fact that the Club's intention is to propose measures and alternatives to accelerate the process of ecological modernization by suggesting and confronting the use of fossil fuels. As we know, none of its members were from the oil industry, despite there being car manufacturers among them who were dependent on oil. The Club's position also denotes its colonizing stance, as once the idea of a stationary internship was realized, the developed countries to which its members belonged would certainly have fewer negative impacts on their way of life and access to goods and services necessary for reduction of life.

⁷ Many environmental analysts consider the Stockholm Conference, held in Sweden in 1972, to be the first international conference to address the issue of the environment. At the time, more than 170 heads of state participated in the meeting, giving it more diplomatic weight and making it a landmark in environmental geopolitics.

publicly confronted. In political terms, the Conference signified incorporating the environmental agenda into the official bodies of international diplomacy. It was seen as a threat to the economic interests of those who supported the development of industrialized countries.

The criticisms expressed at the Conference were directed, above all, at the U.S. government, the leading capitalist economy at that time, erected and sustained for decades by the big oil companies (CHESNAIS, 1998). As Walker (2020) argues, since 1920 – even before the creation of the Mont Pèlerin Society⁸ – Von Mises and Hayek were already meeting at the Vienna Chamber of Commerce with the prominent representatives of the major oil corporations. One of the objectives of these meetings was to think about elaborating legal instruments that could limit the impact of democratic values disseminated in society and reduce government intervention in matters related to the market sphere. In addition, these meetings discussed how to capture the power of the State to foster geopolitical planning that favors these companies (CHESNAIS, 1998).

When the crisis of the 1970s erupted, the oil companies were already organized as a central monopoly in the energy sector. From this sector, the primary reaction to environmental criticism comes from a criticism that, to some extent, has fueled the counterrevolutionary impetus driven by neoliberalism. For Walker (2020), the correlation between oil use and the worsening of global warming gave rise to an anti-environmentalist sentiment among corporations, translating into developing strategies to cushion the impact arising from criticism. Among them, the softening of the forms of reaction and the gradual incorporation of criticism, the creation of instruments such as Think Tanks⁹ (BOURDIEU; WACQUANT, 2003), the financing of large environmental NGOs (DIEGUES, 2008), and the articulation with organizations committed to the

⁸ The Mont Pèlerin Society is an international organization founded in 1947. It comprises philosophers, economists, and politicians from various countries united around promoting liberalism and its values and principles. The society defends freedom of expression, free markets, and the political values of an open society, and it is guided by liberal ideology. Its founders include Friedrich Hayek, Frank Knight, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Michael Polanyi, Wilhelm Röpke, Karl Popper, Ludwig von Mises, George Stigler, and Milton Friedman.

⁹ Bordieu and Wacquant (2003) show how these Idea Banks often delegitimize scientific thought or production. In the case of the discussion proposed in this work, it is the denial that climate change exists, is not an observable phenomenon, nor is its effect as serious as it is claimed to be.

neoliberal agenda, such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, the latter understood as a political actor (PEREIRA, 2012).

According to Holling (2001), the reaction of the oil companies was swift and forceful, as the criticism reached the "heart of the North American business system." As is well known, in the early 1970s, the counterculture movement was not limited to the environmental movement. Still, it housed pacifist, feminist, anti-war, and civil rights currents, all of which sustained strong criticisms of the Western capitalist model of society. The large corporations, on which most of the criticism fell, saw themselves threatened and understood that moment as an opportunity to subvert the discourse and be able to advance with the neoliberal project without, however, disregarding the reasons that fostered such criticism.

Given the fact that fossil fuel burning was the leading cause of climate change, it was expected that companies would act to capitulate to this concept (ELLIOTT, 2022). For this author, the central point to be analyzed boils down to the fact that companies have given the issue of climate change a political character from the first moment this issue began to be debated instead of treating it as a complex natural phenomenon, apparently without solution. Based on this approach, the "*big oil companies*" together with other actors engaged with the neoliberal proposal, were able to respond in a coordinated manner, which resulted in a kind of "cooperative governance of neoliberal capitalism" (ELLIOTT, 2022).

Because it emerged at the dawn of neoliberalism, it was under the neoliberal lens that the treatment of climate change was directed. As Rodrigues (2012) argues, the emphasis employed by the governments of the central states committed to the neoliberal agenda revolved around the security issue. The food, energy, health, military, and other insecurities that could arise due to changes in the climate pattern created a psychosocial environment in the sense that any actions to contain such a threat would be welcome. Neoliberal ideologues familiar with the issue began this task by delegitimizing science as a provider of data and by denying climate change itself, which, according to Rodrigues (2012), "served to calm the minds and hearts" of millions of people around the planet.

According to Elliott (2022), governing fear and managing this issue, rather than attacking it, was the primary strategy adopted in the neoliberalization process. As he

argues, neoliberalism, understood as a process, has as one of its fundamental rules the elaboration of mechanisms aimed at pacifying dissent. In the case of the environmental movement and environmentalism in general, it is in the interest of the ruling classes to avoid deliberate confrontation with their opponents. Thus, it is part of the neoliberalization process to adopt strategies to welcome a significant portion of the sectors from which criticism originates instead of ignoring or abandoning it altogether.

What is striking about this process of neoliberal conversion is the syncretism present in its mode of operation: neoliberalism hardly removes its opponents through explicit opposition, instead seeking to reformulate it to become a more socially accepted contestation. Those opponents who remain recalcitrant may eventually be classified as dangerous, radical, extremist, or even terrorists. In any case, the goal is to generate a collective conviction, a type of shared ideology, in which the only possible solutions to a given type of problem find in neoliberal reforms the most acceptable way to implement them (ELLIOTT, 2022, p. 92).

ECODEVELOPMENT: LAST GASP OF RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

Neoliberalism's latest attack on what could still be its most radical enemy focused on the antithesis of the idea of eco-development. This concept emerged in 1973 and was introduced by UNEP Executive Director Maurice Strong (SACHS, 1995). Developed based on the principle of "thinking globally and acting locally," eco-development was first designed for rural areas in the then Third World countries. The preliminary objectives of this proposal were to encourage the judicious use of local resources without compromising the depletion of nature, as in these countries, there was still the possibility of such societies not engaging in the illusion of economic growth along Western lines (LAYRARGUES, 1997).

However, in the early 1980s, the term was better appropriated by the French-Polish economist Ignacy Sachs, who tried to improve it. Early on, Sachs (1981) sought to define ecodevelopment as "a style of development particularly adapted to rural regions of the Third World, based on their natural capacity for photosynthesis." The fundamental theses of eco-development were based on economic efficiency, social justice, and ecological prudence. Considered together, these theses contributed to structuring what became the five main dimensions of this concept, from which it can be disseminated,

- 1) social sustainability, which aims to reduce social differences and poverty;
- 2) economic sustainability, which proposes the maintenance of natural capital;
- 3) ecological sustainability, which includes the preservation of natural resources;

- 4)spatial sustainability, which presupposes a more balanced relationship between rural and urban areas;
- 5)cultural sustainability seeks to respect the local specificities of ecosystems, cultures, identities, and traditions (SACHS, 1993, p. 57).

For Layrargues (1997), eco-development attempted to react to the prevailing trend of allegedly universalist solutions and generalized formulas without denying the importance of cultural exchanges. As he argues, instead of attributing excessive importance to external aid, Sachs and his theory sought to attribute credibility to the ability of human societies to identify their problems and propose original solutions, even if inspired by exogenous experiences. When turning to the Third World, eco-development aimed to provide an intelligent response to the traditional development model thought from and for the countries of the so-called First World.

Despite the forcefulness of the criticism, Leff (2009) observes the theoretical-conceptual fragility behind the epistemological construction of eco-development. For this author, the environmental issue was genuinely presented by Sachs from the critical perspective of Political Economy to antagonize the adverse effects caused by the economic rationality arising from developmentalism. For Leff (2009), when Sachs referred to these effects, he referred to the harmful consequences caused to the environment by the economic system, notably referring to externalities. However, analyzing the eco-developmental proposal, Leff (2009) understands that it focused on the assimilation of ecological issues into the process of economic development, mainly via the internalization of externalities.

For Leff (2009), this is where the fragility of the concept lies because, theoretically, it did not seek to radically oppose the reproduction of current economic rationality. On the contrary, Leff (2009) identifies that the eco-development discourse did not include the critical perspective necessary to highlight the limits of this same rationality in its analysis. Furthermore, he proposes internalizing the environment in the economic system without considering possible epistemological, institutional, and political obstacles, trusting the concept with its power of contestation. In this way, Leff (2009) understands that the primary objective of eco-development has adapted to the need to readjust the international order and solve the problems of socio-environmental degradation generated by capitalist development.

Above all, it is a practical discourse aimed at harmonizing the reproduction of nature as an object and means of the reproductive process in the expanded reproduction of capital. Therefore, even suggesting the creation of a new

civilization project and providing positive elements for the transformation of the dominant productive rationality, eco-development strategies did not question the possibility of achieving their objectives within the prevailing economic paradigms and institutional structures. The eco-development discourse was diluting its critical potential in its theoretical and practical strategies (LEFF, 2009, p. 137).

The absence of praxis in its implementation was based on the lack of political analysis of the contradictions in which the eco-development strategies were inserted. One of them, and perhaps the main one, concerned the lack of political and institutional support from several sectors, concerned with the possibility of overcoming the dominant productive rationality, from which many of these same sectors benefited. Over time, the proposals that supported the elaboration of eco-development lost their specific meaning and ability to mobilize different social actors to achieve their objectives, especially those linked to the environmental movement (LEFF, 2015).

Detached from social struggles, eco-development was linked to a voluntarist image of the transformation of social reality, and its meaning was restricted to contestatory discourse. Furthermore, by adopting a systemic and pragmatic view of natural processes and ecological dynamics, ecodevelopment did not incorporate the historical-critical potential of social relations to transform nature, and it ignored the transformative potential of social conflicts in the struggle for its appropriation. So, for Leff (2015), eco-development emerged to functionalize the dominant economic rationality, incorporating environmental dimensions into the production process without interfering with the expanded reproduction of capital.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE END OF ANTAGONISM

Concomitantly emptying the eco-development proposal, we witnessed the gradual capitulation of the environmental movement. Elliott (2022) attributes how the movement built its approach around environmental issues – especially global warming – as determining its decline. As he argues, the various aspects of the environmental movement, including the most radical, have always approached the issue of climate change from the theoretical framework of Ecology, understanding this phenomenon as a systemic crisis. Therefore, the effects observed in the environmental sphere arising from global warming and climate change would be understood as belonging to the

order of catastrophes or natural disasters, detached from the social relations that produced them.

Because of this, one of the hallmarks of the environmental movement in the early 1970s was “its enthusiasm for solutions and the call to care for the planet” (ELLIOTT, 2022). This romanticized conduct of the environmental movement contributed to depoliticizing the ecological issue, stripping it of its socio-historical components. On the other hand, this was precisely the strategy used by the actors engaged in implementing the neoliberal agenda, which, from the beginning, politicized the environmental issue to instrumentalize it ideologically. That is, since for environmentalists, it was essential to take care of the effects of climate change while disregarding its causes, it became easy for neoliberals to present proposals to mitigate such effects without altering the structures at the root of the problem.

When it comes to the environmental movement – the main antagonist of the neoliberal project – one of the critical points of the neoliberal proposal lies in maintaining the a-critical and a-historical perspective grasped by the movement. In this way, not exposing the historical processes that led to the organization of modern society through the capitalist mode of production was one of the main tasks of neoliberals. Once the historical path that generated the situation of empirically verified environmental degradation was made invisible, the ecological contradictions caused by the need for growth inherent to the system itself were also subsumed as causes of the environmental crisis. Therefore, keeping the reasons behind global warming anonymous was a first-order reason to guarantee the ongoing neoliberalization process.

Likewise, an attempt was made to keep the paradigms on which the criticisms originated untouched, notably development and economic growth. As Lelé (1991) points out, the criticism centered on the development model conceived from the North demonstrated that this model presented problems, mainly because it did not fulfill the promise of eradicating poverty in Southern countries. Furthermore, the economic growth observed on a global scale indicated signs of weakness in this model, as it did not solve the social problems of the central economies themselves, nor did it provide adequate leveling of the living conditions of Third World citizens. Even so, Lelé (1991)

points out that development and economic growth remained inviolable spheres of the capitalist economy, even as a substrate for its sustainable phase.

In fact, from the 1980s onwards, sustainability gained notoriety and became the central concept of the neoliberalization process (ELLIOTT, 2022). As it is yet another term appropriated from natural sciences by economists, its use has undoubtedly been adapted to the economic interests of the moment (VEIGA, 2010). Therefore, sustainability has come to mean the ability of economic systems in conjunction with natural systems to continue generating profits, incorporating a tone of environmental awareness during this process. In ideological terms, sustainability also hid the antagonisms between greens and neoliberals, as this new approach would cover both currents. As Leff (2015, p. 89) points out:

The sustainability discourse seeks to reconcile the opposites of the development dialectic: the environment and economic growth. This ideological mechanism does not just mean one more twist of the screw in economic rationality. Still, it operates a twist and a twist of reason: its intention is not to internalize the ecological conditions of production but to proclaim economic growth as a sustainable process established in the free market mechanisms as an effective means of ensuring environmental balance and social equality.

The prerogatives and real interests behind sustainability became more evident in 1987, when the Brundtland Report (1987) was published, also known as Our Common Future. From a more pragmatic point of view, the Report contained two main proposals (LAGO, 2006). The first was how to involve the most economically developed countries in commitments that sought cooperation and political engagement in the arenas where discussions on environmental issues took place. On the other hand, the aim was to create mechanisms that would facilitate the industrialization of “developing” countries without overloading their still-preserved natural conditions. For Lago (2006), despite the predominantly generalist content, the Report sought to give preference to how “underdeveloped” countries could find ways to develop without the development process resulting in adverse results on the environment concerning the years of precedent to the publication of the Report.

The question about the Report undoubtedly revolves around the relationship built between the countries of the North and the South. However, the Brundtland Commission's approach to this issue should be a reason for questioning. As Layrargues (1997) points out, what motivated the creation of the Commission in 1983

and the publication of its Report was the witnessed scenario of environmental crisis, which translated into a civilizational impasse. More categorically, what was established at the end of the 1980s was the unquestionable exposure of historically constructed asymmetries between different nations, which resulted in socioeconomic inequality and the stage of environmental degradation observed at the time (OLIVEIRA, 2011).

More incisively, what was at stake – and which was not made explicit – was questioning the lifestyle and consumption level in Northern countries. For the first time, it was clear that the unconditional defense of the standardization of the development model had not allowed countries to prosper equitably. Furthermore, the uncompromising defense of economic growth as a paradigm for overcoming poverty had not resolved the social problems of the central economies, nor had it deepened the poverty situation in the countries of the then Third World. In other words, the countries in a more advantageous position on the developmental trajectory became responsible for the planet's environmental degradation (CARLETTI, 2023).

In this sense, the way of life in Western countries and other industrialized nations was at the epicenter of the socio-environmental crisis. In this way, the discussion that the Brundtland Commission should have taken over would necessarily require a historical analysis of the structural conditions that allowed the construction of such disparate realities. It is understood that this analysis should include, in the foreground, the colonization process as a driver of the asymmetries and inequalities observed at that given moment. In doing so, an approach to the submission of the Colonies to the Metropolises would be inescapable because the former provided, for centuries, unlimited slave labor and natural resources to achieve the project of Modernity (CARLETTI, 2023).

This would imply revealing the conditions of the capital accumulation process, which enabled the unrestricted transfer of resources to the Metropolises (MARX, 2017). Since unrestricted resources were available, it was natural and expected that the citizens of these regions would consume disproportionately concerning the inhabitants of the Colonies. Focusing, therefore, on the social relations of capitalist production, this analysis would conclude that the mode of production that allows access to these consumer goods is only made viable through the continuous expansion of the productive forces that feed it, which, to a certain extent, they concern

the natural conditions available on the planet. Thus, the discussion that the Commission failed to undertake would have to propose ways to reduce consumption in Northern countries and, at the same time, create a mechanism that would enable Southern countries to raise their consumption standards so that a state of balance was reached (ZACARIAS, 2009).

Furthermore, another discussion that the Commission should have made dates back to the accelerated level of environmental degradation observed at that time. According to Mota and Silva (2009), by radically exposing this topic, one would expect the Commission to suggest reorganizing the civilizational base and the political, economic, social, and cultural structure in force in societies established after the Industrial Revolution and within the framework of capitalist Modernity. The clear signs of the exhaustion of resources and their overexploitation would be more than enough for the proposal presented in the Report to point to another mode of production in which natural resources would not be subjected in an infinite way to economic rationality (SILVA, 2010).

Thirty-seven years after the publication of the Report, it is well known that this was not what happened. As Ribeiro (1991) points out, the absence of a radical and classist critique of environmental issues contributed to constructing a consensus that unified the interests of antagonistic classes around the defense of sustainable development. For the author, sustainable development was the maximum limit the ruling classes and governments of central economies were willing to concede. This agreement established the maintenance of Northern countries' lifestyle and consumption patterns, therefore mitigating the weight of their responsibility for environmental degradation, the generation of wealth, and the reproduction of poverty (RIBEIRO, 1991).

The maintenance of the development prefix preceded by the sustainable suffix highlights the colonialist character of the proposal (LIMA, 1997). This helps to demystify the idea that sustainable development is an aseptic term and supposedly devoid of ideological content (FREITAS; NÉLSIS; NUNES, 2012). On the contrary, development would continue to be the driving force and parameter through which forms of social organization would be guided from that moment on. It is, therefore, an essential ideological device, as it erases the origins of unequal relations between North

and South, signals that it is still possible for both poles to reach the same level of satisfaction, and reinforces the role of each person in the international division of labor, to maintain unequal exchanges of natural resources and raw materials (MESZÁROS, 2011).

From the point of view of capitalist production relations, any modality of sustainable development with broad and lasting validity that would safeguard planet Earth's natural and human resources is impossible. "Development" itself in capitalist logic is unsustainable. Therefore, it is impossible to presuppose sustainable development without overcoming substantive inequality, the hegemonic mode of production, and the structural difficulties within it (MESZÁROS, 2011, p. 3).

According to Leff (2015), the central theme in the sustainable development proposal refers to new strategies for the economic appropriation of nature. For this author, the environmental degradation observed in recent decades, which has led to the hindrance of capitalist production, was insufficient to detach the environment from current economic rationality. On the contrary, through sustainable development, pollution, degradation, and waste from industrial production would enter the financial calculations of the market, thus unblocking its immanent condition of expansion. At the turn of the 20th century, nature degraded and became a possibility for accumulation in the capitalist system (MONERAT, 2022).

For Carneiro (2005), the discourse of sustainable development converted the critical meaning present in the concept of environment into a proclamation of neoliberal policies. As he argues, following the ratification of sustainable discourse, environmental dimensions lost their intrinsic role as catalysts for social transformations, the search for ecological balance and social justice. In its place, green developmentalism tried to find ways to attribute value to hitherto "invaluable" environmental characteristics to internalize what was understood as disposable into the production system. At once and in a rhetorical way, the discourse of sustainable development inserts environmental policies into the adjustments of the neoliberal economy while legitimizing the market economy as the one responsible for the rational use of resources (CARNEIRO, 2005).

In one of his works, O'Connor (2000) asks whether sustainable capitalism – or development – is possible. He responds that it is not only possible but also desired. As he argues, for capitalists, sustainability is, first and foremost, an ideological and political issue faced with an ecological and economic problem. That is, a capitalist

system that aims to be sustainable concerns the maintenance or sustainability of a state of affairs for a certain period, preferably a long one. The apparent ambiguity of the term is resolved when, in the production system, it is crucial that profit rates and the accumulation regime can be sustained in the long term, which, in practice, provides sustainability to finances. For O'Connor (2000), there could not have been a better choice of terminology that would represent this new stage of capital because, in economic terms, sustainable capitalism must necessarily be capitalism whose development is permanent – and sustainably – expanding.

CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, I sought to discuss how neoliberalism's institutionalization made the environmental issue's capitulation possible at the end of the 1970s. To this end, I sought to approach neoliberalism as a political-ideological doctrine and give some intelligibility to its operation. When its theses are confronted, neoliberalism uses two main strategies. On the one hand, it acts by recognizing the criticisms addressed to its *modus operandi* and incorporating them into its speech. On the other hand, it tries to politicize the content incorporated based on market assumptions.

Concerning climate change, the big oil companies played a fundamental role in this process. This is because they were the major financiers of the neoliberal project at that time and on whom most of the criticism from the environmental movement fell. On this specific issue, neoliberal ideologues not only incorporated criticisms regarding the burning of fossil fuels but also pointed out solutions to common sense that did not represent radical ruptures, as the greens intended. Based on insecurity and widespread fear, big oil companies managed to cool the contradictions in their productive activities and were able to carry out the neoliberal project.

The elaboration of the concept of Sustainable Development, in turn, followed a similar trajectory but with some particularities. In this case, there is a specific chronology that allows us to observe, in stages, the loss of protagonism of the environmental movement in imposing its political perspective on establishing this concept. From radical criticism to the development model, Sustainable Development was constructed and politicized in different spaces by the hegemonic forces of capital to make it more palatable even for environmentalists. Ultimately, Sustainable

Development represented a pact between developmentalists and more conservative sectors linked to the environmental movement.

However, such a process was only possible by displacing the antagonism between environmentalists and neoliberal ideologues. The characteristic enthusiasm of environmentalists lacked a particular critical stance and ability to lead the process through the *strictu sensu* politicization of the environmental issue. Such politicization only occurred years later, greatly influenced by the critical theory produced by the Social Sciences regarding environmental issues. In this sense, it is understandable that, currently, there is a predominance of the liberal notion and market perspectives on issues related to climate change mitigation and the complete failure of a civilizational project based on the principles of Sustainable Development.

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