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Bruno Lima Rocha

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Pollution in Beijing, at absurd levels and humanly unbearable, is a reflection of a choice of capitalist growth at whatever cost.

On Saturday 12th January, Beijing — the capital of China, the imperial city — hit absolute records of atmospheric pollution. In scenes reminiscent of the worst days of Cubatão (the “Valley of Death” in the 1980s), the air became unbreathable, surpassing human tolerance levels by forty times.

As I’ve written here on other occasions, this is nothing new — it’s part of the contemporary paradox. Since the motto of Deng Xiaoping (To get rich is glorious!) was adopted as the State’s *raison d’être*, the country of Mao Zedong has spared no effort to achieve economic growth and development — at any cost — of the productive forces. The problem lies elsewhere.

Through the Export Processing Zones (in the 1980) initially, then with the gradual liberalization of the economy (though without opening the capital market), Chinese capitalism approached two complementary extremes. On the one hand, it has applied in an exemplary way the neoliberal premise that

economic freedoms stand above political freedoms. On the other, the forms of containment of liberal democracies are of little or no value. Included among these are environmental laws which, although they improve the quality of life of citizens, ultimately reduce productivity and the scale of earnings. Between income and life, the mandarins — newly converted into wild entrepreneurs — have made their choice.

Brazilian democracy has already found a “solution” to the same problem. We have another kind of paradox, a less sincere one. Here we combine the most advanced environmental legislation in the world with wild growth of agri-business and the extraction of raw materials. Led by the commodities of soya beans and iron ore, Brazil’s trade balance anchors its national growth. We depend on the sale of commodities without added value. The bill is a high one, both in terms of dependence on these commodities and for Brazilian biomes. National developmentism does not take into account the cultural factor or life forms. Projects like Jirau¹ and Belo Monte² embody the concept. To complete the tragedy, conservative commentators classify those who defend the rational use of non-durable goods as “eco-bores”.

Chinese growth is praised for its worst aspects while here an irresponsible primary export platform is taking shape. Biodiversity is considered the most important asset in official speeches, but never a priority in development policies. This is the conviction of the Executive. The international scenario of the emerging countries is like a fairground mirror.

¹ Jirau Dam, a huge dam being built on the Madeira River in western Brazil.

² Another huge dam in northern Brazil, built without any regard for indigenous communities.