

**THREE TIMES DENIAL: CLIMATE COLLAPSE, EROSION OF DEMOCRACY
AND PANDEMIC**

**TRÊS VEZES NEGAÇÃO: COLAPSO CLIMÁTICO, CORROSÃO DA DEMOCRACIA E
PANDEMIA**

**TRES VECES NEGACIÓN: COLAPSO CLIMÁTICO, CORROSIÓN DE LA
DEMOCRACIA Y PANDEMIA**



Amaro FLECK¹

e-mail: amarofleck@hotmail.com

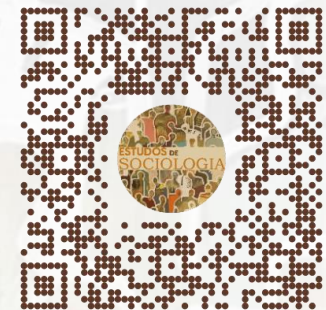


Eduardo Soares Neves SILVA²

e-mail: eduardosns@ufmg.br

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¹ Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte – MG – Brazil. Professor in the Department of Philosophy. PhD in Philosophy (UFSC).

² Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte – MG – Brazil. Professor in the Department of Philosophy. PhD in Philosophy (UFMG).

ABSTRACT: The Covid-19 pandemic was experienced, at least in Brazil, as part of a triple apocalypse, alongside the erosion of democracy and the climate collapse. The present essay aims to illuminate some similarities and differences between each of these three apocalypses, focusing on how they feed each other and generate a very similar mode of denialism.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19. Climate collapse. Erosion of democracy. Brazil.

RESUMO: *A pandemia do Covid-19 foi vivenciada, ao menos no Brasil, como uma parte de um triplo apocalipse, ao lado da corrosão da democracia e do colapso climático. O presente ensaio almeja iluminar algumas semelhanças e diferenças entre cada um destes três apocalipses, focando em especial em como eles se retroalimentam e geram um modo bastante similar de negacionismo.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Covid 19. Colapso climático. Corrosão da democracia. Brasil.*

RESUMEN: *La pandemia de Covid-19 se ha vivido, al menos en Brasil, como parte de un triple apocalipsis, junto con la corrosión de la democracia y el colapso climático. El presente ensayo tiene como objetivo iluminar algunas similitudes y diferencias entre cada uno de estos tres apocalipsis, centrándose en particular en cómo se retroalimentan y generan un modo muy similar de negacionismo.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Covid 19. Colapso climático. Corrosión de la democracia. Brasil.*

I

The fall of the Berlin Wall, on 9 November 1989, is the greatest symbol of the hope with which our era began: finally a unified world, governed by liberal democratic governments on a local scale, and by multilateral organizations on a global scale. The end of the cold war with the collapse of the really existing socialism removed the fear of a nuclear war and authorized the belief that a free market regime and representative democracy could guarantee the inclusion, at least in reasonable levels of quality of life, of Asians, Africans and Latin Americans. Six days later, Brazilians voted again for president, after twenty-nine years.

It certainly was not the emancipated life many dreamed of: it was not the realm of freedom in which work would be abolished or reduced to an insignificant minimum; it was not the utopia in which one could hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, herd in the evening and, after dinner, criticize. But it was something. And the simple promise of being safe from tyrants in uniform, whether olive green like the military here, or one-party bureaucrats, was not something to be sniffed at. Added to a world without hunger and without wars, it was not little. What remains of this beginning of the century? With how many nightmares did an illusion break?

Thirty years later, here we are: at the end of a pandemic that was unable to be contained or mitigated by elected despots, and this in an increasingly hotter world that tends, therefore, to have more and more extreme events. How did we get here? In this essay, we would like to develop some reflections on part of the answer. For this, we will articulate three concerns: that of the last two years (2020-2021), with the pandemic; that of the decade, with the erosion of democracy and the rise of neo-fascism; that of the century, with the collapse of the climatic regime that served as the mainstay of our civilization. Nuno Ramos (2020) recently said that Brazil faces a double apocalypse: coronavirus and Bolsonaro. Unfortunately it is triple.

II

In a developed, technological society, containing a pandemic is not such a difficult task, at least in terms of avoiding the tragedies of past pandemics. Especially when there has been time to prepare and one can count on the experience of countries that have already gone through critical moments. Just follow the advice of scientists (which is more or less consensual) and repeat what worked elsewhere. Closing borders, imposing quarantines and periods of stricter confinement, mass testing, isolating cases, producing the items that will be needed to face the pandemic and reopening (masks, respirators, tests, protective equipment), developing vaccines and previously acquire a varied portfolio of vaccines being developed elsewhere. The goal is to flatten the curve: stop the virus from spreading and, as far as possible, make it disappear. The issue is to get the right moment for each measure. This is all kind of obvious, the harder it is to get people to stay at home. This requires slightly more complicated measures: ensuring that they receive an income so they do not have to work; provide clear and accurate information; monitor and ensure that social isolation is being respected. It is true that quarantines and confinements will bring a blow to the economy, but here too correct measures flatten the curve of recessions, depressions, unemployment. Even poorly developed and poor societies managed to cope. Why did societies like the United Kingdom, the United States, and, above all, Brazil fail?

Katharine Hayhoe (2020, n.p., our translation) recently summed up the stages of denial in a tweet: “It's not real. It's not us. It's not so bad. It's too expensive to fix. Here's a great solution (which doesn't work). And – oh no! It's too late. You should have warned me earlier”. It is a summary of failure: it starts with: “it's just a little flu, it won't do anything, it will only kill people who are already on the edge of the grave”; goes on to: “yes, it is serious, it will kill a lot of people, but many more will die of hunger or the economic consequences of the quarantine”; and then to: “if everyone wears a mask, we can return to normality; chloroquine will save!”; until finally reaching the point of lamentation: “we could have done something earlier, but now it's too late”. Denial works to buy time (or rather, to waste it): it postpones the actions that need to be taken. But this postponement is fatal in a pandemic: acting too late is innocuous. Once the virus has already spread, the measures have to be several times more drastic to have a smaller effect. Denial also works to polish brutality: instead of consciously saying “yes, a million or two people are going to die, but there are too many people in the world, and this will improve our welfare bills and shorten the unemployment queue” or even “Stopping the economy now will make my re-election blow up or shorten my impeachment process”, or even “it is possible

to place the burden of this crisis on mayors and governors, undermining my potential opponents”, he disguises himself, also to himself: “I have values, my decisions, even if apparently hard and insensitive, were always to save lives”. Barbarism sometimes knows how to behave at the table (HAYHOE, 2020).

But what if Hayhoe (2020, n.p., our translation), an American scientist, is not talking about the pandemic, but about the authoritarian threat that hangs over her country (and also, obviously, over ours)? Is not the scheme more or less the same? “No, Trump and Bolsonaro are not a threat to liberal democracy, the institutions are working; they are not a Mussolini, a Franco, a Putin, a Kim Jong-un”; “it may be a bitter medicine, but that alone will solve our economic crisis”; “the crisis will be even greater with the instability caused by any attempt to remove them from command”; “they will be tutored by the military, the ideological wing will yield to the technical wing, there will be a white parliamentary system”; “now it's too late, the way is to accept this new regime or this new situation”. Time for action is lost, but the subject in denial is not sad: perhaps the result was her unconfessed desire (HAYHOE, 2020).

Neither. Hayhoe (2020, n.p.) is an atmospheric scientist and, in this capacity, became a climate activist. What she summarized are not the stages of denial of the pandemic or those of democratic corrosion, but those of climate change: “the world is not hotter, it is the thermostats that are no longer in the wilderness to be now on the edge of parking lots, on asphalt”; “climate changes have always existed, they are the result of variations in solar radiation, they do not have anthropic causes”; “a warmer planet will also bring advantages: it will create new maritime routes in the Arctic, we will plant corn in Siberia or coffee in Greenland”; “we can't stop burning fossil fuels, the economic damage will be catastrophic, and climate warming is just an academic concern, something we're going to worry about in 500 years”; “geoengineering solutions (climate intervention) will do the job: just throw aerosols into the high atmosphere or tons of iron into the sea”; until it ends in regret: “now it's too late”. But if one can gain something by keeping trade open, eventually a re-election; or creating an authoritarian regime; climate denialism is purely suicidal: who benefits from a planet made inhospitable? Was he sincere yet insane?

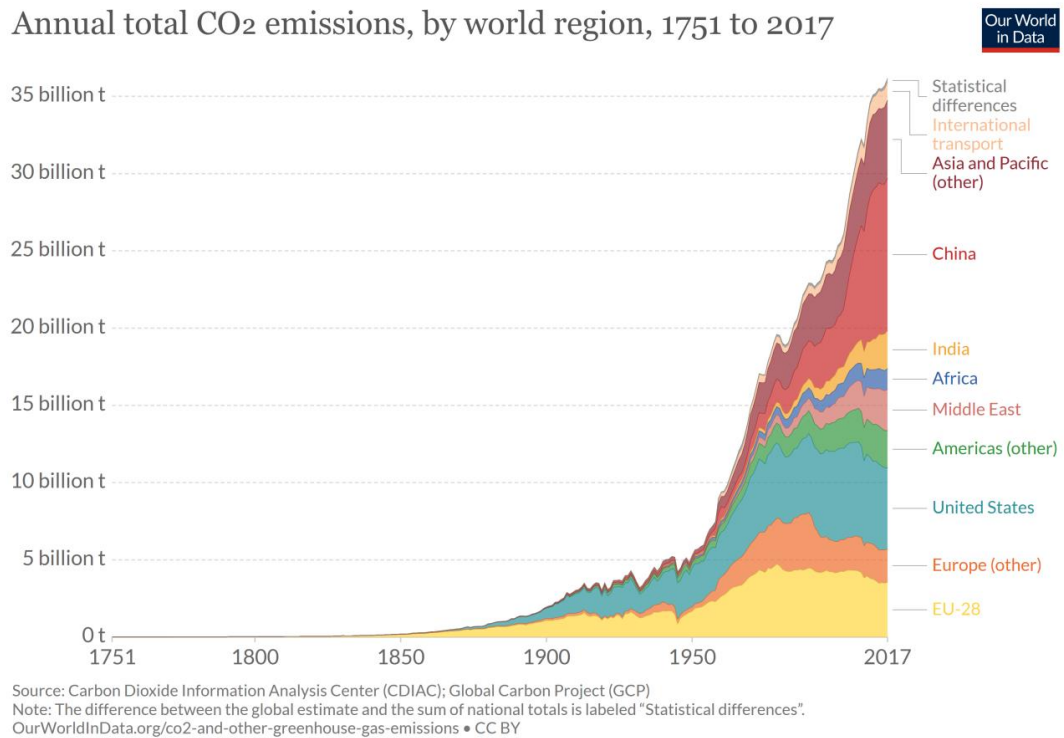
Freud told an anecdote about the neighbor who is accused of having returned a borrowed kettle damaged: “first, he says that he returned it in perfect condition; secondly, that the kettle was already leaky when he borrowed it; thirdly, that he never borrowed his neighbor's kettle” (FREUD, 2019, p. 178, our translation). It is difficult to believe in the denier's sincerity, since he passes, successively, through the different stages: “the planet is not warming; if it heats up

it's not our fault; and even if it were, it wouldn't be a problem"; "our democratic institutions are working; democracy was already eroded; a little authoritarianism will do you good"; "the pandemic will not cause greater damage, it's just the flu; the costs of quarantine and confinement are too great; we did everything we could". But what advantage does the denialist get with his denial? Does he want the end of humanity? Or is he simply a narcissist who seeks the greatest immediate profit, and does not mind leaving scorched earth for generations to come? Or, still, is he a subject averse not only to evidence, but also to the most elementary logical reasoning, so that his understanding must consider his lack of rationality?

III

If the climate collapse is the problem of the century, it will not be too much to make a brief interlude and show the present stage of the collapse of what is a necessary condition of our existence. According to data compiled by the website Our World in Data, between 1751 and 2017 (RITCHIE; ROSER; ROSADO, 2020) humans were responsible for the emission of about 1531 billion tons of carbon dioxide, the main (but not only) greenhouse gas. The data frightens, but also hides: it dilutes emissions over an excessively long time. The fact is that it is concentrated in recent years: it was big in the last seven decades, colossal in the last three or four. The problem we have just begun to face has been brewing since the beginning of the post-war period. In 1751 mankind burned 9 million tons of carbon dioxide; in 1851, 198 million; in 1951, 6 billion and 226 million. In the year the wall fell and in which we returned to vote for president there were more than 22 billion, and in 2017, 36. Two thirds of the carbon dioxide emitted went into the air after the fall of the wall.

Figure 1 – CO₂ emissions by region

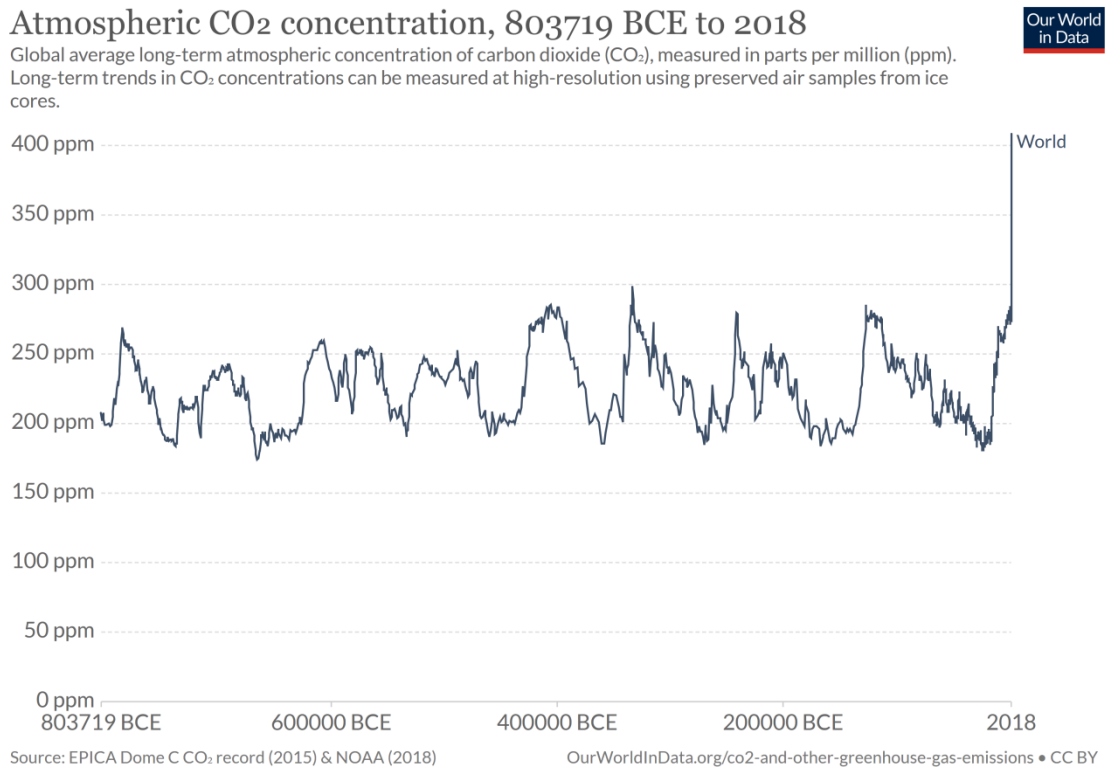


Source: Ritchie and Roser (2020)

A considerable part of these gases is still in our atmosphere. Since the middle of the last century, the concentration of carbon dioxide has been measured daily at an observatory in Hawaii. When Charles David Keeling began his measurements in 1958, he found 315 parts of carbon dioxide in every million particles in the atmosphere, now, in October 2022, the concentration is 416 parts per million.

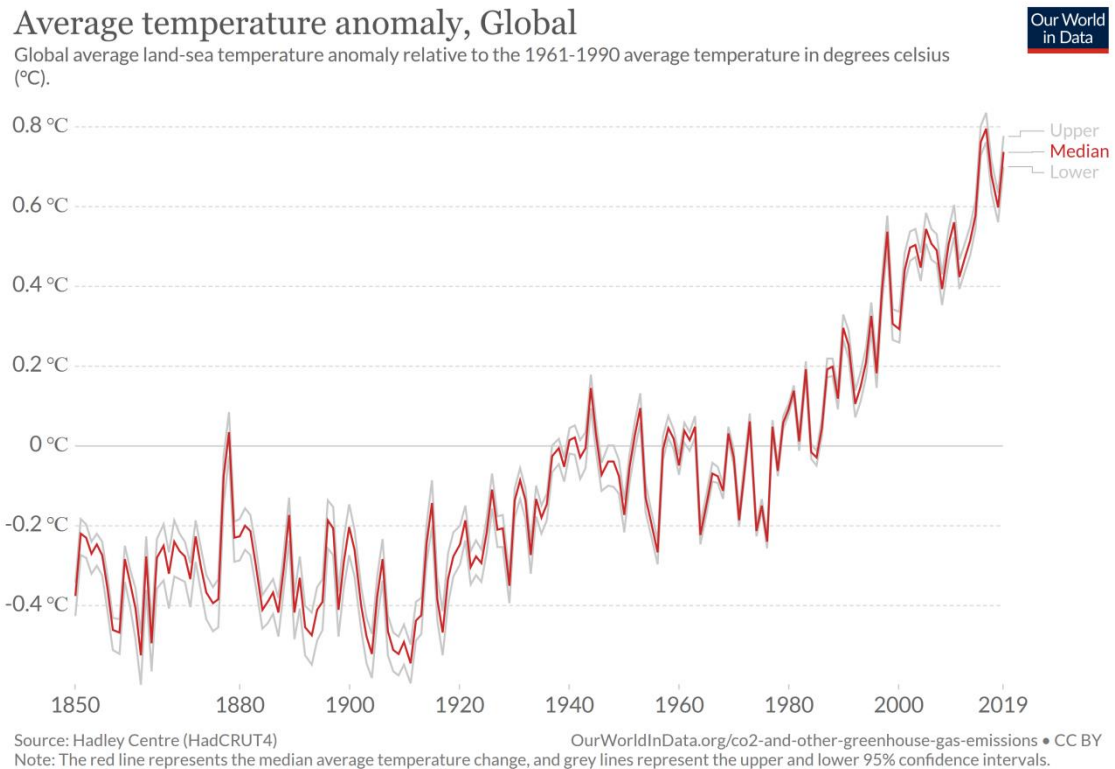
But climate science is able to reconstruct the graph quite accurately up to thousands of years ago, thanks, above all, to ice cores. In this case the picture changes a lot, instead of a single rise we find eight hundred thousand years of continuous variations between 180 parts per million and less than 300. It was only in 1909 that this plateau was beaten. In 2015 there were already 400. Such an amount of carbon was only in the atmosphere during the Pliocene, 3.3 million years ago.

Figure 2 – Atmospheric CO₂ concentrations continue to rise



Source: Ritchie, Roser and Rosado (2020)

In the Pliocene the planet was three degrees warmer than the average pre-industrial temperature. There is a correlation between the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the Earth's temperature: the more carbon, the hotter. Since the industrial revolution, the average temperature on the planet has increased by just over 1 degree centigrade. However, this increase has been rapid, as shown in the graph below.

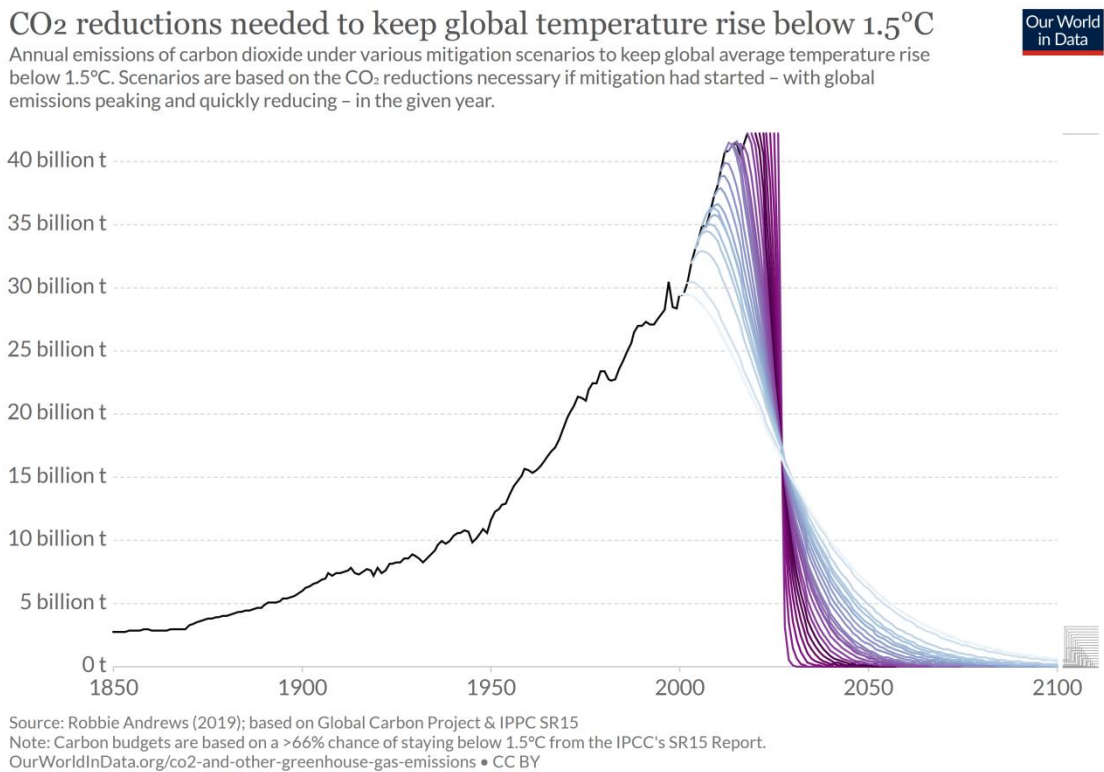
Figure 3 – Médias globais de temperatura aumentaram mais de 1°C desde a era pré-industrial

Source: Ritchie, Roser and Rosado (2020)

The increase in temperature is not the only effect of the climate collapse: the seas rise, become more acidic, species become extinct at an accelerated rate, extreme events (cyclones, storms, droughts, etc.) become more intense and frequent. But the increase in temperature serves as a good criterion for assessing risks: now, on a planet one degree warmer, rains of more than one hundred millimeters are becoming common in large cities, as well as prolonged droughts. Efficient urban planning, however, can mitigate the worst effects of this. Nevertheless, on a planet two degrees warmer, no urban planning will do: in a situation like this, it is almost certain that we will need to abandon the metropolises, and that vast and populous regions will become uninhabitable (generating very serious problems with migration). Three degrees seems to be the threshold of what an organized society, a civilization, would support: from there the climate would be so hostile that agriculture on a large scale would be impossible, and on a small scale, unlikely. It would mean that human existence would need to adapt again to a hunting and gathering stage, only in a much less abundant world. From four degrees of warming, the survival of the human species itself would be put at risk, and the probability of its extinction would grow with each degree above that. Therefore, the debate has been on how to do everything possible to limit this warming to one and a half degrees (this was

the target established in the Paris Agreement [BRASIL, 2015]). A world that warmer is not pleasant, it has severe risks, but it is still a world. For that, the reduction in the emission of carbon dioxide would have to be radical. The graphic below shows the dimension of the cut.

Figure 4 – CO₂ reductions needed to keep global temperature rise below 1.5°C



Source: Ritchie, Roser and Rosado (2020)

IV

The pandemic has managed to make imaginable the size of the blow needed to put the world on a path of declining emissions. 2020 was the first year with a significant decrease in pollutant emissions (in general, when there are serious financial crises, as in 2008, pollutant emissions decrease, but not significantly). To limit warming to 1.5 degrees centigrade, it would be necessary to cut emissions by half by the middle of the decade (starting from 42 billion tons, emitted in 2019), and to a quarter by the end of the decade. Current estimates show that, due to the pandemic, the reduction in the global emission of carbon dioxide was of the order of 5%, that is, in 2020, around 2.5 billion tons of CO₂ were emitted less than in 2019 (AMBROSE, 2020). This in a scenario of global economic contraction of 3.3% (VITTA, 2021) (in Brazil the drop in GDP was 4.1% [ELIAS, 2021]). An emissions reduction of this size is little less than

what would be needed to limit warming to 1.5 degrees. In this case, not only would we need there not to be a rebound (that is, a greater emission when leaving confinement, recovering the “lost time” of production), but also that there was a cumulative effect: that is, that in 2021 an epidemic would occur most severe that would cause a twice as large reduction, and in 2022 three times, and so on. If the correlation between the drop in economic growth and the decrease in the emission of pollutants is not necessary, it has still been quite accurate (that is, until today there has not been a significant decline in emissions without an equally significant retraction of the global economy).

Future climate scenarios are the result of computational modeling that deal with an astonishing amount of data. Yet there are purely speculative elements there: we do not know, for example, how much carbon and methane are trapped under the frozen ground in arctic regions (the permafrost), or maybe we do not want to know (estimates suggest that it would be an amount of methane that would cause damage equivalent to 1000 billion tons of carbon dioxide), and which will be released as this soil thaws. Nor do we know how much warming will contribute to the savannization of the Amazon, and how much this would feed back warming itself³. In general, the standard scenarios modeled by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have been shown to be quite accurate, although they are often too conservative (that is, they are confident that the worst combined effects will not happen). In summary, it is unreasonable to expect that we can afford to emit another 300 billion tons of carbon dioxide and still not have a planet above 1.5 degrees of warming, but neither is it certain that if we emit only these 300 billion tons the planet will not toast.

V

The sequence of covers dedicated to the Brazilian situation of the British magazine *The Economist* summarizes recent Brazilian history: in November 2009 Christ the Redeemer, like a rocket, ascended to the skies under the title: “Brazil takes off” (*THE ECONOMIST*, 2009). Brazil took off. At the end of Lula's second term, the country was gradually eradicating hunger and extreme poverty; it was a model of successful policies to combat poverty; and saw the social ascension of disadvantaged people who started to compose an enigmatic class C, a group of ex-poor people that was not exactly a new middle class. Far from an ephemeral improvement, the country seemed to be following a sustainable path of growth and inclusion: good economic

³ On the subject, we recommend the interview of Carlos Nobre (2020) with *Estadão*.

indexes, debt reduction, improvements in income and income distribution despite the global crisis.

That's why the second image looks like an aborted dream. Christ, the postcard of the wonderful city, tore through the skies like a runaway rocket before an announced tragedy. "Has Brazil blown it?" (THE ECONOMIST, 2013). Did Brazil screw up? It was September 2013, and Brazil had a long past ahead of it. Between the two covers are several events: the second wave of the 2008 economic crisis was much more devastating here than the first, bringing down the prices of the commodities responsible for the good times; this brought the need for an economic rearrangement, with a development policy (the New Economic Matrix) based largely on tax breaks that frustrated any recovery; and in this scenario, ideological disputes intensified: the creation of the National Truth Commission, instituted to investigate human rights violations that occurred mainly during the military regime, bothered the barracks, the greatest beneficiaries of the amnesty law; timid policies to combat homophobia, as well as the assimilation of stable homoaffective unions to civil marriage by the Federal Supreme Court, which occurred when the country was governed for the first time by a woman, tortured in the dictatorship and defender of feminist causes, created the scenario of cultural war in which the space for a new right begins to be organized⁴.

The triptych ends in 2019, with a layer of scorched earth in which what remains of a cut tree trunk forms the map of Brazil. The title: "Deathwatch for the Amazon" (THE ECONOMIST, 2019), the agony or death vigil of the Amazon, the largest tropical forest in the world, which was once again being voraciously devastated. The six years that separate the third cover from the second cover were particularly cruel: the 2014 election split the country; corruption scandals revealed by a no less corrupt and scandalous judicial process (Car Wash - Lava Jato) intensified the split; the defeated candidate did not recognize the result of the election; the campaign to impeach the newly re-elected president began as soon as the ballot was cleared; the president was removed through a parliamentary coup; the vice president took over with a radical political turn but quickly became just as unpopular, if not more so; former president Lula (PT) was convicted, arrested and prevented from running for president, being the favorite according to polls at the time; Jair Bolsonaro (PL), a federal deputy from the lower

⁴ The new Brazilian right-wing rights were ethnographed by Camila Rocha de Oliveira (2019) in her doctoral thesis entitled "*Menos Marx, mais Mises*": *uma gênese da nova direita brasileira (2006-2018)* ("Less Marx, more Mises": a genesis of the new Brazilian right-wing (2006-2018)), defended in 2019. Also based on field studies, Isabela de Oliveira Kalil portrays the kaleidoscope of Bolsonaroism support groups in his report *Quem são e no que acreditam os eleitores de Jair Bolsonaro* (Who are and in what believe Jair Bolsonaro voters) (KALIL, 2018).

clergy, defender not only of the military dictatorship, but of its darkest expedients (particularly of torture and the disappearance of bodies), is elected president, stating, during the campaign, that he would shoot opponents; the judge responsible for Lula's conviction and imprisonment becomes the new government's minister of justice.

The ascension of Jair Bolsonaro (PL) to the presidency of the republic resembles, at least at first sight, a sequence of victories for the extreme right around the world: of Donald Trump in the USA; by Viktor Orbán in Hungary; of Recep Erdogan in Türkiye; of Narendra Modi in India, among others. In all these cases, one can speak of an authoritarian, autocratic populism, which mixes doses of nationalism and xenophobia with strong links to sects or religious movements that border on fanaticism. As much as there are differences in each of these situations, it is notable that this constitutes a 'wave', and that this authoritarian populist wave puts the validity of the democratic institutions in these countries at risk.

Levitsky and Ziblatt, in *How Democracies Die*, argue that we are seeing a new form of democratic corrosion, which no longer needs to resort to the classic expedient of coups d'état using military force. On the contrary, corrosion would occur through gradual changes in the rules of the game, so that “the erosion of democracy is, for many, almost imperceptible” (LEVITSKY; ZIBLATT, 2018, p. 17, our translation). The authors observe that the ascension of the candidate to autocrat usually obeys some constants: a) the support either from consolidated parties or from recognized statesmen (in the Brazilian case, it fell not to a recognized statesman, but to an economist well liked by the markets, Paulo Guedes, the role of guarantor of the Bolsonaro government); b) a prior fraying of the political system, mainly due to two unwritten rules of democracy losing their validity: mutual tolerance, the perception that the adversary has an equal right to compete for power and to govern in case of victory (in our case, this tolerance was undermined by the non-recognition of defeat by Aécio Neves (PSDB) and by the campaign to impeach Dilma Rousseff (PT) which began shortly after the counting of the votes that elected her); and the refusal to play the constitutional hard game (biased interpretations of the law, which, although respecting the letter, violate its spirit, using the legislation to paralyze the government; this is the case of the president's dismissal process for a crime of responsibility due to fiscal pedaling, that is, accounting maneuvers that allegedly would violate the fiscal responsibility law).

Even among this group, Jair Bolsonaro represents an extreme case, of an almanac authoritarian, capable of completing all the requirements in lists of authoritarian elements. Perhaps that is why he has already, even during the period of his first term, advanced in the

three terrains where the subversion of the democratic regime takes place, still according to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018): the capture of the judiciary power, the police, the agencies regulators and intelligence services (through rigging; exclusion of employees who are not sympathetic to their ideals; disrespect for the usual procedures for appointing positions); the withdrawal of some opponents (by the most diverse procedures – from bribery and co-optation to marginalization, lawsuits for slander and defamation, creating difficulties for businessmen or important figures who support the opposition); rewriting the rules of the game (reforming the constitution, the electoral system). Evidently, in none of these cases the result is already consummated, but in each of these points occurrences already abound.

It should be noted that the Brazilian democratic corrosion did not occur in an idyllic scenario, despite certain advances obtained during the New Republic. As Wolfgang Streeck rightly observes in “The Return of the Repressed” (2017), the rise of “barbaric populists”, as he ironically calls autocrats (due to the panic that their protectionist measures provoke in the elites), is already taking place worldwide in a post-democratic scenario, after the divorce between capitalist markets and democratic politics. Thus, it is a deepening of a scenario of democratic reversal, in which authoritarian populists take the place then occupied by technocrats responsible mainly for ensuring the returns of creditors, who had already taken over the space in which politicians once dealt with institutionally mediated social conflicts, but dealing mainly with popular demands.

VI

The corrosion of democracy also corrodes the mechanisms capable of containing or mitigating a pandemic. Not only that, it also feeds back on climate breakdown by messing up environmental policies. Brazil's recent history serves as evidence. The inability to fight the pandemic in a minimally efficient way reveals not only the technical incompetence of far-right autocrats, but also the dismantling of the societies they govern.

Two years after the arrival of the coronavirus that causes Covid-19 in Brazil, when we write these lines, the country accounts for almost seven hundred thousand deaths officially caused by the coronavirus (the number is probably underestimated). A result like this is not a road accident. On the contrary, as shown by the report by the Center for Studies and Research on Sanitary Law (CEPEDISA), at the University of São Paulo (USP), in partnership with Conectas Human Rights, this scenario was not obtained through the State's omission in

combating to the pandemic, but for their active participation in the spread of the virus (CEPEDISA, 2021). After all, the federal government's strategy, adopted from the very beginning, was to accelerate contamination by the virus in the belief that this would lead to the desired herd immunity as soon as possible.

Deisy Ventura, Fernando Aith and Rossana Reis (2021) argue that the executive branch carried out: a) propaganda against public health, promoting crowds, combating measures to restrict contagion, such as social isolation and the use of masks, and prescribing medicines without proven effectiveness; b) boycott of the initiatives of governors and mayors, delaying the transfer of resources, referrals for vaccination and the attempt to confiscate inputs acquired by the States; c) normative action to consider as essential the greatest possible number of activities, as well as to veto restrictive measures.

The strategy could not have gone more wrong (if the objective had been to have the lowest possible number of victims): such herd immunity proved not only too costly, to be paid for with too high a number of lives lost, but also illusory, because immunity is ephemeral and does not protect against virus variations (mutations that become more likely when the virus circulates easily). Although other countries also adopted similar strategies, most of them backed off as their problems were revealed. Not Brazil. The result is that Brazil had one of the worst death averages in the entire world.

VII

Something similar could be said about environmental policies. The corrosion of democracy has prevented advances in measures to combat global warming. Worse, it contributed to its backsliding, undermining what little effort had already been made. The Bolsonaro government's environmental policy has been a tragedy. The most visible facet of this involves the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest: both because of the very real risk of the forest becoming impossible, because of the incipient savannization process, and because of the fact that this deforestation is one of the main sources of carbon dioxide emissions. Thus, despite the worldwide drop in emissions that occurred in 2020, Brazil went against the grain and increased its contribution to the climate collapse despite the pandemic and the stoppage of various activities (such as schools, universities, and, for a shorter time, significant part of trade).

As shown by data from the System for Estimating Emissions and Removals of Greenhouse Gases (SEEG), linked to the Climate Observatory, most CO₂ emissions in Brazil

result from changes in land use and forests. As a result, the year in which the country emitted the most carbon dioxide in this millennium was 2003 (SEEG, 2023a), with 2.6 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent, the apex of uncontrolled deforestation in the legal Amazon, when more than 25,000 km² were deforested (TERRA BRASILIS, 2023). From then on, successful policies to combat deforestation were instituted, which were responsible for significant reductions in the following years, reaching the mark of 4,600 km² in 2012 (the year in which the country emitted about 1.4 billion tons of CO₂eq). Since then, deforestation, and consequently emissions, has grown (deforestation: 7.5 thousand km² in 2018, 10.1 thousand km² in 2019, it is estimated that 11.1 thousand km² in 2020; emissions: 1.98 billion tons of CO₂eq in 2018, 2.17 in 2019, the estimate for 2020 is a growth of 10% to 20% [SEEG, 2023a, 2023b]).

VIII

Our hypothesis is that the pandemic is a taster of things to come, a kind of trailer for climate breakdown. Adam Tooze (2020) recently commented that this is the first economic crisis of the Anthropocene. Bruno Latour (2015) observed that the Anthropocene is characterized by instability, by the “intrusion of Gaia”, so that the climate ceases to be a kind of scenario and becomes, itself, the protagonist. If I'm right, perhaps the crisis diagnosis itself no longer makes sense. There are no more crises that erupt, but an instability never experienced, something that prevents any form of planning. This pandemic is the effect of a clumsy way of dealing with the environment. If it reveals something, it is our fragility: how much we depend on conditions that are not assured.

Fighting the pandemic is also a small-scale example of the struggle to mitigate the damage caused by climate breakdown. In these cases, no action is rash: taking supposedly radical measures before tragedy strikes is the right action. Think how simple it would have been to close borders, especially air borders, at the beginning of February 2020 (or, from then on, to have required strict quarantine of everyone arriving from abroad). Think how much less radical the actions would have needed to be, and how much better the scenario would have been if concrete measures had been taken at Eco 92, when the volume of evidence that indicated a severe worsening of the climate crisis was already immense.

But the differences are also important: a single country can manage to control the pandemic; Local actions are efficient to prevent the spread of the virus. In the case of the climate emergency, concerted action on a global scale is needed. With more or less devastating effects,

it can be expected that the pandemic will pass, but the same expectation is not reasonable in the face of climate breakdown.

Brazil, alongside the United States and some countries on the eastern side of Europe, are negative examples of how to deal with the pandemic. We are also the country with the govern who is the paragon of democratic corrosion, an almanac authoritarian, capable of completing the score of any cast of fascist tendencies – the incarnation of the perversion of the will, not its weakness. Action to combat the coronavirus is being erratic: large doses of denialism and misinformation, followed by confusing and conflicting orders with those that were correctly taken by mayors and governors. In the fight against climate collapse, the whole world is a great Brazil. To paraphrase Rodrigo Nunes (2020): Brazil is still the country of the future, but the future has gotten worse.

IX

We conclude with a few words about democratic corrosion and what it has to do with all that has been said here. By now it has become clear that authoritarian populist leaders, right-wing extremists, govern or misgovern the countries that have had the most deaths caused by the pandemic so far – the United States, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Hungary. At first, the relationship is somewhat evident: Trump, Bolsonaro, Johnson and Orban were unable to plan an adequate response to the challenge posed by the virus. This is not surprising: bad policies are expected from bad politicians. But neither is it surprising that the four behaved in a similar way, especially at the beginning of the pandemic: they denied the seriousness of the situation and disdained the radical nature of the measures that would have been necessary to contain the spread of the virus. In short: they did not accept the news and tried to persist in the ordinary life of before. And the pattern repeats itself in their environmental policies. Precisely in this there is an almost organic affinity between such leaders and their constituents.

The capitalist dynamic puts us all at the beginning of a crucial decade because of its threats: on the one hand the collapse of the climate and all its foreseeable effects: famine, mass migrations, extreme events (cyclones, storms), pests and plagues; on the other hand, the automation and digitalization that converts all individuals into potential or real unemployed. And all this in a situation where income and wealth disparities accelerate and living standards decline. In short, a situation in which the future is cancelled. In it, all that remains is to dispute the past: the left with the dream of resurrecting the welfare state and its mechanisms of social

protection; the right with the attempt to rescue the order of a world in which men, as long as they were white and heterosexual, were capable of providing a home full of meaning; and the center pretending that we can live forever in the 1990s, with its promise that half a dozen structural reforms will be able to create a scenario of lasting economic growth, but in this, too, the positions are shuffled: the right becomes revolutionary: it is necessary to change everything so that the old order can be established again; while the left turns conservative: it is necessary to resist changes in order to safeguard existing institutions.

There is no way to dissociate democratic corrosion from the dissemination of the denialist posture, as subjects in extreme denial are among the most staunch defenders of right-wing extremists. Certainly, the denialist posture is the result of several causes, in part epistemic, in other policies: the digitization of communication; the emergence of social networks and their echo chambers (bubbles); the absence of curatorship in the production and verification of information (post-truth); the inability to revise theories even when there is excessive evidence of their failures (as in the case of austerity policies and trickle down economics) and, more specifically, the rise of specialized lies that predominate in the increasingly powerful economic science (Laffer Curve; Cecchini Report; etc. [STREECK, 2017]). We think that a fear of the state of things also enters into account, a “fear of the consequences of the general developments of society” that deals, albeit in an indirect and distorted way, with the feeling of social catastrophe, with the widespread perception that the way of life is not only at risk, but already condemned (ADORNO, 2020).

Therefore, the denialist is not only the cause, but also the consequence of this corrosion. When the future is not disputed, when it presents itself only as a threat, and nostalgia for an imagined past takes the place of utopia, then there is little left for the individual but to deny everything that warns him of the arrival of what cannot be avoided. The pandemic is an appetizer of climate collapse: not by instituting a 'new normal', but by burying the old one for good. The corrosion of climate, democracy, knowledge, society also corrodes the mechanisms that would be able to stop or even reverse these corruptions. The denialist is the one who refuses to mourn, even if he has to live with ghosts for this. But these ghosts, unfortunately, do not just inhabit the lower end of the political spectrum.

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