

The new always comes

Via [Revista Movimento](#)

A dialogue with the recent book by Nancy Fraser.

In “The old is dying and the new cannot be born” (Autonomia Literária, 2020), Nancy Fraser presents a panorama of North American politics that seems to me to be very useful to our debates on balance and perspectives of the Brazilian left.

Starting from the realization that we are going through a global political crisis that involves the brutal weakening of the authority of the parties and the political establishment and consequently there is a search for new ideologies, organizations and leadership, Fraser points out the existence of a crisis of hegemony. Simplifying the concept developed by Antonio Gramsci, hegemony “is the term he uses to explain the process by which a ruling class makes its domination seem natural by infiltrating assumptions of its own worldview as the common sense of society.” (p. 35)

The organizational counterpart of the construction of hegemony is the constitution of a hegemonic bloc, that is, “a coalition of disparate forces that the dominant class gathers and through it affirms its leadership”.

The pre-Trump hegemonic bloc was what Fraser calls “progressive neoliberalism,” an alliance between liberal currents of feminism, anti-racist struggle, environmentalism, LGBTQ+ struggle, with the financial sectors and the cutting edge of the North American economy, that is, Wall Street, Silicon Valley and Hollywood.

To understand this alliance it is necessary to appropriate two concepts used by Fraser: distribution and recognition.

Distribution is the vision of how society should allocate

goods, especially income, wealth. It is directly related to the social structure and class division. Recognition expresses how society shares respect and esteem, the moral marks of belonging. It is related to the hierarchies of social status.

According to Fraser, the combination of these two aspects of law and justice has forged capitalist hegemony in the United States and Europe since the mid-20th century. For her, distribution and recognition are the “essential components from which hegemonies are built” (37) and it was the discrediting of the normative nexus between them that broke the hegemonic block prior to Trump and made possible the emergence of “trumpism”.

This “progressive – neoliberal” hegemonic bloc had as its axis of economic policy the dismantling of barriers and protections to the free movement of capital. This line, initiated by Ronald Reagan and deepened and consolidated by Clinton, caused a brutal reduction in the standard of living of the working class and the middle class and transferred wealth to those at the top, including the upper echelons of the managerial professional classes. Along with this plutocratic policy came “an ethos of superficially egalitarian and emancipatory recognition. At the center of this ethos were the ideals of diversity, women’s empowerment, LGBTQ+ rights, post-racialism, multiculturalism and environmentalism. These ideals were interpreted in a specific and limited way, fully compatible with the ‘Goldman Sachsification’ of the US economy”. (39)

The antagonist of this hegemonic block of progressive neoliberalism was reactionary neoliberalism. Its policy of distribution was similar, although its discourses claimed to defend small businesses, its aim was to strengthen finance, military production and nonrenewable energy. What set him apart from progressive neoliberalism was his vision of what would be a fairer order of status: racist, patriarchal, homophobic, anti-immigrant, and pro-Christian. His most important differences were in the field of recognition and not

distribution.

Fraser defines that “hegemony has to do with the political, moral, cultural, and intellectual authority of a particular worldview – and with the ability of this worldview to embody itself in a lasting and powerful alliance of social forces and social classes. Progressive neoliberalism has enjoyed this hegemony for several decades. Now, however, its authority is severely weakened, if not completely shattered”. (76)

This polarization between two models that are very similar from an economic point of view has left the victims of financialization and corporate globalization orphans in “an empty and unoccupied zone, where antineoliberal and pro-working families policies could have taken root.” (46) This is what Fraser calls the “hegemonic gap.” (45)

When Barack Obama appeared on the political scene in the midst of the worst financial crisis since the Depression, some thought he could fill this void: “Barack Obama could have taken the opportunity to mobilize his mass support in favor of a major shift away from neoliberalism, even in the face of Congressional opposition. Instead, he entrusted the economy to the very Wall Street forces that had almost destroyed it”. (46)

Expression of this gap was the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. A discontent that found no interlocutors in institutional politics erupted and ended up, according to Fraser, serving mainly to reelect Obama in 2012, but also foreshadowing an earthquake that was to come. Frustration and the crisis of representation followed, the two neoliberal blocs collapsed and the “earthquake finally shook the 2015-2016 electoral race, when prolonged discontent suddenly turned into a crisis of political authority. (48)

The rest of the story is well known, with Bernie Sanders playing the anti establishment on the left and Trump on the

right. Fraser defines these two phenomena as reactionary populism and progressive populism, using the term “populism” in the sense of a politics with popular appeal, without the pejorative connotation attributed to it in Brazil[1].

Both criticized the neoliberal policy of distribution, but their policies of recognition were opposed. Universalism and egalitarianism versus nationalism and protectionism. The social base that Trump contested was white, straight, Christian, a traditional working class that had lost space, prestige, and money. And they were furious.

But Trump was, at least in part, an election stellar. He abandoned the “populist” politics of distribution and doubled his bet on the reactionary politics of recognition, thus constituting a “hyper reactionary neoliberalism”. (53)

But Trump did not constitute a new hegemonic block. His electoral defeat in 2020 confirms Fraser’s thesis:

“By deactivating the economic-populist face of his companion, Trump’s hyper-reactionary neoliberalism seeks to re-establish the hegemonic gap that he helped to open in 2016 – except that he cannot now close that gap. Now that the populist king is naked, it seems doubtful that the working class portion of Trump’s base will be satisfied for a long time only with a diet of (des) recognition”. (54)

Written in 2019, and as part of the effort to support Bernie Sanders in representing the Democratic Party in the elections, Fraser’s text contains a precise prediction: policies of recognition that disconnect with the axis of distributive justice will serve the efforts to “restore the previous status quo in some new form. In that case, the result would be a new version of progressive neoliberalism”. (55) The victory of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris fits precisely this concept, which does not mean, under any circumstances, that Trump’s defeat was not a great victory.

Fraser's narrative about the situation and the deadlocks in American politics has particularities that are specific to the country. However, there are many points of contact with the world situation in general and with the Brazilian situation in particular.

If we look at Fernando Henrique Cardoso's Brazil we can clearly see Clinton's progressive neoliberalism (not as progressive as the American one, for obvious reasons), as well as the hopes awakened and dashed by Obama can be identified with those awakened by Lula and dashed with the consequences of the economic crisis under Dilma Rousseff. The significance of the Occupy Wall Street movement has a parallel in the June 2013 uprising, which uncovered discontent, left most of the left paralyzed, and opened a Pandora's box that leaked into Bolsonaro. The parallel between Trump and Bolsonaro is quite obvious.

The city elections demonstrated that Bolsonaro is far from closing the crisis of open hegemony, especially with the failure of petism and its policy of class conciliation. They also demonstrated the strength that won the antiracist agenda and the consolidation of women and LGBTs as important political actors.

The crisis of hegemony remains open and there is no guarantee that its outcome will be similar to what happened in the United States, with a reestablishment of progressive neoliberalism. There are many variables open, ranging from the possibility of an impeachment of Bolsonaro – if the political elites conclude that to overcome the economic crisis aggravated by the pandemic it will be necessary to remove him from office – to his permanence with electoral consequences still difficult to foresee.

In the U.S. elections, after the fight for Bernie Sanders, everyone joined with Joe Biden to defeat Trump. It cannot be excluded that something similar might occur in Brazil. The

defeat of Trump was an event of great magnitude, precisely because it represented, as did Bolsonaro in Brazil, a superreactionary attempt to end the crisis of hegemony, also closing the loopholes through which the most progressive social movements express themselves and ending the democratic freedoms and civilizing conquests so hard uprooted. The PSOL's task is no less important in this scenario.

Gramsci teaches us that in this crisis in which the old has died and the new cannot yet be born, there is an interregnum in which "pathological phenomena" of the most varied kinds arise[2]. These phenomena are everywhere. In the United States the greatest of recent times I suppose has been the occupation of the Capitol by trumpist militias, a gesture of desperation in the face of defeat, but also a password about the methods that the extreme right is willing to use around the world.

In Brazil's daily life we see the supermarket vigilante, over-exploited, who beats a poor, black man to death; the policeman, wearing a bulletproof vest, who kills a young black man by confusing him with a robber; the white man, unemployed for six years, who kills his ex-wife in front of his daughters; the male, frustrated with his repressed sexuality, who beats the transgender for hating her for wanting her. Examples of cruel tormentors who are also, to some extent, victims of a system that is rotten, but will not fall alone. They lack a programmatic vision and an organizational perspective. An anti-capitalist program that encompasses demands for distribution and recognition, and an organization that can carry out the struggle for this program.

One conclusion is enlightened by Fraser's text, keeping the differences between Brazil and the United States: the need to seek the construction of a new counter-hegemonic bloc, which unites all those who resist the Bolsonaro attacks. This bloc must also fight to conquer popular sectors that voted for it in 2018 – not because he was racist, misogynistic, and homophobic, but in spite of being so – and that were looking

for a representation for their hopes of belonging and inclusion decimated by the economic crisis that has been dragging on since 2008 and that gained new momentum with the pandemic.

To do this it is necessary to highlight the common roots of class injustices and status in capitalism, making the connection between the agendas of recognition and distribution. It is not possible to deal with the antiracist struggle without revealing the intertwining of race and class, just as our struggle for the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people is not only to seek to diversify the existing social order, giving more representation to a political and economic system that benefits from the most diverse forms of oppression to increase exploitation.

It is necessary to seek a new anti-hegemonic bloc that has the working class as its leading force. But this class, as Fraser describes, cannot be “restricted to a white ethnic majority of heterosexual men, manufacturing and mining workers,” a segment that fed trumpism in the United States and finds its parallel in Brazil in the backward sectors of the working class that supported Bolsonaro.

This working class with the capacity to be the axis of the new counter hegemonic bloc must be seen in an “intersectional” way, encompassing massively immigrants, women and blacks, precarious workers, delivery workers and domestic workers (paid or unpaid). Trade unions are fundamental if they are to reinvent themselves and regain their representativeness and leadership, encompassing the new segments that are still disorganized. This bloc may also become the leading force capable of attracting youth, the LGBTQ+ community and the most impoverished sectors of the middle class. The challenge of the PSOL is to be an organizational force that has the capacity to promote, and perhaps lead, the formation of this block.

[1] More on the subject of populism in this sense see MOUFFE,

Chantal. For a left-wing populism published by Autonomia Literária, 2020.

[2] GRAMSCI, Antonio. Cadernos do Cárcere. Vol 3. 2ed. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002, p. 184.

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