

Covid-19 and the new global chaos

Breno Bringel (25th June 2020)

Introduction

We are living in a moment of global chaos. Chaos does not mean the complete absence of some kind of order, but suggests a level of turbulence, fragility and contemporary geopolitical uncertainty in the face of multiple "global risks" and possible destinations. Unpredictability and instability become the norm. This refers not only to greater volatility in the face of threats, but also to the very dynamics of political forces and contemporary capitalism. The world order that emerged with the fall of the Berlin Wall and sought to expand formal democracy in the world (despite how often the major powers destabilized and interrupted it whenever they thought it was necessary) hand in hand with neoliberal globalization, in a kind of "[global social-liberalism](#)". A narrative of global "prosperity" and "stability" was created that confined democracy to capitalism. This strategy is now being challenged in light of the prospect that the international market can hold up well, even with authoritarian drifts, neo-fascism and constant violations of individual rights. If the pandemic ends up producing a geopolitical shift, it would then be necessary to discuss some of the main emerging geopolitical trends and patterns, as well as the contentious scenarios in dispute at the global level. That is the focus of this article.

Neither de-globalization nor the end of capitalist globalization

We are not facing the end of globalization and the emergence of "de-globalization", although we are possibly facing the end of capitalist globalization as we know it. The degree of radicalization of the territorial and financial expansion of capital during the last decades has been made possible by the creation of an agreement championed by the West – with the United States at the helm (even as its hegemony is on the decline) – which has allowed for the creation of dominant narrative of growth. This was attuned to the unlimited expansion of transnational companies and to the approval of diverse groups that hold power and national and international organizations. Its unfolding took place, as is well known, by removing all barriers in accordance with a grammar of deregulation, flexibilization and liberalization that secured neoliberalism's place around the world, while destroying the environment and the social life. With it came a process of cultural struggle to entrench neoliberal globalization as a model that was not only economic but also societal. Despite intense criticism of the alter-globalization movement and a host of resistance movements – and how much the 2008 crisis uncovered the most tragic and lethal dimension of financial capitalism and globalization – the response was not an alternative to it, but a radicalization of the model. The losses were shared with the entire population and states applied policies of adjustment and austerity while bailing out the banks, which in turn privatized the benefits.

Capitalist globalization was thus able to follow its course of accumulation and plunder, deepening the extractive model. The recent scenario, amplified in times of pandemic, seems to be a little different: among the different sectors of the right and extreme-right, "anti-globalists" and nationalist positions emerge everywhere, whether in the core of the system, in the "emerging powers", or in peripheral countries, seeking to reorganize capitalism in a more closed and authoritarian way. There is no single strategy or course. In fact, [Luis González Reyes and Lucía Bárcena](#) show how the three main hubs of capitalist globalization are following different strategies. The United States promotes protectionist policies while, at the same time, strengthening the trade war with China, which, like the European Union, seeks to strengthen global economic chains, although in different ways. In the first case, by pushing an ambitious plan of economic expansion, in which the new Silk Road initiative stands out. In the second, with trade negotiations and bilateral investments. Meanwhile, international trade, privatizations and capital flows may stumble over more public regulations proposed by different actors; dependence on inputs and products from other countries (visible in the pandemic with masks or respirators, but in reality extends, in many cases, to essential products), is prompting many countries to revise their policies, thinking about self-sufficiency or, at least, about reducing dependence. Strategies for specialization and internationalization of production, on the other hand, are being reworked and central states and transnational companies are reorganizing and increasing investments in technologies such as robotization or artificial intelligence. The world, therefore, seems to be moving, at least in the short term, not towards deglobalization, but towards a *more decentralized, reticular and ultra-technological capitalist globalization*.

Global value chains will change directions in the face of the post-pandemic recession, although they will certainly continue to carry a lot of weight. The supranational institutional framework designed to facilitate the logic of accumulation may lose weight in the face of a more complex economic and political plot of accumulation in cities and in hierarchical networks. Not everything is new, but the pandemic may accelerate and consolidate geopolitical changes and trends that have been triggering over the past decade. This is the case with the relative strengthening of China, which, even if it does not become a new *hegemon* in the short term, it will play a more decisive role in the world system. Conversely, the gap between the center and the periphery – or North and South – tends to increase even more, due to both the centrality of technological development and the economic recession, which is always accompanied by a known macroeconomic prescription that is harmful to the countries of the Global South. These scenarios and trends reinforce the fact that the current geopolitical order is predictably marked by greater rivalry in the interstate system, distrust between political and economic actors, but also by the deepening, on the part of dominant actors, of global militarization, which could strengthen systemic chaos.

It seems unlikely that a new global governance of health can emerge, both because of the faltering role of the World Health Organization and because of

the lack of commitment from the states themselves. International and multilateral organizations of all kinds have also failed to cope with the tragedy of the pandemic, either through silence, inability or incongruity. That is precisely why they need to reinvent themselves. Most of the regional blocs have been weakened and, in some cases, dismantled and without moral authority in the face of the pandemic. This is the case with the European Union, which, during the global health crisis, missed the opportunity to establish itself as an alternative to the failure of the US' response to the pandemic, but also in the face of the centralized and authoritarian Chinese model. Cracks and asymmetries within the block appeared again, making internal coordination and external projection difficult. On the other hand, those regional projects that some years ago tried to project themselves in Latin America as counter-hegemonic regionalisms – such as UNASUR, CELAC and ALBA-TCP – went almost silent in the pandemic and were not large enough to build any relatively well articulated supranational political response. In the case where they minimally functioned, as with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), this occurred mainly through the objective of exchanging information and coordinating policies to stimulate trade and business. Thus, in some cases the pandemic may lead to the definitive burial of some regional projects. In others, regionalism will be reorganized as a result of broader geopolitical and geo-economic changes.

Between the virus contention and social protests: national shock and local alternatives

During the pandemic, national sentiments were mobilized, and the intervening state was vindicated even by neo-liberals. A kind of "transitional health Leviathan" emerged, as proposed by Argentine intellectual Maristella Svampa. With it came, in most cases, policies of social and health protection, but also the military in the streets, states of emergency where everything was suspended and the establishment of a dangerous warlike narrative. It turns out that permanent surveillance from the most classic forms to digital tracking and drones, control and management of [big data](#), new facial recognition devices, and other sophisticated forms of social control are deepening and not just to fight the virus. Power concentration adopted to combat Covid-19 may even be necessary to enable public health care and "protection" of the population. However, there is a very thin line between this and authoritarian practices. The state responses were diverse, also varying according to the profiles of their political regimes. In some cases, authoritarian state capitalism prevailed, while in others the more socially conscious face of the state appeared. However, much of the analysis of the state management of the crisis sought to highlight cases of "success" and "failure". The main variable for this was the lockdown of infected people and of the dead. There are certainly more successful strategies than others, and cases in which denial, coupled with incompetence (in this sense it is difficult to beat Bolsonaro and Trump), offers the worst side of the responses seen. But we must not forget that in the case of dependent states on the periphery and the global

semi-periphery, the difficulties in confronting the pandemic are even greater: public health systems are practically non-existent, the right to water is compromised, housing is precarious and overcrowded in the urban peripheries, and the state's capacities are limited. Nevertheless, the importance of the State and the national sphere coexisted with a strong appreciation of places and the local scale. All over the world, local initiatives have appeared, seeking to generate dynamics of mutual support and to build neighborhoods and communities to provide collective responses from below, based on people's daily needs. Given the difficulty of protesting in the streets, much of the analysis of resistance in times of coronavirus tended to emphasize the crucial role of digital activism, but also the creativity of social movements to generate spaces and [innovative proposals](#).

The press, as usual, tends to pay attention only to the most visible aspects of citizen action and social movements, such as flash mobs, *cacerolazos* (pot-banging protests) or online petitions. Although this has been an important part of the collective actions during the pandemic, it is essential to also note what happens under the surface, such as the self-organization and protection of workers who have had to continue working, either because they cannot survive without their income or because their jobs fall within what are considered "essential services". Despite the restrictions and difficulties inherent to protests, uprisings can always occur through some catalytic event, even at unlikely times like a pandemic. This was the case with the brutal death of an African American man, George Floyd, by a white policeman in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, which unleashed a wave of anti-racist protests not seen in the United States since the fight for civil rights in the 1960s, impacting the entire world.

Although it is common to hear that the elderly population is the most vulnerable to the coronavirus, recent events have made it clear that being African-American in the United States or Black in Brazil, and in so many other countries with strong structural racism, also means that you belong to a *high risk social group*. In other words, the chances of dying from racism are greater than from the coronavirus, which leads to a relative reduction in the costs of protest in times of pandemic. Beyond the material and immediate needs, the commitment of many groups and collectives to the community and the reconstruction of the social bond in times of deep individualization of society has been significant. It has also sought to bring to light care work inequality, solidarity and food and energy sovereignty. The lockdown of a third of the world's population has also served to spread a message that feminists have long insisted on: the body must also be considered as a scale. But the local scale was not only important in a transformational, non-institutional and, in some cases, anti-institutional sense. In those countries that failed to push forceful measures throughout the national territory, there was fierce dispute with local and regional leaders who, along with unofficial initiatives, took on the institutional lead in the fight against the pandemic. In other cases, progressive and leftist municipalities have also sought to promote collaborative care platforms or have directly taken over the reins of crisis management.

This "new return" of places and their importance to social resistance and social movements in times of coronavirus cannot lead us to fall back into had seemed to be overcome, but which are once again widely circulating today, as if the global scale is the place of capitalism and the local scale the locus of resistance. As I have insisted [on several occasions](#), in the past two decades, the most *globalized* social struggles were the more *localized* ones. In other words, territorialized movements are the ones that have managed to internationalize more successfully. This has been the case, for example, with the peasant and indigenous movements in Latin America since the 1990s, but also with the several experiences gathered around the alterglobalization movement and global and environmental justice struggles. However, the emergence of what I have defined as a new [geopolitics of global indignation](#) during the last decade seems to have led to a lower intensity of organizational density among social struggles around the world. That protests expand globally, or rather, through different countries, does not mean necessarily that it is globalized in a strong sense – that it articulates with solid ties and builds a truly global response to the capitalist world system. On the one hand, it is important to distinguish between global actions and global movements. On the other, faced with the hypothesis that we would be facing new political cultures without such an internationalist effort, it would be necessary to deepen the debate on the changes in the "social movement form" and in the types of activism today. Although they continue to coexist with more traditional formats, they force us to question previous lenses to grasp cognitive, generational and identity dislocations, with important repercussions on practices of resistance, political articulations and conceptions and horizons of social transformation.

Three geopolitical scenarios: recovery, adaptation or transition

In Classical geopolitics, there was a strong "geodeterminism", which links the provision of political actions to environmental conditions or places. Moreover, the predominant anthropocentrism allowed for unlimited territorial expansion and capital accumulation, in an effort to "domesticate" nature and natural resources. Although the ecosystem boundaries have long been crossed, the pandemic seems to have opened an inflection with regard to the importance that the environmental issues and the possible geopolitical scenarios acquire vis-à-vis social and economic models. In the contemporary political debate, three different projects dispute the directions of the post-pandemic world:

- Business as usual, focused on GDP growth, predatory developmentalism and the search for new market niches to lift economies out of the crisis, from adjustment policies that require, once again, the sacrifice of the majority to maximize profits for the few;
- The "Green New Deal", which initially emerged a decade ago in the United Kingdom, has gained more prominence in recent years from the

proposal of Democratic representatives in the United States to generate social and economic reforms to transform the energy sector. It has also spread very quickly in the last year (and especially during the pandemic), with diverse appropriations from companies, international organizations and the European Union, which is creating its own "[European Green Deal](#)";

- The paradigm shift towards a new economic and ecological social matrix, proposed by more combative environmental movements and various anti-capitalist sectors that see degrowth, *buen vivir* ("good living) and more disruptive measures as the only possible alternative.

[These projects](#) seem to open up three possible scenarios, which do not occur in a "pure" mode and can interwoven in multiple ways, although all have their own logic: the *recovery* of the most aggressive logic of economic growth; the *adaptation* of capitalism to a "cleaner" model, although socially unequal; or the *transition* to a new model, which implies a radical change in the ecological, social and economic matrix. In view of these projects and scenarios, it is important to ask ourselves the implications of each of them.

The implementation of "business as usual" implies an even greater strengthening of militarized globalization, of the biopolitics of authoritarian neoliberalism, and of a model of destructive despoliation that would lead, predictably, to even more catastrophic scenarios, including wars and the deepening of the eco-social crisis. Terms such as "return to normality" or even "the new normal" justifies and ensures this type of scenario, based on the anxiety of a large part of the population to recover their social lives and/or employment. In the case of adapting to a green capitalism, deep geopolitical and geo-economic adjustments seem likely. According to this vision, a green makeup is no longer enough, a process that began with the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and the "adjectivation" of development as "sustainable". The situation now requires going a step further. And we know that, if capitalism accepts it, it does so not necessarily for the protection of the environment, but because this may be a way to maximize profits. The new strategies of coexistence between the accumulation of capital and the environmentalist imaginary may give more room for autonomy to local politics, but also deepen North/South inequalities and environmental racism.

However, it is necessary to be fair: this predominantly "adaptive" scenario is still strongly disputed. On the one hand, an important part of the dominant collectivities, especially in the North, understands that it is a path to follow. On the other hand, political forces that defend social justice and sustainability seek to stress it in various ways, towards a rupture and an integral reconfiguration. This is the case of proposals that claims for the "decolonization" of the rationale of the Green New Deal from the South; or that critically discuss their assumptions, but ground them in other realities such as Latin America, Africa or Asia, giving more importance to the State and to the contributions of popular

movements, with the objective of promoting, as Maristella Svampa and Enrique Viale suggest in the context of Argentina, a great [ecosocial and economic pact](#) that can address some national realities and serve as a basis for essential North/South democratic dialogues.

Finally, the third scenario is the most difficult, but also the most necessary so that the environment is not only, once again, a banner to save capitalism, but to save humanity and the planet. It is the social movements themselves, the territorial experiences and a diversity of popular and political-intellectual struggles that drive this scenario, stretching the limits of the narratives of green capitalism. The transition towards a radical change in the eco-social matrix is a goal of several social movements today in both Global North and Global South.

At a time of systemic inflection point, when attempts at a capitalist exit from the crisis join a growing political authoritarianism, it is essential to create broad democratic and transformative platforms that bring together activists, committed citizens and social organizations that seek to prevent the destruction of ecosystems and that the multiple inequalities brought to light by the Covid-19 crisis be swept under the rug. There is not one recipe, but a multiplicity of routes to escape from capitalist globalization and to articulate a new globalization of trans-local movements. Many are already underway and seek to reinvent transnational solidarity and militant internationalism, expanding future horizons. It is in this spirit that the proposal for a [Latin American Ecosocial Pact](#) was born on June 2, 2020, with the support of more than 2,300 people and 450 organizations until the [first public presentation](#) of the initiative on 24 June. One of the key points of the platform is the *articulation of redistributive justice with environmental, ethnic and gender justice*.

To this end, concrete proposals, that also spread in other forums – such as solidary tax reform, cancellation of states' foreign debts and a universal basic income –, are combined with broader horizons associated with building post-extractivist societies and economies, strengthening community spaces, care and information/communication from society. Moving in this direction will require sacrifices and drastic changes ranging from the personal sphere (changing habits, reducing consumption or reducing travel) to the more macro (policies that make it possible to relocate food and a change in the food system or a radical decline in sectors such as oil, gas and mining), as well as labor relations and social life as a whole. It also implies territorial resistances that seek new forms of articulation, connection and intelligibility within the global map of emerging struggles. Or, in other words, to develop, from the struggles of our time, a *global movement* that can challenge the directions of this *new alter-globalization moment*. Only then we will move from a destructive globalization to a "[pluriverse](#)" one. Only then other possible worlds will emerge.

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