

INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM OF CONSERVATIVE HEGEMONY AND PARALYSIS OF GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE GOVERNANCE

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In *Sistema internacional de hegemonia conservadora: governança global e democracia na era da crise climática* [International System of Conservative Hegemony: global climate change governance and democracy in the age of climate crisis], Eduardo Viola, Matías Franchini and Thais Lemos Ribeiro explain how and why the climate change crisis may profoundly change the make-up and the dynamics of current international relations.

They start from the premise that climate change is a central civilizing force of our times. That is, it is one of the main elements that define the present and the future of human societies. It is also a fundamental planetary frontier, delimiting a space in which humanity can operate safely.

Thus, the authors use the recent and innovative approach of planetary frontiers to reinforce the argument of the civilizing force of climate change. That is, the notion that planetary frontiers appear as a global and systemic way of addressing sustainability¹. In this context, the main challenge is to find a space for humanity to operate safely. Global governance becomes essential as planetary limits correspond to *global commons*. Without a high level of international cooperation it is impossible to establish and protect a space in which humanity can operate safely.

The concept of a low-carbon green economy seems appropriate to address the issue of planetary frontiers. Therefore, in contrast to the concepts of sustainable development and low-carbon economy, low-carbon green economy appears to be a new paradigm, according to which the global development model should operate within planetary limits and in accordance with the idea of a safe space for humanity. The low-carbon green

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economy points towards prosperity without growth, without ignoring equity. Therefore, there is a significant amount of space for growth for the poorer nations, slightly less for emerging countries and almost zero for developed societies.

Defined in this way, the new paradigm for development imposes strong challenges to governance, both domestically and internationally. At the domestic level, it involves debates and discussions between the State, the market and civil society, each having to adapt their own behavioral logic to the requirements of the planetary system. At the international level, the management of a safe operating zone for humanity needs to be cooperative in order to be efficient and this involves profound changes in the current structures of global governance.

The originality of this work lies in the fact that it characterizes climate change as a civilizing force. In this context, the authors situate climate change at the same level as other processes which are central to the evolution of societies, such as globalization and democracy, and identify the need to reconsider some concepts in International Relations in light of climate change. According to the authors, the incorporation of a climate change variable necessarily leads to changes in the classic notions of civilizing dynamics, democracy, prosperity and the international system. Therefore, it proposes a different way of assessing the quality of democracy, prosperity, wealth and development. Finally, the authors show the importance of rethinking the international system itself which is characterized by them as being dominated by a conservative hegemony.

Thus, the impact of the climate change crisis on social life places it on equal footing with the two other great civilizing forces: globalization and democracy. Whilst there seems to be a positive relationship between democracy and globalization, the relationship between democracy and climate change is less obvious and more complex. Not all democratic countries have a strong climate change agenda, whilst authoritarian countries such as China show a trend toward decarbonization. The future of globalization is directly related to the future of the international system which, according to the authors, seems to be increasingly dependent on providing an answer to the climate problem. Climate change as a guiding light for the international system and as the main civilizing force is therefore the main argument of this book.

In face of the inadequacy of conceptual and theoretical tools to address climate change, the authors highlight four important concepts to analyze how and why climate change alters the systemic governance dynamics and the behavior of agents such as global governance, power, climate change commitment and hegemony. The notion of global governance, for example, is expanded so as to encompass a variety of State and non-State agents acting at different levels: sub-nationally, nationally, trans-nationally and internationally. The concept of power or the strength of nations moves away from a realist interpretation to focus, above all, on the possibilities and capacities of nations, seen as the interaction between the State, the market and civil society which contributes to shaping international politics. Therefore, it can be understood as the capacity particular State actors have to influence the climate process. In this way, in addition to the traditional power resources such as economic, political and military factors, climatic factors are considered, such as the proportion of global emissions,

human and technological capital, as well as energy behavior. Based on the conceptions proposed, the authors analyze the power or strength characteristics of thirty-six powerful nations which are classified as super-powerful (such as China, the United States, the European Union), powerful (Brazil, Korea, Japan, India and Russia) and medium-strength nations.

The commitment towards climate change, on the other hand, relates to the degree of assimilation a particular society has towards climate change as a civilizing force, and explains the way countries are involved in the structure of the global governance of climate change. This concept considers the climate change situation of a particular country and its political behavior as a problem related to climate, both at national and international levels. This definition is essential to identify the action of the State in relation to this civilizing dynamics. Reformist forces are characterized by converging measures such as decarbonization, whereas conservative forces resist the changes needed to stabilize the climate system and maintain a safe space for humanity to operate. Basing themselves on this concept, the authors show that there are three types of powerful nations: reformist (the European Union, Japan and South Korea); conservative (India and Russia) and moderate conservative (Brazil, the United States and China).

It is important to highlight that climate change commitment influences how a political system is classified in democratic terms: a high level democracy is one where there is a high level of acceptance of climate change as a civilizing force. The inclusion of climate change as a civilizing force also means a change in the notion of prosperity. The term should not only focus on wealth, but on how it is obtained. The inclusion of an income index in terms of carbon intensity is, therefore, shown to be fundamental.

Finally, the term hegemony is employed in relation to the predominance of a particular force or a set of forces over a force or a set of forces - once more traditional concepts of international relations are pushed aside, such as those proposed by the classic realist theory, or other versions of realism and that presented by Gramsci.

Thus the authors propose the use of the term "conservative hegemony system" which emerges by synthesizing power (the concept of power) and commitment (expressed as a dialectic between reformism and conservatism), molding systemic governance. The fact that most of the powerful nations are conservative in relation to climate change influences the international system itself. The issue of climate change not only appears as one of the main themes of the international agenda, but reveals challenges to global governance.

At the international level, organizations and other corporative arrangements founded on the principle of strict national sovereignty are not appropriate for addressing current problems in a world that is becoming increasingly globalized and characterized by independent transnational flows between States. These organizations do not reflect the deep level of interdependency between nations and are, therefore, not fit to address problems which can only be managed cooperatively. Thus, the authors highlight the obsolescence of international institutions established within the United Nations to address climate change, arguing that they only establish vague legal agreements with little or no practical results.

According to the authors, only a small number of nations are willing to assume this responsibility and this shows that the international system is dominated by conservative forces. One of the most structural of requirements is that most nations need to gradually abandon sovereignty as planetary limits start to operate as *global commons* and significantly increase the need for joined up and cooperative solutions. Thus, the solution for the climate problem is at the heart of global governance.

However, the authors argue that humanity only reacts to immediate threats which are very tangible or to extreme immorality, and as a result social institutions are set up to work within the short-term. On the other hand, the foundations of sustainable development are to be found in long-termism. Therefore, whilst global public awareness on this topic increases rapidly, political solutions have been conservative and inefficient as was clearly observed in Rio+20. Environmental governance deficit is a reflection of governance barriers at the international level, dominated by conservative and nationalist forces. The international system characterized by a conservative hegemony is unable to provide solutions to problems rooted in the profound interdependency of current societies which in order to be addressed require, more than ever, a cooperative approach. The core issue is an efficient structure for global governance institutions which will only be possible if the main actors within this system move towards reformism, accepting the limitations of their powers and sovereignty in order to develop long-term global common goods. This scenario is unlikely in the short and medium term.

There is no doubt that the concept of the conservative hegemony of the international system is appropriate to characterize the current power game between powerful nations at an international level. Conservatism explains the lack of engagement of a large number of countries in the move towards a low-carbon green economy and this has a negative impact on global governance. In as far as the climate is made up of *global commons*, isolated actions of a particular state do not contribute to solving climate change issues. The actions of a small group of countries do not contribute towards a solution and they are also not encouraged to do so, due to, amongst other factors, economic losses.

Adopting cleaner technologies by reformist countries involve higher costs which affect the prices of traded goods and therefore the competitiveness of exported goods. Problems associated to industrial competitiveness may in part explain the conservatism which permeates the international system in that many countries are unwilling to pay this cost. Thus, currently the transition towards a low-carbon green economy depends, above all, on the benevolence of reformist countries who are willing to pay for the costs of this transition, whereas conservative countries jump on the bandwagon, both in relation to what is good for a cleaner planet and in relation to the resulting increase in the commercial competitiveness of their products, which although more polluting are also cheaper.

Innovation on the part of the authors lies in building theoretical and conceptual tools to analyze both international cooperation in relation to climate issues and global governance in its current form. Contrary to what is believed, the growing interdependency of States has made cooperation even less likely, at least in the short-term. In this context, problems common to humanity and, therefore, solutions which require everyone's cooperation seem a long way off, given that within a system characterized by conservative

hegemony no country seems to be willing to deal with and pay the costs of a systemic transition.

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Note

i Nine frontiers are identified, seven of which can be quantified: climate change, acidification of the oceans; ozone; the bio-geo-chemical cycles of nitrogen and phosphorus; fresh water usage; changes in land use; biodiversity; chemical pollution and aerosol concentration in the atmosphere. Three of these nine planetary frontiers have already been crossed: climate change, the rate of biodiversity loss and the nitrogen cycle.