



### Implications between pandemic, environmental degradation and capitalist system

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#### Summary

This work seeks to analyze the correlations between the current outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the process of environmental degradation that has been intensifying more and more throughout this period. The main methodological coordinate applied in this research consisted of a bibliographic review, contextualized by reading and analyzing journalistic material. This research seeks to question, especially in relation to the Brazilian context, how the global pandemic and the collapse of the environment are intrinsic processes when situated in a broader context of capitalism's offensive. The proposal is to articulate the socio-historical configurations between these phenomena to the current production model. The central issue to be attacked is the way in which the economy has developed, demanding a new reorganization, extinguishing predatory actions and their process of unlimited expansion as if nature were infinite to be exploited in an unbridled manner by intensive capital.

**Key words:** Covid-19 pandemic. Environment. Neoliberalism.

#### Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the correlations between the current pandemic outbreak of Covid-19 and the process of environmental degradation that has been intensifying more and more throughout this period. The main methodological coordination applied in this research consisted of a bibliographic review, contextualized by the reading and analysis of journalistic material. This research seeks to question, especially in relation to the Brazilian context, how the global pandemic and the collapse in the environment are intrinsic processes when situated in a broader context of capitalism's offensive. The proposal is to articulate the socio-historical configurations between these phenomena to the production model in force. A central issue to be attacked is the way the economy has been given, demanding a new reorganization, extinguishing predatory actions and their process of unlimited expansion as if nature were infinitely exploited in an unbridled manner by capital-intensive.

**Keywords:** Pandemic Covid-19. Environment. Neoliberalism.

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## **1. Introduction**

The pandemic has clearly highlighted the structural inequalities and chronic oppressions that exist in capitalism, as well as the logic of the production and reproduction of capital, which privileges the market economy to the detriment of human lives. Within this logic, the most important thing for the big capitalists is the increase in profits in less time and labor costs, placing second priority on the well-being and dignity of workers.

It was no different with the Covid-19 pandemic, in which the anti-scientific discourse contrary to the recommendations of social isolation and closure of economic activities on the grounds that such measures would cause damage to the market economy and, consequently, a disaster even greater than itself. virus, set the tone and put human lives in the background. It is within this same logic of unlimited exploitation in the name of the interests of capital accumulation that the environment suffers an increasingly intense process of degradation of its biodiversity.

The objective of the text is to discuss the interconnections between the Covid-19-2 pandemic and the process of environmental degradation that the planet is suffering. This research seeks to question, especially in relation to the Brazilian context, how the global pandemic and the collapse of the environment are intrinsic processes when situated in a broader context of capitalism's offensive. The proposal is to articulate the socio-historical configurations between these phenomena to the current production model. It is, therefore, about establishing links between the health crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic and the crisis in the environmental field.

The relevance of this topic lies above all in bringing the socio-environmental aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic to the center of debates in social and human sciences. Before being numbers and statistical data, the pandemic is a process experienced daily by men and women from different social classes. It does not appear restricted to public health, but is linked to other sectors, such as the economy, politics and education. It is imperative to elucidate the origins and implications of the pandemic from a social and historical perspective, in addition to the shocking death toll.

The main methodological coordinate applied in this research consisted of a bibliographic review, contextualized by reading and analyzing contemporary journalistic material. In addition to this introduction, the article is divided into three more sections. The first of them seeks to discuss how the ideology of neoliberalism has been present in discourses about

pandemic. Soon after, the relationships between the phenomena of the pandemic and socio-environmental degradation are presented, emphasizing their articulations with the capitalist production model. The last section makes some conclusive considerations, and finally, the bibliographical references.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Neoliberalism: between life and the economy

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the biggest crises experienced worldwide in recent times. It is not just an isolated health problem, but involves, in addition to the biological aspects of the virus, social and geopolitical aspects, being the stage for disputes in the political-economic arena. (VERGARA, 2020).

While the scientific community defends restriction measures, the discourse adopted by the extreme right is that citizens must expose themselves to the health risks of breaking social isolation under the argument that the economy cannot stop, guaranteeing the maintenance of market activities .

Along this path, a false dichotomy emerged between saving human lives and saving the economy, as if it were possible for one to exist without the other. This dilemma, however, can only serve us to reveal what alienation seeks to obscure in every way: “in the capitalist mode of production, the production of wealth generates incompatibilities with the guarantee of quality of life for the vast majority of the population” ( BRETTAS, 2020, p. 11).

In the ultra-neoliberal discourse, citizens' health is reduced to an economic or budgetary business (FERNANDES; PAULA, 2020). The system produces urban space by prioritizing the accumulation of capital rather than the dignified conditions for the survival of citizens, leaving de-urbanized areas and without adequate infrastructure to the population of the most impoverished strata, who are also even more exposed to the risks of contamination of various diseases, due to the lack of basic sanitation and other services necessary for the dignity of human life (VERGARA, 2020).

According to Fernandes and Paula (2020, p. 134), neoliberalism can be understood from two interpretative lines, in which the first refers to a theory “about political-economic practices of administration of the capitalist mode of production”, whose role of the state

is to guarantee favorable conditions for the autonomous and expansive functioning of the market economy. Thus, contrary to what the conception of the Minimum State presupposes, the presence of the State here is maximum.

The second interpretation concerns neoliberalism in its subjective and epistemic dimension, that is, as an ideology that guides not only institutions, but also all life in society, going beyond the limits of economics and politics to insert itself into people's daily lives. , influencing their ways of thinking and seeing the world, in education and culture.

To the extent that there is the universalization of economic rationality to several other spheres, countless procedures, individual choices of the *homo oeconomicus* (Foucault, 2008:311) to the elaboration of public policies, are reduced to calculations of costs and benefits (FERNANDES; PAULA, 2020, p. 134).

The State acts directly in the implementation of neoliberal policies, in defense of capital, functioning as the hand that takes away democratic rights, makes labor laws more flexible, as well as environmental laws. The exploitation of natural resources is a crucial condition for the expansion and accumulation of capital. The fury of capitalism has to this day decimated hundreds of indigenous peoples, and all of this with the consent of the Brazilian State.

## **2.2 Health crisis and environmental crisis: two sides of the same coin**

Since *boom* pandemic, a narrative develops, notably among public figures and supporters linked to the ex. US President Donald Trump that the new SARS-COV-2 virus is nothing more than a “Chinese virus”, that is, a virus produced within a laboratory in the city of Wuhan, China, with the aim of cause an economic crisis that would lead capitalism to total decline and finally implant communism in the world (LAYRARGUES, 2020).

The chaotic narrative that the Coronavirus was a product of experiments carried out in Chinese laboratories with the purpose of sabotaging the capitalist economy so that communism could triumphantly dominate the world was endorsed by government authorities in Brazil, and above all by the country's president. , Jair Messias Bolsonaro. On more than one occasion, the then head of state even insinuated that China had created the virus on purpose in a cunning plan for world domination. In one of his statements Bolsonaro suggested:

It is a new virus, no one knows whether it was born in a laboratory or born by a human being ingesting an unsuitable animal. But it's there. The military knows what war is

chemical, bacteriological and radiological. Are we facing a new war? Which country grew its GDP the most? I won't tell you<sup>two</sup>.

This conspiracy theory has gained thousands of followers in Brazil, including politicians, religious leaders, supporters of the president and those linked to the country's far right. However, it is not supported by the concrete materiality of the facts, and is nothing more than a fallacy driven by exclusively ideological interests. Not only has China suffered a slowdown in its GDP, but the companies that have emerged stronger in the pandemic are precisely the large North American companies in the technology sector, namely: *Apple, Amazon, Google, Facebook* it is *Microsoft* (LAYRARGUES, 2020).

By creating fallacious narratives, the extreme right also creates a totally parallel and distorted reality, activating its mechanisms of domination. On the other hand, this discourse also obscures the relationships between the pandemic, environmental degradation and the capitalist system. Therefore, it is understood that the origin of the Coronavirus is not in Chinese communism, but in the mode of production that has destroyed the planet's biodiversity, namely: capitalism.

As Layrargues (2020) adds, like other epidemics, the new Coronavirus was not an invention made in the laboratory, but its genetic characteristics are close to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus, which has its original host in bats, configuring, thus, a zoonosis. In the words of this author:

Zoonoses are diseases that were previously exclusive to non-human animals, which, due to spillover, ended up becoming human diseases as well. Zoonoses represent no less than around 60% of infectious diseases in humans. Hantavirus comes from rodents. The yellow fever virus comes from monkeys. H5N1 Avian Flu comes from wild birds and H1N1 Swine Flu comes from pigs. Measles probably comes from goats. HIV-1 comes from chimpanzees. SARS comes from the civet cat. Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) comes from the dromedary. Zika comes from the famous *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. The new Coronavirus comes from bats... (LAYRARGUES, 2020, p. 8).

According to him, all these viruses are the product of the increasingly unbalanced coexistence between human beings and wild animals, which, due to the systematic destruction of their natural habitats, are forced to seek shelter and food for their survival outside of wild areas, in anthropized locations. The problematic issue here is not necessarily the bats or other wild animals, but their habitats invaded by

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<sup>two</sup>Retrieved in <https://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2021/05/05/bolsonaro-volta-a-insinuar-que-a-china-would-have-created-coronavirus-on-purpose.ghtml>.

human settlements, constantly modified by human action and destroyed as a result of the unrestrained exploitation carried out by agribusiness.

Where the initial focus of the latest epidemics emerged was precisely where natural areas suffered a strong ecological imbalance, combined with the increased proximity of domestic herds to wild animals victimized by their habitats being invaded and devastated by agricultural expansion. The impoverishment of biodiversity as a consequence of the deforestation of native forests, caused by the predatory advance of the agricultural frontier, leads to the weakening of the health of wild animals that begin to survive under severe environmental pressures (LAYRARGUES, 2020, p. 9).

By compromising the ecosystem, biodiversity is impoverished, which represents a natural layer of protection against zoonoses. As countless natural habitats continue to be destroyed, the tendency is for diseases transmitted from wild animals to humans to become increasingly common in the world. However, what has been observed in Brazil is the increase in deforestation in large proportions, leading to the loss of biodiversity and favoring the reproduction of vectors (WELTERS; GARCIA, 2020).

Between February and June last year, deforestation alerts increased by 49% compared to the period from 2017 to 2019<sup>3</sup>. Climate change is also related to the emergence of new epidemics, because the melting of glaciers contributes to the return of ancient viruses trapped in them for a long time.

This isn't something about secret laboratories that produce biological weapons, it's really something about the natural world. But from the ecologically unbalanced natural world: the 2013 Ebola outbreak in West Africa is the result of significant forest losses due to industrial agriculture that drove wildlife to roam impoverished forest fragments and then approach human settlements; avian influenza is related to intensive poultry farming and the Nipah virus, for example, emerged due to the intensification of pig farming and fruit production in Malaysia, with massive forest fires as the trigger for the outbreak (LAYRARGUES, 2020, p. 8).

The consumption of raw domestic and wild animals, sold openly in markets with large circulation of human beings, creates favorable conditions for zoonoses, and is at the origin of the current pandemic. It is estimated that this type of market will only grow, motivated mainly by the extravagances of the new Chinese local middle class, as well as by the illegal international trade in smuggled wild animal meat (LAYRARGUES, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Withdrawn in: <https://revistaqalileu.globo.com/Ciencia/Meio-Ambiente/noticia/2020/08/como-pandemia-contributed-to-increase-deforestation.html>. Accessed on: 10 Nov. 2021.

Already in the early stages of the pandemic, when social isolation measures and restrictions on economic activities were enacted, the world recorded a decrease in air pollution and greater environmental quality. In 2020, Brazilian cities such as São Paulo and Paraná had a significant drop in the emission of polluting gases due to reduced car circulation and factory closures.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, if the amount of pollutants released into the air decreased, there was a significant increase in the production of hospital waste, which is just as harmful to the population and the environment. According to Souza (2020, p. 70), “in Brazil, the adequate management and handling of waste is still one of the challenges of basic sanitation, with an extensive volume still without adequate disposal in ditches, dumps and streets”.

Investment in large infrastructures has been widely justified through the rhetoric of development, and nowadays, under the guise of sustainable development, a concept “which, in a far from naive way, creates a false notion of reconciliation between capitalism and ecological issues” (VIZEU; MENEGHETTI; SEIFER T, 2012, p. 569).

Even environmentalists from different movements accepted to dialogue with the notion of sustainable development, because it suggested a less savage development and concerned with meeting human needs. However, I read a mistake. As Freire and Vaz (2020, p. 10) highlight:

The concept of sustainable development, which at first glance intends to guarantee the maintenance of life and preservation of resources, actually represents a collision course. If the references of resource exploration and consumption that have guided the way of life of advanced economy countries in recent decades are maintained, what we will have is, in more or less time, the destruction of the planet.

In favor of the capitalist development model, for a long time the environment supported perverse patterns of exploitation of natural resources without any respect for environmental laws. “We are faced, once again, with the prevalence of economic logic over all other spheres” (FERNANDES; PAULA, 2020, p. 137). But, now more than ever, nature has shown clear signs of exhaustion, and it is clear that the current model of capitalist development remains (un)sustainable (FREIRE; VAZ, 2020).

Those who suffer most from the neoliberal offensive, whether in the field of the environment or health, are the most vulnerable, most of whom survive in inappropriate places,

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<sup>4</sup>Taken from: <https://g1.globo.com/pr/parana/noticia/2021/02/03/poluicao-no-parana-diminui-e-qualidade-do-ar-improve-in-2020-diz-iat.qhtml>. Accessed on: 10 Nov. 2021.

inadequate housing, without water and basic sanitation. Simple measures such as washing your hands, using a mask and using alcohol gel, minimum hygiene and protection conditions during the pandemic, constitute real challenges for a large part of the country's peripheral and marginalized population. Not only does it suffer from material deprivation, but it is also more exposed to environmental disasters, in addition to directly depending on what nature produces (OLIVEIRA, 2013).

Therefore, there is no way to disassociate the pandemic from environmental degradation in its intersection zone with the capitalist system. In relation to both phenomena, there are public debates and government practices guided by a rationality imported from the neoliberal economic arena, which goes beyond the limits of the production arena to enter several other areas of life in society. The pandemic also did not represent any harm for the agricultural sectors, as the Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles, rightly highlighted, “the opportunity opened up by the pandemic, which strongly attracts the attention of the press, was taken advantage of” to “pass the herd and changing all the rules and simplifying [environmental] standards (...) in a big way” (ALESSI, 2020 apud FERNANDES; PAULA, 2020, p. 139).

What is observed is that both in the environmental issue and in the health crisis, discourses emerge and place the market as the one that must find the necessary solutions to overcome the crisis, when in fact the big problem of the crisis is precisely the fragility of this economic and social system. in force.

### **Final considerations**

In the Brazilian legal and constitutional understanding, the right to life is a fundamental right and the premise of society, since it is impossible to exercise any other right in the absence of human life. Along this path, it is worth highlighting that all sectors of society, education or politics, are sectors materialized by the action of human beings, this means that, without individuals, there is no concrete movement of social life.

It's no different with the economy. It is not a system alien to the actions of subjects in time and space, but a product of collective life, linked to other social sectors, in such a way that a collapse in the Unified Health System (SUS) would also end up causing irreversible damage to the entire the country's economic system. Therefore, the dichotomy between saving

lives and save the market implemented by government sectors and denialist private sectors is a fallacy.

However, it is not at all a fallacy created by unprepared or ignorant people, but one that is part of a political strategy of the dominant classes in defense of the interests of capital. Between the lines of this speech, it is possible to conclude that, firstly, without workers there is no production of wealth, because if they stop, economic activities also stop, and secondly, the logic of the capitalist system takes life as a secondary priority and prioritizes the profits of big businesspeople.

But what does this have to do with the pandemic and environmental issues? The text showed that capitalism, with its wild and predatory rhythm in relation to natural resources, is capable of destroying all existing biodiversity, and consequently, the protective layer of the environment. In the name of unbridled exploitation, nature is doomed to succumb and along with it the entire population. The origins of viruses like the one that currently plagues us lie precisely in the predatory action of human beings on the habitats of wild animals.

Given these records, it is assumed that we still have an environmentally unsustainable development economy. It is a system that is sustained by unbridled exploitation, whether exploitation of human beings or nature itself, of exacerbated consumption and predatory production.

The pandemic is an exceptional moment, but it is not responsible for the social and environmental problems that plague humanity. We need to rethink the social organization and the production model that we want beyond this new moment. The slowdown imposed by isolation was an emergency measure, it is imperative to reorganize society from a perspective that is truly sustainable and prioritizes human life.

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