


Environmental devastation under the Bolsonaro government: unveiling a “myth”

Devastação ambiental no governo Bolsonaro: desvendando um mito

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Abstract: This article reflects on the Bolsonaro government’s environmental management interventions, led by a process of deepening bourgeois ideological decadence. Despite the undeniable devastation of nature and the international consensus regarding the ideology of sustainable development, the Bolsonaro government made use of an arsenal of ideas disconnected from this reality, by which it imposed an impossible *fantasy* on the order of capital, a country without “environmental issues”. To unravel this *myth*, we present the results of bibliographic and documentary research. We conclude that the ideological decadence and environmental management under the Bolsonaro government played an important role in removing obstacles for capital to “drive a coach and horses through” and advance its process of accumulation, leaving a trail of destruction, as demonstrated by the increase in deforestation.

Keywords: Bolsonaro government. The “Environmental issue”. Ideological decadence.

Resumo: o artigo objetiva refletir sobre as intervenções do governo Bolsonaro na gestão ambiental, orientadas por um processo de aprofundamento da decadência ideológica burguesa. A despeito do movimento do real, da inegável devastação da natureza e do consenso internacional — em termos da ideologia do desenvolvimento sustentável —, o governo Bolsonaro se utilizou de um arsenal de ideias desvinculadas da realidade, por meio do qual impôs a fantasia do impossível na ordem do capital: um país sem “questão ambiental”. Para desvendar esse *mito*, apresentamos os resultados de pesquisa bibliográfica e documental. Concluímos que a decadência ideológica e a gestão ambiental no referido governo cumpriram importante papel na liberação de entraves para o capital *passar a boiada* e avançar no seu processo de acumulação, deixando rastros de destruição, como demonstra o aumento do desmatamento.

Palavras-chave: Governo Bolsonaro. “Questão ambiental”. Decadência ideológica.

1 Introduction

Among the various current analyses, Casimiro (2020) offers a perspective that seeks to understand “[...] the tragedy and the farce [...]” (Casimiro, 2020, p. 16) of the rise of extreme right factions in Brazil in 2019. For Casimiro, following Marxist thought, the *theatre* that took place in Brazil that year was a real and absolutely tragic farce, characterised by actions that were a clear offensive against public education and research institutions, environmental regulations, and human and labour rights, attacks against indigenous peoples,

and a lack of decorum. In short, a farce that combined the tragic and the comic, but nevertheless was able to solidify a reactionary project through which progress was made in providing the reforms demanded by capital in crisis.

This article reflects on some of the dangers, offensives, and setbacks experienced in Brazil — particularly in environmental management under the Bolsonaro government — and is supported by Marxist and Marxian contributions. The factors that make up the anatomy of capital society allow us to expound the foundations of the “environmental issue” and the role of ideology in its concealment. As Marx and Engels (2007) warned us: “[...] If, in every ideology, men and their relations appear upside down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon results from their historical life process, just as the inversion of objects on the retina results from their immediately physical life process” (Marx; Engels, 2007, p. 94).

The change in the metabolism between man and nature has a historical and social determination, so it can only be explained by the relationships established between men in the material organisation of life, by capitalist social relations, in which the private appropriation of labour, nature, and the means of production come into conflict with sustainability. The deepening of the contradictions in contemporary capitalism and its structural crisis have highlighted the “environmental issue”, and a field of ideological and political disputes has been created around it. Within the complex and diverse environmentalist ideology, the ideology of sustainable development prevails, and this hides the social determinations of capitalist relations as being the basis of the “environmental issue”. It preaches the possibility of reconciling the capitalist market and nature, even when the movement of real life shows the contrary. The concealment of capitalist contradictions by bourgeois apologetics and the disregard for reality to guarantee the preservation of the capitalist social order were translated into ideas that Marx and Engels (2007) called *deliberate hypocrisy* and Lukács called (1968) *ideological decadence*. It is our understanding that the guiding ideas of environmental management produced under the Bolsonaro government are developments of this process and, as Iasi (2020) suggests, an aggravation of *ideological decadence*.

Chosen as a *myth* by which to govern Brazil from 2019 to 2022, Bolsonaro led actions that accelerated and deepened regressive processes typical of capitalism in crisis, and strengthened the widespread conservatism and reactionism in Brazilian society. The regression of democratic achievements, including the right-of-all to a balanced environment, was underpinned by the denial of scientific advances — with particular disregard for research and studies demonstrating the existence of the “environmental issue”¹ — and by the criminalisation of collective actors and those demanding social and environmental rights.

Our understanding is that it is not possible to reconcile capitalism with socially and environmentally sustainable development, given that the contradictions of capitalist production and reproduction tend to increase social inequality and the destruction of nature (Mészáros, 2011). The Bolsonaro government’s environmental dismantling project was a political and programmatic retreat from the adherence to proposals to confront the “environmental issue”, even those engraved on the surface of the ideology of sustainable development, an ideology established by the bourgeois order itself.

¹ Understood here as a “[...] set of manifestations of the destructiveness of nature – whose roots lie in the development of property relations – and their sociopolitical consequences” (Silva, 2010, p. 82).

In view of this, we state that under the Bolsonaro administration there was a farce in which the “environmental issue” became one of the targets of ideological decadence as a form of consciousness (Iasi, 2020). This decadence was expressed in bizarre attempts to create a “*mythology*” around the environmental issue, treating it as a Marxist climate conspiracy, “climatism”, or climate alarmism, to make people believe that the “environmental issue” was a phantom against which, in order to counter it, necessitated the denial the demands for social and environmental sustainability.

Earlier, as a member of parliament, Bolsonaro has positioned himself against actions to preserve the environment, mocked environmental movements, and aligned himself with highly polluting economic sectors. As president, he delivered speeches that presented Brazil as having resolved the “environmental issue”, a position that is not supported by reality. For example, the collapse of the dam at the Córrego do Feijão Mine, in Brumadinho, Minas Gerais (MG), occurred three days after he declared, at the 2019 World Economic Forum in Davos, that “[...] we are the country that best preserves the environment [...]” (Bolsonaro apud Sudré, 2019, unpaginated).

We employ data from bibliographic and documentary sources to develop our arguments regarding environmental management under the Bolsonaro government to offer some elements that contribute to unravelling the strategy behind this farce, the objective of which was to obscure the “environmental issue” even when confronted by such devastating results.

The article has two topics. In the first, we question the strategy of sustainable development, pointing out its ideological character, and go on to demonstrate the deepening ideological decline under the Bolsonaro government, and its attempt to obscure the “environmental issue”. In the second, we present evidence of unsustainability that continued to occur despite efforts to cover it up, and we consider some government environmental management interventions and indications of increased deforestation in Brazil. We conclude that the ideological decline under the Bolsonaro government led to regressive practices in environmental management that removed obstacles to capitalist accumulation and enabled capital to “drive a coach and horses through”. This requires, on the part of the working class, a critical social consciousness capable of unveiling the ideologies and *myths* used to cover up the “environmental issue”.

2 Ideological decline and the “environmental issue”: from sustainable development to the climate change farce

Since the Brundtland Report was drafted in 1987, the international consensus — established through pacts, agreements, and commitments between multilateral organisations, governments, businesspeople, banks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and social movements — has argued that sustainable development, with goals and targets to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations, 2015), is the strategy that can reconcile capitalist expansion with environmental and social sustainability. Formulated from the perspective of big capital, sustainable development does not oppose the process of the commodification of nature, limiting itself to proposing technological and behavioural changes, without altering the social relations in which the deepest determinations of the “environmental issue” are found (Silva, 2010).

The “environmental issue” constitutes a social challenge which is, according to Mészáros (2011), of the highest importance, as capital ignores the demands of a “[...] socially viable human dominion over the forces of nature” (Mészáros, 2011, p. 608). One strategy of capital to ensure its reproduction, is to accelerate the consumption of goods or decrease the turnover time of capital through disposability, thus institutionalising waste. Mészáros (2011) also points out that the current crisis of capital has required the change from productive destruction to destructive production, in which the costs of environmental degradation are socialised, while most humanity is denied the basic conditions for survival.

Sustainable development, green capitalism, and conscious consumption are empty expressions of possibilities, supported by the preservation of capitalist social relations and the fragile promise that changes to technology and cultural values will solve environmental problems — a promise that is only convincing due to the power of concealment, inversion, and the naturalisation of an ideological reality. Foladori (2001) warned of the limits of this proposal when he stated that:

[...] the aim is to correct the effects of capitalist production through technical means, that is, by placing filters here and there, establishing quotas or taxes in other cases, etc. Without discussing the efficiency of such technical measures at this point, it is clear that none of them affect the capitalist social form of production. In this sense, these are class-based positions in defence, obviously, of the capitalist class, owner of the means of production and, therefore, of the instruments with which it transforms nature into useful objects and spaces (Foladori, 2001, p. 106).

By denying class contradictions and the historical and social determinants of the “environmental issue,” the sustainable development proposal sets out a guiding ideology for public and private policies, programmes, and actions. The result is more of the same environmental and social unsustainability, as is evident in a brief visit to Brazil. By keeping the deepest determinations of this destructiveness hidden, concentrated in the logic of capitalist accumulation, the ideology of sustainable development manages to remain intact, as a form of wealth, private property, the exploitation of labour, and commodity. Through Marx and Engels (2007), we understand that ideology is a particular form of social consciousness with the capacity to dominate its producers “[...] as a hostile and alien force [...]” (Iasi, 2017, p. 93), that is required for the reproduction of capitalist domination.

Brazil’s active participation in various international agreements in defence of the environment, such as Rio92 and Rio+20, demonstrated the governments’ commitment to sustainable development proposals, and its criticisms, in various media outlets, referred more to dissatisfaction with the limited progress in implementing this strategy.

Among the advances worth mentioning — fruits of the period of the re-democratisation of Brazil, of the demands of environmental movements, of the environmentalisation of social struggles, and of internationally signed pacts and commitments — is the right-of-all to; a balanced environment, guaranteed in the 1988 Constitution; public management of the environment through the National Environmental System (Sisnama), established by the National Environmental Policy (PNMA); and control instruments such as environmental licensing and the participation of civil society in conferences and management councils (Mendonça, 2015).

Notwithstanding these advances, Mendonça (2015) identified in the 2000s, and especially in the last terms of the Lula (2007-2010) and Dilma (2011-2015) governments, a dangerous attack on the environmental agenda arising from the neo-developmental model, which revealed itself to be yet another discourse hiding the social-liberal ideology (Castelo, 2013). The process of deindustrialisation, which began in the 1990s and continued into the 2000s, deepened the re-primarisation of the economy and increased production of *commodities* for export, in which the agribusiness and mining sectors gained strength, in a “[...] shift of the production frontier towards products intensive in natural resources [...]” (Gonçalves, 2011, p. 2), this meant a significant increase in the demand for land.

Socio-environmental conflicts have intensified amid a series of public works and interventions under the Growth Acceleration Programme (PAC), which required the relaxation of environmental legislation and the fragmentation and defunding of the implementing agencies, including the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) and the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBIO) (Mendonça, 2015; Marques, 2016). International pacts and multilateral agreements have also demonstrated a weakening of the environmental agenda in Brazil, including the non-adherence to “[...] the New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF), signed by 180 parties worldwide, including governments, corporations, Indigenous peoples and NGOs” (Marques, 2016, p. 43).

Since the “environmental issue” is a constituent part of the capitalist mode of production, the State, regardless of the form of government, cannot be dissociated from this dynamic owing to the “[...] ontological dependence between economy and politics” (Silva; Santos, 2020, p. 30). Despite the different configurations of a modern bourgeois State, its *essence* is irrefutable, and its intervention is increasingly required during structural crises of capital, resulting in the deepening of the “environmental issue”. With the advance of the global economic crisis and its consequences in Brazil, the regressive trend in the environmental agenda has become more pronounced. The optimistic outlook regarding the neoliberal version of the State, implemented in the 2000s through the class conciliation pact, was interrupted by the 2016 coup. With the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, what had previously seemed a short “detour” in environmental management took a profoundly regressive path, particularly with the arrival of Bolsonaro into the federal executive in 2019. This caused a rapid return to indicators that it had already surpassed during more than four decades of, albeit limited, achievements.

But why would a government committed to the expanded reproduction of capital and the implementation of ultra-liberal counter-reforms offer resistance, even to a conservative environmental ideology? We will follow the pathway opened by Iasi (2020) to understand that the dominant ideas in Brazilian social formation at the time of the rise of the extreme right, and under the Bolsonaro government, resulted from a worsening of the ideological decadence that has affected capitalism and its intellectuals, organic or traditional, since the class struggle first exacerbated their contradictions. For Iasi, at certain historical moments, the contradictions of capital unmask the illusory nature of the dominant ideas:

Marx was convinced that there is a connection between the dominant ideas and the dominant social relations – or, more precisely, the relations *that make a class the dominant class*. The historical movement, however, moves through contradictions in such a way that the social relations within which the productive forces developed can

become obstacles. At the moment when this happens, a contradiction is established and the ideas that previously corresponded become inauthentic, non-corresponding. However, Marx and Engels argue, the more they are contradicted by life and the less they are worth to one's own consciousness, the more resolutely they are affirmed, the more hypocritical, moralistic and saintly the language of the normal society in question becomes (The German Ideology, pp. 283-4). The consciousness of this time, in the authors' words, thus becomes a conscious illusion, a 'deliberate hypocrisy' (Iasi, 2020, unpaginated, our emphasis).

As a presidential candidate, Bolsonaro presented an ultra-neoliberal project based on the denial of any environmental control over the market; the debate seemed to regress to the times of developmentalist Brazil and the civil-military dictatorship of the 1970s. With this awful period of history in the past, environmental awareness had advanced significantly. However, attacks on democracy can be repeated as many times as necessary. Denying environmental issues today, in the name of market freedom, requires resorting once again to an authoritarianism capable of blinding inconveniently attentive eyes and silencing voices that denounce the unsustainability of capitalist development in Brazil. In fact, attachment to the past haunts us, "[...] the tradition of all dead generations weighs on the brains of the living like a nightmare" (Marx, 2011, p. 5).

Sustainable development boasts the appearance of civility. Bolsonaro's rusticity, his complete rejection of this ideology, which began during his election campaign, reflects a deepening ideological decadence that was mobilised to support the interests of the ruling class. The result of the 2018 elections brought with it the possibility of rejecting even this bourgeois agenda of a *green economy* and its accompanying guidelines and resorting to the unscrupulous defence that capitalist development can continue without agreements on climate, forest, and biodiversity.

Bolsonaro's environmental management achieved as many as possible of his campaign promises: the so-called impassable barriers to economic enterprise have been systematically attacked. Even before he was sworn in, he influenced Brazil's decision to withdraw from hosting the Climate Summit (COP-25)² planned for 2019, demonstrating his political unwillingness to collaborate in strengthening collective spaces for environmental management.

The appointment of lawyer Ricardo Salles³ to the Ministry of the Environment (MMA) was essential in conducting environmental management aimed at "[...] driving a coach and horses through"⁴. The "environmental issue" was treated as climate ideology, in the words of the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Bolsonaro government:

² Conference held for governments to announce updated national plans and strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in an attempt to ensure that global warming is kept below 2°C this century as part of the 2015 Paris Agreement.

³ Linked to the Ruralist bloc and convicted of environmental fraud two weeks before taking office. In the words of the president, he was the "perfect marriage" between MMA and Mapa (Leal; Angelo; Araújo, 2023). Salles was fired in 2021 and the management of the Ministry of the Environment passed to ruralist Joaquim Álvaro Pereira Leite, (Venaglia, 2021) who continued to "drive a coach and horses through" with the openly anti-ecological policy of the Bolsonaro government).

⁴ During a meeting held in April 2020, the video of which was made public, the then minister laid out the *modus operandi* of environmental management: "We need to make an effort here, while we are in this moment of tranquillity in terms of press coverage, because all anyone is talking about is Covid, and we need to drive the coach and horses forward, and change all the (environmental) rules, and simplify standards" (Salles apud Alessi, 2020, unpaginated).

The environmental cause was launched by Romantic writers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a conservative movement par excellence, which emerged in reaction to the emergence of the left in the world in the form of the French Revolution, whose proposal was to destroy nature – starting with human nature. Over time, however, the left hijacked the environmental cause and perverted it until it reached its peak in the last 20 years with the ideology of climate change, “climatism”. “Climatism” gathered some data that suggested a correlation between rising temperatures and increased CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere, ignored data that suggested the opposite, and created a ‘scientific’ dogma that no one can challenge under penalty of being excommunicated from good society – exactly the opposite of the scientific spirit (Araújo, 2018 apud Scantimburgo, 2018, p. 107).

This reading of the situation lacks historical evidence and expresses an ideological decadence that presents itself as “[...] an evasion of reality, with an escape in the predominance of ‘pure’ ideology (Lukács, apud Iasi, 2020, unpaginated). As the capitalist mode of production advanced in expanding the reproduction of capital, as evidenced by the social processes of the late post-Second World War phase, its contradictions have grown exponentially. The wealth produced demands increasingly more from nature and at a faster pace, compromising the response capacity of ecosystems. In the transition from the 1960s/1970s, these processes emerged into the social consciousness, giving rise to environmental movements (Silva, 2010).

Within the tangled web of environmental issues, ideological strategies to neutralise any debate that might lead to a questioning of the capitalist social order have been gaining ground and hegemony to prevent the environmental agenda from realising its anti-capitalist potential. Environmentalism has been captured by market logic, demonstrating the hollowness of the fanciful idea that the Left had hijacked the environmental cause.

The Bolsonaro administration portrayed the country as being the *most* environmentally friendly. To ensure this, controls and the silencing of the various collective actors involved in defending an environmental agenda were imposed. Hence the dismantling of environmental policy, from implementation to social control, the contesting of data released by research institutes and environmental monitoring agencies, and the threats to withdraw the country from international agreements, showing a lack of commitment to agreed goals, such as the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. To ensure capital had the lead role in its predatory relationship with nature, a smokescreen was necessary to obscure the evident environmental damage and justify the dismantling of environmental management. Below is a selection of the strategies employed by the Bolsonaro government to accomplish this task.

3 “Where there’s smoke there’s fire”: devastation under the environmental management of the Bolsonaro government

Restructuring the institutions and agencies involved in environmental protection was one of the central thrusts of the Bolsonaro government. Despite the declared desire to abolish the Ministry of the Environment (MMA), the main agency responsible for implementing Brazilian environmental policy, and merge it with the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAPA), political conditions prevented him from doing so, and the MMA retained its status as a ministry. He did, however, implement significant changes to appease the agenda of national and international capital, especially the fractions of the bourgeoisie linked to agribusiness and mining.

Among the changes to the MMA structure, we highlight the: 1. transfer of the Brazilian Forest Service (SFB) and the Rural Environmental Registry (CAR), to fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply (MAPA), also responsible for the demarcation of indigenous lands; 2. transfer of water resources policy, including the National Water Agency, to the Ministry of Regional Development; 3. transfer of the economic agenda on extraction to MAPA; 4. removal of the climate change theme from the MMA's responsibilities by abolishing the Secretariat for Climate Change and Forests; 5. abolishing of the Department of Environmental Education; 6. abolishing of the Secretariat for Extraction, Regional Development and Combating Desertification; and 7. the abolishing of the Secretariat for Institutional Coordination and Environmental Citizenship (National Association of Environmental Services, 2020).

The offensive against environmental policy is, therefore, clearly evidenced by the deliberate weakening of the implementing bodies and the subordination of environmental issues to agricultural business:

On the list of the responsibilities of the MMA there is a striking absence of any mention of combating deforestation, which has always been a core environmental policy. If the government continues to take no action against environmental crime, as the new government regulations suggest, the consequences will be irreversible damage to the environment, which the Constitution defines as the heritage of all society. [...] The dismantling of socio-environmental policies seems to pretend that these challenges and demands no longer exist. The new regulations have gone so far as to practically eliminate references to combating climate change in the structure of the MMA. The Secretariat for Climate Change and Forests no longer exists. All that remains is a passing reference to the National Climate Change Fund and its Management Committee. It is as if the president wanted to end the problem by omitting references to it (Instituto Socioambiental, 2019, unpaginated).

In terms of social control, there have been dramatic setbacks to the progress made in democratising public policies post the 1988 Constitution. Bolsonaro's intervention led to the vacating or even closure of the spaces for civil society participation where social control is exercised, thus impacting environmental policy councils and committees. Analysts point out that Decree No. 9,759/2019 (Brazil, 2019a), which contains these revocations, affected around 500 federal bodies. The Brazilian Climate Change Forum (FBMC), the National Native Vegetation Recovery Plan Commission (Conaveg), the National Biodiversity Commission (Conabio), and the National Forestry Commission (Conaflor) are examples of participatory spaces for environmental control that were abolished.

The decree did not have the legal force to extinguish collegiate bodies established by law. Faced with this impasse, Bolsonaro, through Decree No. 9,806/2015⁵ (Brazil, 2019b), changed the composition of the National Environmental Council (Conama), reducing the number of members from 96 to 23, of which 10 were government appointees. Civil representation on the council was reduced to four members, selected by lottery.

⁵ The Supreme Federal Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal, STF) suspended the effects of the decree and Bolsonaro signed a new decree (11.018/22) — which changed the composition of Conama, providing 8 seats for civil society. ICMBio and ANA returned to the collegiate body, however, the exclusion of the Ministry of Health and entities representing indigenous peoples remained. Another change was the increase in the number of representatives of business entities, from two to five. With this new decree, Conama now has 36 representatives (Menegassi, 2022, unpaginated).

The disastrous environmental management of the Bolsonaro government resulted, from its first year in power, in an increased rate of deforestation, which has since increasingly diverged from climate agreement goals. The rising deforestation rate was soon criticised, even by segments of the economy, so that in 2020 the structure of the MMA underwent further changes. Through Decree No. 10,455 (Brazil, 2020a), the Ministry once again included a secretariat for climate, the Secretariat of Climate and International Relations, and for the Amazon rainforest, The Secretariat of the Amazon and Environmental Services. However, environmentalists expressed their distrust of this reorganisation as follows:

[...] For Adriana Ramos, from the Socioenvironmental Institute (ISA), “the best example that the government has taken several cosmetic measures just to counter, as the government itself says, the narrative that it considers to be an ‘international smear campaign’ is the issue of climate change having returned to the agenda subordinate to International Relations, as if we only dealt with climate change from here on out, but had no responsibility [for the issue] at home”, she said (Prizibiszki, 2020, unpaginated).

The reactivation of the National Council for the Legal Amazon was, likewise, seeking to demonstrate a response by the government to the dissatisfaction of Brazilian and foreign companies, which were signalling the market’s “nervousness” by threatening to boycott Brazilian products as a response to the growing figures for deforestation. Initially created in 1995, the Council sat within the structure of the MMA. Decree No. 10,239/2020 (Brazil, 2020b) established a link between the Council and the Vice-Presidency of the Republic and excluded from its composition the governors of the states forming the Legal Amazon⁶. It also strengthened the military leadership working in 14 ministries allied to the government. Furthermore, it excluded agencies working to protect the Amazon rainforest, in areas of reserves and Indigenous lands, such as ICMBio, the National Indian Foundation (Funai) and civil society organisations.

As a strategy to obscure the “environmental issue”, attacks on research institutes and controlling the dissemination of environmental monitoring results played an important role. Publications by the National Institute for Space Research (INPE), which reveal an exponential increase in deforestation and degradation alerts in the Amazon, were contested by the federal government. In response to the uncomfortable result that, between the first half of 2018 and the first half of 2019, Brazil recorded an 88% increase in deforestation alerts, 38% in indigenous lands and 85% in Federal Conservation Units, the government reacted not only by discrediting the Institute and its research, but also by dismissing researchers who held leadership and coordination positions in the agency. Shortly after the release of this data, physicist Ricardo Galvão was dismissed from his position as director of INPE. In 2020, the coordinator of Earth Observation, Lúbia Vinhas, was dismissed from her position after the release of data showing a record number of deforestation alerts: in June 2020, the alerts covered an area of 1,034.4 km², the largest coverage in the month of June since 2015 (National Association of Environmental Services, 2020).

Bolsonaro’s decision that the alarming data from INPE be reported to the government before being released publicly was an unequivocal demonstration of his intention to censor environmental monitoring in the Legal Amazon. In July 2019, the deforestation alert covered

⁶ Comprising the states of Acre, Amapá, Amazonas, Maranhão, Mato Grosso, Pará, Rondônia, Roraima e Tocantins.

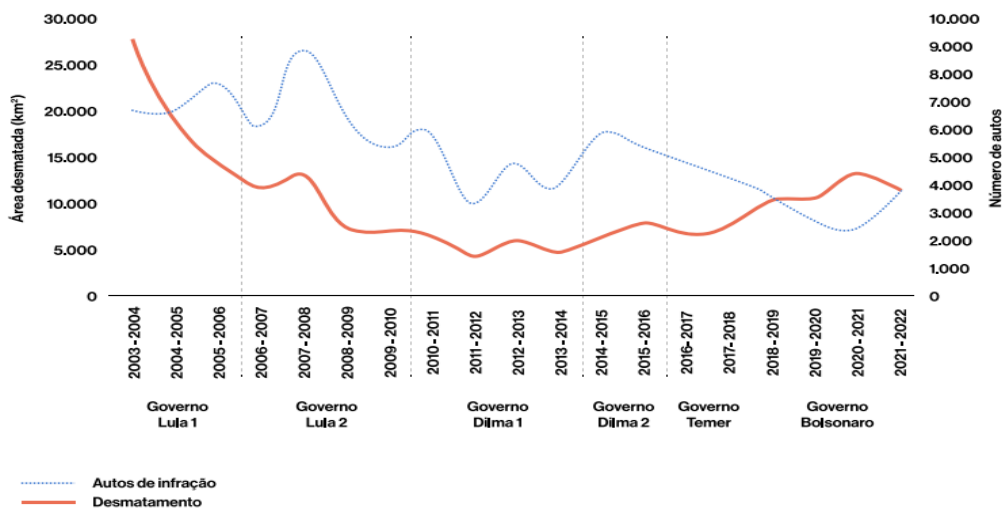
an area of 2,254.9 km², an increase of 278% compared to July 2018. In the first half of 2020, this number rose to 3,069.57 km², representing an increase of 25% compared to the first half of 2019 (After..., 2020).

Regarding international consensus, disagreement with agreed goals was a hallmark of the Bolsonaro government and the setback regarding the Sustainable Development Goals is revealing. The pact, containing 17 goals and 169 targets to be achieved by 2030, considers the eradication of poverty to be the “[...] greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development” (United Nations, 2015, unpaginated). The inclusion of these targets in the approved Multi-Year Plan (PPA) 2020-2023 (Brazil, 2019c) was vetoed, yet another piece of evidence that does not match the discourse that sought to convince Brazilian society and international nations that sustainability was central to the government’s efforts, as Bolsonaro stated at the IV Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/UN), in March 2021.

Agriculture, overseen by MAPA, is one of the largest economic contributors to deforestation and shared the same theme as the environment in the 2020-2023 PPA. Defined as an environmental axis, almost R\$140 billion were allocated for the period of the plan, with 98.5% of the resources for MAPA’s operations and the remainder for the MMA (ClimaInfo, 2019). The priorities set in the budget are further proof of the neoliberal political project of the Bolsonaro government, aligned with predatory capitalist logic, to serve the agribusiness sector, which is expanding over Brazilian territory. This has deepened the disregard for human needs and the environmental conditions on which they depend, especially traditional communities and Indigenous peoples.

The “coach and horses” which reshaped regulations, scrapped inspection agencies, and removed sources of funding, resulted in a Brazil with little environmental protection, allowing loggers, land grabbers, illegal miners, and the agribusiness and mining sectors to take centre stage, benefiting the advancement of their economic ventures. The results were disastrous. From 2019 to 2022, deforestation rates became an even more worrying, with a 59.5% increase in the area deforested in the Amazon. The executive secretary of the Climate Observatory, Marcio Astrini, pointed out that Bolsonaro took over the country with an annual rate of 7,500 km² of deforestation in the Amazon annually and ended his term with 11,500 km². At the same time, there was a 38% drop in fines applied by the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama), compared to the period 2015-2018, as shown in graph 1:

Graph 1 – Deforestation in the Amazon and Ibama fines for violations against flora



fonte: Inpe (2022) e Ibama (2022). Portal de dados abertos (29.11.2022).

Source: reproduced from Leal, Angelo and Araújo (2023).

The evidence presented here demonstrates that Bolsonaro and his ministerial team spared no effort in safeguarding the interests of the dynamics of capital. This contributed to an increase in the environmental destructiveness that plagues contemporary times and had unequal impacts depending on social class. On the stage of history, this government was yet another example of what a decadent bourgeois ideology can achieve in reality.

4 Conclusion

The summary presented here does not claim to be an exhaustive list of the actions implemented by the Bolsonaro government in dismantling management of the environment, but we believe it is sufficient to demonstrate how ideological decadence, the ideal expression of the crisis of capital, was able to mobilise regressive practices regarding previously achieved advances. This government has made it clear that capital and its offensive against labour and the goddess Gaia are very real and are placing us on a dangerous path. Those who believe that Bolsonaro governed in an improvised and inexperienced manner are mistaken. With the support of groups guided by reactionary and moral values, the myth was given the mission of accelerating the processes that would guarantee greater flexibility and freedom for the development of commodity production, marking the place that Brazil has historically occupied in the international division of labour: that of an agrarian-exporting country.

Counter to the farcical denialism guiding the policy of dismantling environmental management, history was quick to reveal what was behind the smokescreen: our wealth, labour, and natural resources, privately appropriated by capital that was, and is, staked to feed the insane logic of the commodity. Confronting the “environmental issue” needs to be at the centre of the class struggle, with the objective of overcoming capitalism’s control over social metabolism, the State, and its governmental variations, as a bulwark of decadent bourgeois ideology. In other words, combating ideological decadence and its practical implications requires confronting the order of capital, a revolutionary struggle against a mode of production of life based on the exploitation of labour and devastation of nature, and whose ideal expression is increasingly decadent, in a purposeful hypocrisy (Marx; Engels, 2007) so that capital can advance over nature in a wasteful and destructive way.

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