

The emergence of anti-environmentalism in the United States in light of the contemporary democratic crisis

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Abstract: It is possible to attribute several meanings to anti-environmentalism throughout its historical trajectory. Although protecting the particularities of specific cases, the present text argues that this antagonism observed in the 21st century would not appear as a change in public administration styles, but as a rupture vector. The Study analyzed the United States case to develop the aforementioned hypothesis. The analysis took the federal administration's performance at domestic and international level, between 1970 and 2021, as an analytical axis, which was focused on republican administrations, based on documentary analysis. Reflections carried out over the study enabled perceiving the anti-environmentalism issue as an aspect of the contemporary crisis of Western liberal democracies. Therefore, in conclusion, the conditions allowing environmentalism to exist as such, rather than environmentalism itself, are the factors at stake in this disruptive attempt.

Keywords: Environmentalism; anti-environmentalism; United States; democratic crisis; conservatism.

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Introduction

Environmentalism became one of the core elements to legitimize Western liberal democracies as sovereign nations and to organize international relations between these countries after its rise in late 20th century. The assumed unanimity on the environmental issue relevance did not prevent opposition to environmentalism from emerging. It is hypothesized that in the 21st century adjustments in opposition forms would not point towards changes in its styles of government, but to a rupture vector, if one bears in mind the particularities of countless moments and territories, although several discourses and practices remain connected to what was observed in previous decades. The present text followed a theoretical-analytical approach elaborated in a previous study in order to develop the current study question (VASQUES, 2018). It was done to assess the United States' case, which is a core country for the international outspread of environmentalism. The actions of federal administration at domestic and foreign levels were taken as an investigation axis, from the rise of federal environmental regulation to the present day (1970-2021). This temporality is justified as the main oppositions to environmentalism were articulated through such an institutionalization process. In addition, it observes other powers, subnational entities and civil society representatives, based on the overlap between their discourses and actions. This process is limited to the analysis of literature and documentary material produced by such political actors (such as virtual folders, campaign materials, official statements).

The study was divided into four sections, in addition to the present introduction and the final considerations. The first section deals with the emergence of the opposition to environmentalism, since its formation basis at the conservative field during Ronald Reagan's administration (1981-89). The second section describes the actions taken by these antagonists in the 1990s, with emphasis on their influence on the formulation of US environmental foreign policy, and their mobilization in George W. Bush's administration (2001-09), which were encouraged by the "war against terror" discourse. The national security theme incorporation by the Democratic Party, Obama's tension with the Congress in his second term and the rupture attempt by Trump are discussed in the third section. The fourth section discusses anti-environmentalism as core aspect of the crisis in Western liberal democracies. It concludes that, despite the importance of fighting denialism, environmentalism itself is not at stake in this disruptive attempt, but the conditions allowing its existence, as such.

The rise of opposition to environmentalism in Reagan's administration

Even if one has in mind that Reagan's environmental policy was added to the economic and institutional reforms, this process was only possible due to the rise of environmentalism itself, also because of oppositions already in place (VASQUES, 2018). The recognition that a new object and public policies were designed resulted from their own effects. A better understanding of the consequences of the bipartisan actions from the 1970s was consolidated as the main vector for disrupting this alignment. This process

becomes clear as regulation impacts were taken into consideration right in the first years of its application, which led Jimmy Carter (1977-81) to deregulate the transport and energy sectors. Simultaneously, the Congress was paying closer attention to the emerging environmental policy and to its anti-competitive effects by supporting cost-benefit analyses for new regulations.

Carter contributed to Reagan's deepening interventions in regulatory processes by limiting the institutional effects of the rising environmentalism. In the mid-1970s, the debate about lack of political accountability in federal agencies was consolidated, and it included the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Mechanisms were proposed that would allow more frequent interventions by decision-makers who could be held politically responsible, as opposed to technical indications and analyses. This dispute made environmentalists take a step back, because, although they were against the flexible regulations, they were also suspicious of decisions based on cost-benefit analyses. This scenario made groups, such as the Sierra Club, which is an important civil organization, legally challenge the presidency's role in setting these regulations. In response, the Judiciary branch ruled in favor of broad interventions by the federal administration and it helped legitimize Reagan's actions, in his early years in office (KRAFT; VIG, 1984).

Reagan's striking victory over Carter was interpreted as a popular endorsement to deep conservative changes and to economic revitalization. Despite having support from most of the Congress at the beginning of his term, which allowed Reagan to approve his economic plan, he would soon face the opposition from both the Legislature and the public opinion, which demanded a positive environmental agenda (DUNLAP, 1987). His commitment to imposing immediate victories and the institutional scenario favorable to intensive Executive action helped him organize his actions through an administrative presidency. It is through this way of governing that differentiated Reagan from his predecessors when it comes to controlling environmental regulations. In addition to the debate about the continuity of this policy's effects, Reagan's presidency was essential to establish a repertoire of discourses and practices, as well as an intellectual conservative field against environmentalism. This is clear from the analysis of administrative regulations, and of official documents and statements produced at that time, mainly in the Republican Party's campaign plans.

The early 1980s witnessed broad demands by regulated sectors that wanted to review the environmental standards issued in the previous decade. This issue was even observed in the Republican agenda as explicitly stated in their electoral programs, which advocated the need of a healthy environment, while simultaneously arguing that regulation benefits would justify the imposed costs. But Reagan joined the sagebrush rebellion¹ supporters and discarded moderate proposals by the transition group linked to George H. W. Bush. He adopted a radical vision and placed James G. Watt at the head of his environmental policy. Watt was a lawyer recommended by the conservative organization known as the Heritage Foundation, by Senator Adam Laxalt (R-Nevada) and by businessman Joseph

1 - Movement articulated in the West, between 1970 and 1980, which proposed changes in the administration of federal public lands by expanding the control of local authorities over such areas.

Coors (KRAFT, 2000).

The radical nature of interventions made in environmental policy was disclosed by the effects of both the administrative presidency and the implementation of a negative agenda focused on institutional dismantling. His plan was not limited to defending State reduction, but was based on a strategy developed with conservatives who coordinated their actions through their association with Reagan, as evidenced in his speeches and media reports on environmental issues. Even though they were partially reversed in the second term (WENNER, 1990) and in subsequent administrations, the main measures undertaken during the first three years of the government stand out as follows (KRAFT & VIG, 1984): selection of a bureaucracy aligned with conservative ideals, institutional reorganization to centralize the control over the changes; budget cuts justified by economic appeal and governmental reform; and centralization of the regulatory oversight process (i.e., cost-benefit analyses) to implement the presidential agenda.

As observed from the political appointments, the choice for new staff favored professionals unexperienced in public authority, or in issues they had to deal with. Generally, the selection depended on nominees' alignment with the ideals advocated by the conservative Republican wing close to Reagan. EPA recruitment took place in the private sector, in sectors regulated by it. Yet, institutional reorganization led to a smaller number of job positions, which, consequently, reduced legal disputes and the application of inspection mechanisms. This restriction was followed by centralization measures, such as creating bodies linked to the White House aimed at coordinating changes in public policies. Budget cuts were justified by the unprecedented proposed fiscal containment, which was well-received by agencies' heads (KRAFT; VIG, 2019). Finally, it is possible to highlight the issuance of an executive order focused on submitting all significant-impact regulatory proposals to cost-benefit analyses, inhibiting new standards and avoiding potential additional burdens on the private sector.

Reagan resorted to the mythical discourse of American exceptionalism to oppose Carter's logic of scarcity; he also used Nixon's New Federalism to share responsibilities with local authorities. He reorganized the environmental policy along with conservative groups that helped consolidate an intellectual field to oppose environmentalism, as evidenced by the rise of the wise use movement², one of sagebrush rebellion's offshoots (MCCARTHY, 2002). The 1980s were marked by economic and scientific clashes that underpinned both advances and opposition to the environmental agenda. According to Short (2004), Reagan associated his political strategy with two narrative axes linked to the United States' cultural formation, namely: Puritan wanderer myth and Turner's frontier thesis. These narratives would be useful for their rhetorical structure and discursive potential to elaborate messages and collective cultural visions, rather than for the analysis about the construction of a national subject.

Reagan called for nature's richness to be used responsibly, ensuring economic pros-

2 - It is a grassroots movement, supported by large companies, which aimed at expanding property rights and at reducing governmental intervention on public lands.

perity for generations to come. Wilderness³ was expected to respond to divine purposes by providing the means to enhance human beings. This interpretation would oppose the dissociation between culture and nature, which was set out in natural resource conservation policies in the late 19th century. Public lands' management would be one of the keys to prosperity, with the government responsible for ensuring that everyone has access to all these lands, rather than just to a few, alluding to the elitist and urban characteristics of environmentalism. James Watt articulated the connection among land, freedom and prosperity, arguing that institutional frameworks would encourage people to make the best use of these resources. In his second term, Reagan deepened this discourse, abandoning the radicalism of his first term, and, with the support of both the Congress and Margaret Thatcher, ratified the Montreal Protocol in 1987, for the protection of the ozone layer (SHORT, 2004).

The conservative opposition in the 1990s and its manifestation through W. Bush

The fight against environmentalism continued to decline with George H. W. Bush (1989-93), who sought to associate his image with that of Theodore Roosevelt (1901-09), known for adopting several nature conservation policies in the early 20th century. Bush was forced to deal with Exxon Valdez oil spill (1989) and with his low support in Congress he approached environmentalists and approved amendments to the Clean Air Act. On the other hand, he resumed cost-benefit analyses, maintaining the central role of economic discourse. Unlike Reagan, he undermined the country's leading role in environmental diplomacy at Rio-92 by not signing the Convention on Biological Diversity. Bill Clinton's election (1993-2001) repositioned environmentalists' expectations, but legislative reforms turned impossible even with the support of most of Congress due to strategic errors at the beginning of his administration. His advantage in the Congress ended in the first midterm elections, a fact that boosted the rise of conservatives under the leadership of the Republican Newt Gingrich (R-Georgia) and his Contract with America. In other words, an offensive aimed at rolling back the environmental legislation, which was blocked by Clinton, who was forced to rule through vetoes and executive orders (DAYNES; SUSSMAN, 2010; TURNER; ISENBERG, 2018).

The analysis of his discourses and practices shed light on how Clinton deviated from Carter's scarcity logic and fought for the economic argument by rescuing the ideas by Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-45). This relationship, also evident in the Green New Deal with Joe Biden (2021-), aimed in the 1990s to reinterpret the Democratic trajectory, using the memory of a successful alternative to propose a plan capable of combining economy with the environment. Studying documents from the period shows the process to build a narrative based on a systemic, integrated approach concerned with socio-environmental

3 - Wilderness would go beyond wild nature. It would be an essential identity element of the Puritan cosmology, with a moral function. Its exploration would represent the fulfillment of a prophecy and the process by which Europeans would become Americans.

impacts on minorities. Thus, if the 1980s helped to professionalize environmental groups, the following years were featured by the complexification of strategies by their opponents. Faced with new contours in economic debate, which aimed at matching development and the environment, the political cost of justifying pollution as a condition for prosperity became unsustainable. Therefore, Republicans started defending values held dear to conservatives, echoing Reagan, and opposing the climate agenda launched under H. W. Bush.

Accordingly, conservative groups sought to feature Democratic environmental policies as fostering resentment. Supported by national-economic sectors, they built an intellectual opposition field that questioned the legitimacy of the federal government to restrict individual freedoms, arguing that this would limit the divine right to the country's natural wealth and hinder prosperity. The New Deal became the main target of these groups' demonstrations, which opposed the Democratic narrative by reviving dissatisfaction among countryside residents and from those in the West. This conservative moral narrative was added to the Republican Party's agenda. The guidance given to its representatives in debates on the environment was to avoid economic arguments, cast doubt on science, and centralize the discussion on moral values (TURNER; ISENBERG, 2018). This approach sought to divert the focus of these debates by defending the interests of its supporters without directly attacking the environment. Economic and scientific discourses lost centrality in guiding anti-environmental thinking and actions to be taken in the 1990s, although the economy remained relevant (VASQUES, 2021).

W. Bush's victory after a turbulent election set him on a weak presidency trajectory. September 11, the anthrax attacks and, later on, the wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan, changed this scenario and influenced his environmental policy. Republicans managed to successfully articulate an electoral speech to project W. Bush as an environmentalist, despite the fact that he was competing with Al Gore (JALONICK, 2004; DAYNES; SUSSMAN, 2008). These campaign promises, however, faded at the beginning of his administration. Supported by groups like the wise use movement and the American Enterprise Institute, besides being close to Reagan's conservatism, W. Bush made significant setbacks to the environmentalist agenda, although he adopted some positive measures.

Reagan's repertoire was recovered under W. Bush and adjusted to his context. Political appointments drew on experienced individuals from the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and law firms. Vacancies in positions were strategically used to undermine bureaucratic routines (HULT, 2003; SAMET; BURKE, 2001). Budget cuts were proposed, although they were partially reversed in Congress. Furthermore, executive orders were widely adopted to revoke Clinton's actions and to redirect the regulatory processes. W. Bush worked to reduce command and control mechanisms by favoring voluntary and market-based solutions (BRECHIN; FREEMAN, 2004). Internally, he employed subtle language and practices to promote the conservative agenda, as observed in the name of propositions to set back the regulations: Clear Skies, Healthy Forests Initiative, among others. He also reduced exposure to the media, hindered access to information, threatened scientists and adulterated technical studies (RECHTSCHAFFEN, 2003; DEVINE, 2004).

H. W. Bush's resistance and Clinton's failure to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, marked

by the Byrd-Hagel Resolution approval in the Congress (1997), created a favorable scenario for W. Bush to reject the agreement. By analyzing the justification sent to the Senate, it is possible to state that the document summarized the conservative approach and explained the country's environmental foreign policy. It sought to safeguard national interests, most of all by aiming at protecting or promoting its economy by articulating a favorable or, at least, balanced competitive framework among its competitors. US diplomacy has consistently refused or avoided transferring financial or intellectual resources to peripheral nations (HARRIS, 2009). Above all, it defended the country's sovereignty and autonomy, which has been clear since H. W. Bush, when the president gave up the country's leading role, preferring to negotiate individual or small groups agreements. W. Bush did the same in 2007, when he invited countries accountable for emitting most greenhouse gases to work on climate solutions. Biden adopted a similar strategy in 2021, when he convened his Climate Summit and, months later, limited COP-26 outcomes⁴.

W. Bush's attempt to reach an agreement with major emitters did not prevent his opposition to climate change from going on. However, since H. W. Bush, the political costs of this attitude have increased and according to Republican strategists, it was no longer possible to avoid the proposition of new alternatives, since it could put the election at risk (COHEN, 2004). Thus, the U.S. diplomacy sought to articulate the international debate in light of its guidelines, but it proved to be unfeasible. This was especially true considering that its domestic actions were contrary to multilateral debates. This scenario was exposed by resistance within the Legislature, the Judiciary and in civil society articulations. It also helped consolidate the role of subnational entities in opposing the federal government's environmental setback agenda (CRAIG, 2003). See the Massachusetts v. EPA case, which ruled in favor of the State's request to use the Clean Air Act as legal basis for the EPA to regulate carbon dioxide emissions.

W. Bush implemented the anti-environmentalist playbook developed in the 1990s. Its alignment with the U.S. foreign policy adopted in the following years was clear, even during Democratic administrations. The moral debate was mobilized to justify the new ways of State actions taken over regulated agents, which marginalized command and control measures, and privileged market solutions. Overall, W. Bush helped weaken republican practices by adopting misleading attitudes to communicate and justify his decisions. Although at the end of his government W. Bush supported certain progressive measures, they had limited impact in comparison to the setbacks. Thus, if disputes over property and public lands brought conservative groups together in the 1980s and 1990s, the climate debate plays this role in the 21st century. Their antagonism ceases to be a defense of foreign policy principles to unify the opposition against the environmental agenda.

Environment as national security and the reversal led by Trump

The dispute between John McCain and Barack Obama in 2008 shifted the discourse

4 - <https://www.actionaidusa.org/news/fossil-fuels-in-the-cop-decision-text-why-the-u-s-not-india-is-the-problem/> (accessed on January 13, 2022).

opposing the Republicans' environmental agenda, just as in previous elections (GERARD, 2008). At that time, the United States was dealing with the consequences of the financial crisis, which put the economic debate in the mainstream. This did not prevent Obama, upon winning, from identifying himself as an environmentalist. However, his departure from this agenda in his first term was seen by his supporters as a strategic decision to prioritize other policies (e.g., public health) and to deal with the conservatives in the 2010 elections (HILL, 2020). Critical approaches show that the breach of expectations among environmentalists was also linked to his support for the fossil industry, given his incentives to shale gas exploration through fracking (GONZALEZ, 2018).

As mentioned, regulated sectors called for more flexible environmental standards in the late 1970s. This demand took on economic profiles in the Regan era. In the 1990s, command and control solutions lost ground to market-based mechanisms (e.g., cap-and-trade). Aligned with the dominant international discourse, these latter instruments gained prominence and were adopted by both parties. Something similar happened in the Obama administration, which linked environmental discourse to the securitization agenda (BRICKER, 2012). In 1991, H.W Bush included the environment in the national security strategy, unlike Carter's logic of scarcity, which proposed a change in lifestyle by contrasting prosperity with the rational use of resources. Clinton adhered to this narrative, aligning sectors of the state bureaucracy in that direction (O'GORMAN, 2014). The security debate took on features of the war on terror under the W. Bush administration, and at that time, the top domestic terrorist threat declared by the government was an environmentalist movement, the Earth Liberation Front (LOADENTHAL, 2013).

The combination of environment and national security was overall guided by the risks of dependence on natural resources and of geopolitical instability resulting from scarcity due to environmental degradation. Obama incorporated the idea into that discourse that climate change would be an even greater threat in his 2008 campaign (O'GORMAN, 2014). The failure of the scarcity logic, the commonplace given to economic arguments, the prevalence of a public debate based on moral foundations and the decline in popular support for the war were decisive factors for this strategy. Democrats recognized that the national security issue could be mobilized to discuss climate with conservatives according to values held dear by U.S. citizens. Accordingly, the justification for climate action would have its planetary altruism marginalized in favor of the need to safeguard national sovereignty. This defense would be a condition to keep the country's international hegemony, and a way to ensure its citizens prosperity. This narrative became evident when this discourse was associated with the management of damages caused by Hurricane Sandy, in 2012 (HILL, 2020).

Although Obama had little success in the aforementioned strategy, this did not prevent him from emphasizing environmental issues in his second term. Facing the impossibility of advancing in the legislature, democrats once again adopted an administrative presidency (TZOUMIS et al., 2015). This model of governance created tensions among several Congressmen, who saw it as an attempt to usurp their powers. This was especially noticeable with the Clean Power Plan, bilateral climate agreements, and the signing

of the Paris Agreement (KRAFT; VIG, 2019). The intensification of conflict with the Congress in a polarized environment (DUNLAP et al., 2016) helped bring Republicans together, converging to defend an agenda in opposition to climate management. The unity strengthened by this clash was essential to sustain Donald Trump's anti-environmentalist policy (2017-21), although it led to several conflicts within his own party.

Trump was perceived as a viable candidate as he garnered broad social support, outmaneuvering his internal rivals. The choice for having Michael Pence as vice president connected him to the party's traditional bases, mainly to its main leaders and donors (CLEMENTI, 2021). Internal party tensions became evident on the environmental issue when Trump chose to subvert a central element of the Republican playbook. Instead of treating this issue as a liability, he radicalized his approach by combining moralistic rhetoric with the inversion of such perception. That is, he argued that Republican actions should be viewed as an asset to be leveraged with the electorate (TURNER; ISENBERG, 2018). The ambiguity observed in the discourses of previous conservative administrations was given additional contours, characterized by its promoters as frank and directly communicable to the resentful segments of the population.

An examination of Trump's political communication and its changes provides elements to better understand ruptures and continuities. The same can be said about the use of administrative actions to reverse Obama's policies, about the selection of high-ranking government officials from corporations, lobbyists, non-governmental organizations and law firms, about the budget cuts for federal agencies and public policies, and about the intense pressure for deregulation in the Legislature. The choice of Scott Pruitt as EPA administrator, a lawyer who represented several state governments against Obama's Clean Power Plan, highlighted Trump's commitment to promote an anti-environmental agenda. Pruitt argued that EPA should return to its original functions regarding water and air management, and that several federal responsibilities should be transferred to state governments, reviving Nixon's federalism, which was embraced by Reagan (KRAFT; VIG, 2019). A significant new development was the constant federal clashes over environmental issues, immigration, and the Covid-19 pandemic (CLEMENTI, 2021).

From the analysis of his statements, it is evident that Trump advocated that environmental regulation was one of the reasons hindering the country's economic growth. In order to hold his position, he kept the strategy of placing science under constant doubt, as well as defining actions against climate change as a costly hoax for the nation. The withdrawal from the Paris Agreement could be compared to W. Bush's decision about the Kyoto Protocol, reinforcing the idea that there were no significant ruptures under Trump's administration, but rather a change in the style of government (HERBERT et al., 2019). However, a broader reading of this framework helped understand this decision in a different way. Despite his predecessors favoring bilateral negotiations and working to limit the possibilities of agreements in multilateral spaces, they did not question their existence. When Trump left international negotiations, he claimed it was in the name of national sovereignty, criticizing the agreement's content and, more importantly, the legitimacy of multilateral forums, as seen in his stance towards the World Health Orga-

nization during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Even with the implementation of the anti-environmental agenda, regulated sectors benefited little (NERGER et al., 2021), and despite many of these measures being undone by Biden, this dynamic underscores the dilemmas associated with the United States' ability to comply with international agreements. It is so, because the congressional deadlock and administrative presidencies have contributed to a volatile institutional context, as such measures can be reversed by subsequent administrations. Thus, it is possible that Trump's legacy would be less observed at the institutional level, and more in ideal terms, weakening trust in democratic institutions and in scientific knowledge. Simultaneously, it also strengthened the idea of incompatibility between environmental management and economic prosperity, nationalist feelings and white patriarchal views, to the detriment of a diverse and plural environment (BOMBERG, 2021). The weakening of multilateral negotiation spaces is added to this list. This legacy, which helped support the Capitol invasion in January 2021, does not appear to have been weakened by Trump's electoral defeat.

Anti-environmentalism as an aspect of liberal democracies' crisis

When one perceives environmentalism as a governmental rationality in its relationship with the surrounding (*entorno*, in Portuguese) typical of the 20th century (VASQUES, 2018), it becomes possible to subject it to critique in light of its contingency. Its singularities can be made explicit, and the implications within and beyond its disciplinary spaces explored. Considering its paradoxical relationship of interconnection and opposition with the 19th-century nature conservation policies, it is argued that the emergence and consolidation of environmentalism are closely related to the developments following World War II. In addition to the natural sciences' limitations to properly respond to emerging social demands, there are changes in relationships between nations that, among other factors, begin to oppose new expropriations. The prevalence of today's dominant environmentalism can be explained by its ability to deal with the current situation. Generally, this has been achieved through incorporating the human sciences into themes so far monopolized by natural sciences, and by articulating with economic and competitive mechanisms that contribute to framing what is a good government and the correct ways to access resources outside their territories (VASQUES, 2018).

The emerging opposition to environmentalism in the late 1970s and its consolidation under Reagan's administration had direct implications for those opposed to the welfare state, which becomes evident in references to the New Deal. However, the contours of these antagonisms differ, and their particularities are clarified through the understanding that, when dealing with the environment, one is referring to a new rationality of governing subjects and their surroundings, specific to the second half of the 20th century. This divide is seen, for example, in the invocation of Theodore Roosevelt's nature conservation policies by conservative Republicans, while simultaneously opposing climate-environmental policies. This recollection can be related to diverse meanings. In the 1980s and 1990s, it could be interpreted as part of the clashes related to the shaping

of emerging environmentalism. In the 21st century, it appears to expose a desire to return to the past, which denies and seeks to break with current agreements.

In the context of the Cold War, the overlap between environmentalism and the market was evident on the international stage since at least the meetings in Founex, Switzerland, in the late 1960s (LAGO, 2007). This convergence was promoted as one of capitalism's advantages in the bipolar world, associating environmental governance with the recognition of collective moral advancements⁵, respect for sovereignty, a path to prosperity, and an instrument of cooperation among people. Reagan's support for this narrative, exemplified by his signing of the Montreal Protocol, contradicted his domestic discourse, which aimed to limit the effects of environmental regulation. This incompatibility lasted until the end of the Cold War, when his environmental foreign policy was reassessed (HARRIS, 2009). The global cooperation discourse was marginalized in favor of regulatory disputes under competitive bias. He used his international dominance to conduct negotiations in bilateral or small group settings.

Renouncing its leadership in multilateral environmental forums in the 1990s contributed to the weakening of international cooperation initiatives. This scenario remained with Clinton, when national economic concerns were safeguarded by a conservative Legislature. The war on terror discourse gave a new contour to the United States' trend toward non-cooperation. If domestically the national security protection would legitimize additional caution in the goals and deadlines assumptions, internationally, the respect for national sovereignty was challenged by the possibility of thinking about applying doctrines, such as the right to protect the environment (EVANS, 2009). The decline in popular support for the war and the outbreak of the 2008 financial crisis limited the effects of these discourses, which did not prevent the continuation of conservative Republican actions, as evidenced by the refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

The maintenance of the legislative deadlock has been decisive in strengthening the anti-environmentalist agenda, despite the resistance in the Judiciary, in social organizations, and in subnational entities. Obama's decision to fight the Congress on the climate issue in his second term highlighted this process, given the impossibility of bipartisan actions. The convergence of interests between regulated sectors and conservative groups significantly contributed to shaping the contours of federal environmental policies, both domestic and international (TURNER; ISENBERG, 2018). By defining national interest through the lens of competition and prioritizing it in multilateral negotiations, these negotiations were effectively rendered unfeasible. From the perspective of this political strategy, if at the peak of US leadership in the post-Cold War era, engaging in international cooperation implied a relative diminishment of its dominance, then, with signs of its decline, resorting to multilateralism came to signify its weakening. The process of signing the Paris Agreement with China, in 2016, during the electoral campaign, and the certainty of its non-ratification by the Congress, made US displacement in the political-economic order clear, although the country itself helped establish this order in the 20th century.

5 - It does not mean that concern with environmental issues was absent in countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain (SÁNCHEZ, 2008).

The cooperative distancing policy took on disruptive contours with Trump, and the conservative Republican playbook assumed new meanings. The denialist discourse brought attention to its ramifications, demanding responses to its consequences. However, if the growing polarization on environmental and climate issues (DUNLAP et al., 2016) showed the effectiveness of this approach, the condition of possibility for its success would not lie in the encouragement of radicalization by Trump and his supporters. Rather, it would be in cracks opened by the unraveling of social convergence around democracy as a collective endeavor. This was largely associated with the unfulfilled citizenship expectations promised within the framework of possibilities offered by the post-war order, as highlighted by the deepening of social inequality. This dissatisfaction would not be only experienced in the United States, but in other liberal Western democracies, at different degrees, until reaching unprecedented levels in the 21st century (FOA et al., 2020).

The construction of environmental rationality as one of the fundamental aspects of relationships established in the post-war period allows observing the implications of strategies to oppose democracy. The convergence of this assumption with the premise that conservatives' radicalization would disclose the desire for rupture would reinforce the reasons why the climate agenda became a preferential target. At the international level, leaving the Paris Agreement means denying the current model of relationships between sovereign states. Within this framework of disruptive conservatism, the rationale behind their discourses and practices lies in the understanding that it would be unfeasible for the United States to ensure the prevalence of its national interests in the competitive international space established among liberal democracies, where environmental standards are a significant component. The content of the climate agreement is not the issue at stake, but the rules allowing its formulation. In this context, the victory of the Democrats in 2020 would apparently represent an attempt to distance themselves from rupture rehearsals, and return to a stance of defending U.S. national interests based on current international arrangements.

This movement by the United States would represent the country's return to its uncooperative stance in multilateral spaces. The persistent congressional deadlock is almost mirrors the idea that, although U.S. citizens largely support environmental issues, they face significant disagreements over the actions to be taken. This situation, which is not accidental, keeps the country's out of sync with the international agenda, suggesting that despite occasional electoral defeats of conservatives, the effects of this unraveling remain. Even though the opposition to the denialist discourse constitutes a relevant dimension, maintaining this conflict, for example, in terms of the antagonism between technical and political perspectives, contributes in certain aspects to distancing the debate from one of its structuring dimensions, namely, the desire for democratic rupture. It is not about ignoring anti-environmentalism and its ramifications, but about understanding that its emergence in the 21st century would be an effect—one that also strengthens this dynamic—of the tensions provoked by the rising attempts of authoritarian political projects.

Conclusions

The history of the environment as a governmental rationality of the surrounding is closely implicated in the reconfiguration of relationships between nations in the post-war period, particularly among liberal Western democracies. The United States case illustrates how the opposition to environmentalism led by conservative groups, despite continuities, also took on different meanings throughout its trajectory, extending beyond national dynamics. While rapprochement with the economy was inevitable in the 1970s, so too the maintenance of the United States' broad international leadership was an indispensable condition in that bipolar world. At the end of the Cold War, the conservative discourse consolidated its match to national interests and values, and it influenced the United States' environmental foreign policy for the following decades. It was clear, from that moment on, regardless of party affiliation, any international agreement would require prior alignment with national issues that were defined at the scope of such a conservative dimension. The Trump administration is featured as an attempt to break away from what was outlined in the 1990s.

The diagnosis of certain economic groups that would be unfeasible to ensure the prevalence of their interests by competing under the current rules, and therefore demanding actions in their favor, aligns with a powerful conservative rationality that opposes the established value framework in the post-war period. Its radicalization and reorientation towards promoting an alternative political project would regard the perception that it became viable due to the understanding of fraying the social bases supporting democracy. The outspread of its authoritarian political project finds space and support, being introduced as an option to address unmet citizenship expectations over the last few decades. Thus, it is argued that this dynamic does not explicitly indicate a crisis of capitalism, but rather of the assumptions that enable the reconciliation of democracy with neoliberal governmental rationality, in which the trajectory of environmentalism, mainly the climate debate, offers a privileged viewpoint for observation. The eventual predominance of this authoritarian dimension could, ultimately, imply a reconfiguration of the surrounding and its governmental rationality, culminating in the transformation or even the end of environmentalism.

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A emergência do anti-ambientalismo nos Estados Unidos à luz da crise democrática contemporânea

Pedro Henrique Ramos Prado Vasques

Resumo: É possível atribuir inúmeros sentidos às oposições ao ambientalismo em sua trajetória histórica. Resguardadas as particularidades de casos específicos, o texto defende que, em regra, esse antagonismo no século XXI configuraria não uma mudança de estilo de governo, mas um vetor de ruptura. Para desenvolver essa hipótese, analisa o caso dos Estados Unidos, tomando como eixo analítico a atuação do executivo federal no plano doméstico e internacional entre 1970-2021, dando enfoque às administrações republicanas, o que o faz a partir de análise documental. Mediante reflexões conduzidas ao longo do estudo, percebe a questão do anti-ambientalismo como um aspecto da crise contemporânea das democracias liberais ocidentais. Conclui-se que o que estaria em jogo nessa tentativa disruptiva não seria o ambientalismo em si, mas as condições que permitem a sua existência enquanto tal.

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Palavras-chave: Ambientalismo; anti-ambientalismo; Estados Unidos; crise democrática; conservadorismo.

El surgimiento del antiambientalismo en Estados Unidos a la luz de la crisis democrática contemporánea

Pedro Henrique Ramos Prado Vasques

Resumen: Es posible atribuir numerosos significados a las oposiciones al ambientalismo en su trayectoria histórica. Salvaguardando las particularidades de los casos específicos, en el texto se argumenta que, por regla general, este antagonismo en el siglo XXI no constituiría un cambio en el estilo de gobierno, sino un vector de ruptura. Para desarrollar esta hipótesis, se analiza el caso de Estados Unidos, tomando como eje analítico el desempeño del ejecutivo federal a nivel nacional e internacional entre 1970-2021, centrándose en las administraciones republicanas, lo cual hace a partir del análisis documental. A través de las reflexiones realizadas a lo largo del estudio, se percibe el tema del antiambientalismo como un aspecto de la crisis contemporánea de las democracias liberales occidentales. Se concluye que lo que estaría en juego en este intento disruptivo no sería el ecologismo en sí, sino las condiciones que permiten su existencia como tal.

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