



How and why European and Chinese pro-climate leadership may be challenged by their strategic economic interests in Brazil

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Abstract

Climate change has been socially constructed crisscrossed by public and private interests, asymmetries and world-view conflicts. When it comes to the legitimacy of norms to address the complexities of social conditions of vulnerability and effective actions to fulfil distributive and climate justice principles, climate change still faces a discrepancy between political announcements and incongruous practices of international actors. While analysing the cases of China and the European Union, we point out contradictions stemming from their policy goals guided by strategic interests. From a global climate justice perspective, we analyze recent power dynamics that operate at two levels: first, economic relations and negotiations between Brazil and the two poles of power, considering the scenario of socio-environmental injustice and climate insecurity; second, policy practices of both global players in climate governance, bearing in mind the notions of climate justice and development as conceptual guides to understand when and where contradictions emerge. To do so, this article is structured around three sections: (i) a brief historical account of China's and the EU's roles in international climate policy; (ii) their legacies in climate governance and the inextricable relationship between their normative behaviour and their development objectives; (iii) an overview of the signing of the strategic memorandum of understanding for economic and trade agreement between Mercosur and the EU in 2019, as well as Sino-Brazilian relations facilitating investments and trade in multiple segments vis-à-vis the most recent multifaceted backlash in Brazil's socio-environmental and climate policies.

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, climate change has been a prominent global issue on international policy agendas. Despite recent events and system-wide dynamics (the 2008 global financial crisis, the Brexit, the Trump administration, the new wave of anti-science and anti-climate authoritarian leaders in Western democracies and Southern countries, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.), climate change has gained significant normative and political contours at the multilateral level (Biermann et al. 2010; Boulet et al. 2016; Bulkeley and Newell 2010). Especially since the signing of the Paris Agreement in 2015, states actors have strengthened their climate commitments through consensus-building around broad prescriptions, such as nations' pledges to new targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GEEs) voluntarily through their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), but also through the acknowledgement of input coming from relevant non-state actors, innovative modalities of action, transversal policy areas based on new understandings of development and the need for a just and equitable low/zero-carbon economy.

The repertoire of climate negotiations, whose processes expose ideas, collective views, and behaviours that shape norms in their multiple regimes has reached an inflection point in the matter of development (Björkdahl 2002; Boulet et al. 2016; Chasek et al. 2017). Climate change has been socially constructed crisscrossed by public and private interests, social disputes, asymmetries and world-view conflicts. Its potential effects affect both material and ideational dimensions of social relations, stretching to different scales, degrees, territories and policy areas. The historical experiences of the climate agenda have crafted at least two fundamental aspects, which are based on a political and ideological rhetoric led by particular challenges that generate contradictions across the field in contemporary negotiations. First, we observe a dispute over the subject-matter itself, both in terms of narratives about its existence,¹ causalities and impacts (Lahsen 2015; Dryzek et al. 2011; Chakrabarty 2009), as well as in terms of public policy responses, regulations and development models. Second, when it comes to the legitimacy of norms and the implementation of rules to address both the complexities of social conditions of vulnerability and effective actions to fulfil distributive and climate justice principles, climate change still faces a discrepancy between political announcements and incongruous practices.

Our paper focuses on this second aspect. While analysing the cases of the People's Republic of China (hereafter, only China) and the European Union (EU), and their claimed leading roles in the climate multilateral regime, we point out several contradictions that dialectically result from their policy goals guided by strategic interests. Inspired by a Neo-Gramscian perspective (Cox 1987; Ollman 2014; Teschke and Cemgil 2014), we hypothesize that the promotion of a global zero/low carbon economy agenda raises a new rationale for political behaviour and the need

¹ Washington and Cook (2011) present similarities and differences among the contrarians and deniers, the climate skepticism (as the so-called French movement "climato-sceptiques"), and the emergence of other reactionary movements that refute the climate crisis.

to (re)define the rules of the international climate game. Nonetheless, this redefinition involves a set of constraints related both to short-term economic interests in different world regions and the realities of political power analyzed from the global justice frame of reference (Baer et al. 2010; Bourban 2018; Holifield 2020; Lucke et al. 2021).

While analysing one key country where both the EU and China have strategic trade and investment interests, we argue that the legitimacy of these two global climate actors in maintaining the status quo as leaders of climate negotiations (Bulkeley and Newell 2010; Cuyckens 2012; Franchini et al. 2017; Giddens 2011; Viola et al 2012) comes to be questioned when we consider existing controversial linkages between their mobilization for economic growth and promised global climate norms. The EU is a normative leader in multilateral settings, and its norm-making reflects its competitive advantages in pro-climate energy innovation and environmental services, even though the EU must deal with internal energy matrix variations. China leads the G-77+China grouping in multilateral negotiations and is a major provider of economic cooperation (investments, trade, infrastructure) and technical cooperation (agriculture, capacity-building, etc.) to Southern countries. In addition, China has changed its positioning in multilateral climate talks and decision-making instances to take on more responsibility in the climate burden (Jinnah 2017), thus showcasing solidarity towards Southern countries facing short-term adaptation difficulties (LDS, small islands, countries with threatened coastal zones, etc.).

In both cases, leadership supposes followership and does not ignore interests behind political announcements and promises of North–South or South–South solidarity. The lack of policy coherence of China’s and the EU’s positioning in different multilateral spaces as well as their motivations to promote foreign aid and sign trade or investment agreements must also be considered. The case of their bilateral relations with Brazil, one of the major global emitters, a very relevant player on international climate negotiations and our comparative variable, is of chief importance to explore contradictions between a pro-climate diplomatic rhetoric and a series of strategic decisions in economic, trade and foreign aid domains. For both China and the EU, Brazil is a strategic partner for commodities, investment and access to a huge domestic market (Saraiva and Gavião 2020; Cariello 2018); besides, it has historically been in China’s and EU’s sphere of economic interests, and analysing both players’ trade profile, investment portfolio and aid programmes in Brazil can be instrumental to understand their controversial local and global impacts—as demonstrated by deforestation rates resulting from agribusiness expansion whose production is associated with exports and foreign consumption (Kroll and Shogren 2008; Themoteo 2020).

From a global climate justice perspective (Gardiner 2004, Harlan et al. 2015, Vanderheiden 2013), we aim to analyze recent power dynamics that operate at two levels: first, economic-commercial relations and negotiations between Brazil and China, as well as between Brazil and the EU, considering their impacts on the Brazilian territory, with emphasis on the scenario of socio-environmental injustice and climate insecurity; second, policy practices of both China and the EU in climate governance, bearing in mind the notions of climate justice and development as conceptual guides to observe these contradictions. Unlike other studies that analyze

climate justice issues in state behaviour by focusing on negotiations and institutions, we demonstrate that the interdependence between domestic and international levels is often more decisive for the understanding of the contradictions that prevail in prescribing policy goals and criteria, conceptions of justice and the legitimacy of the climate change multilateral regime itself. For the climate agenda, the domestic-international nexus encompasses understandings, arrangements and bridge-building, as well as disagreements, disputes and conflicts of interest at different and complex political levels (Inoue 2016). Our approach allows us to contribute both to the climate justice literature on the social, political and economic dimensions of structural inequalities and system asymmetries and to the broader literature on climate politics and international political economy, recalling a classical dilemma in international relations: although countries have a common goal in protecting collective goods from all sorts of risks, they seek to preserve their own interests.

The article is divided in three sections: the first one addresses a brief historical account of China's and the EU's roles in international climate policy. The second section succinctly highlights their legacies in climate governance and the inextricable relationship between their normative behaviour and their development objectives. The third one provides an overview (i) of the signing of the strategic memorandum of understanding for economic and trade agreement between Mercosur and the EU in 2019 and (ii) of Sino-Brazilian relations facilitating investments and trade in multiple segments vis-à-vis the most recent multifaceted backlash in Brazil's socio-environmental and climate policies. Methodologically, the paper is based on an interdisciplinary review of studies in Political Science, Sociology, International Relations and Political Ecology. In addition, the article also relies on archival research on newspapers, such as *Diálogo Chino*, *Nature* and *Agência Pública*, technical notes produced by governmental agencies, reports published by civil society organizations and official databases.

Climate change as a 'strategic opportunity'

China and the European Union are two key players in global climate governance and many other international agendas.² They are two poles of power in what Keohane and Victor (2010) have described as the climate 'complex of regimes' ordered between (i) the flow of consensually integrated international legal spaces, institutions and cooperation schemes, and (ii) fragmented and multi-thematic unofficial arrangements. Both have played leading roles in the decision-making processes of climate agreements, although often in different positions and

² Scholars have analyzed the Chinese and European emergence as strategic partners in global governance (Belis and Schunz 2013; Hochstetler and Milkoreit 2014), their dialogues for the mutual recognition of their respective identities (Yiwei 2012), the Chinese positions as 'normative engagement' (Jinnah 2017), the economic competition between the EU and China (Oertel et al. 2020) and the uncertainties of sustaining the climate regime due to domestic instabilities, such as the Brexit and the Chinese fossil fuel-intensive growth model (Liu et al. 2019). Here we adopt another perspective in the analysis of their global roles in climate change.

adopting contrasting trajectories: one, critical to a Western liberal international order, acting together with G-77 and not automatically adhering to commitments or procedures (Moreira and Ribeiro 2016); the other, consistently supporting a pro-climate agenda and actively addressing norms and responsibilities.

These different features have evolved over the years and showcase the complexity of climate policy and the linkages between the climate regime and international hierarchies, economic asymmetries and the very core of existing global power relations. In the early 1990s, when the international order was going through structural transformations, China and the EU addressed a vast integration of internal agendas to the global market. Such processes of economic growth and expansion of strategic technological and financial sectors involved an orchestration of multilateral strengthening and the pluralization of transnational commercial and investment relations, access to natural resources and consumer goods, as well as setting-up of regulatory patterns. All these elements have since then evolved and contributed to their current competitive edge in the field of climate services and technologies.

Disruptive global and domestic scenarios, North–South tensions and inequalities among key state and non-state actors have traditionally been part of international climate negotiations (Keohane 2015; Viola et al. 2012); however, the institutional fragmentation of climate change governance has often hindered progress in the definition of responsibilities and generated normative frailty (Biermann et al. 2010; Ostrom 2014; Zelli and van Asselt 2013). The climate agenda is highly dependent on the political, economic, commercial, financial, social, and cultural relations in the international system. Therefore, one must see its effects not only in terms of its harmful impacts in the medium and long term, but also the opportunities it produces. In dialogue with Björkdahl (2002), this means adopting an intersectional perspective to analyze ideas, motivations and patterns of collectivization that underpin climate change as a global problem. If Keohane (2015) is right when he asserts that there may be a possibility of a shift from multilateral stability towards systemic instability due to environmental crises, how do actors such as China and the EU assess their own advantages and disadvantages when they respond to collective action needs?

The emergence of climate change is connected to socio-historical configurations of the international order consisting not only in systemic events that defined the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, but also in line with the empirical realities resulting from North–South relations, demands for the recognition of rights to develop, the laws of capitalism and its contradictions, debates on distributive justice tenets and the historical responsibility of industrialized economies and the opposition between luxury and subsistence emissions (Baer et al 2010; Bond 2012; Piketty 2013; Shue 1993). The socio-historical configuration of the current international order includes, *inter alia*, the trajectories of wealth distribution between and within nations, the hegemonic disputes between states, the end of the Bretton Woods agreements, the interstate competition over natural, energy, and financial resources, the anticolonial wars, the petroleum crisis in the 1970s, the end of the Cold War, the construction of multilateral organizations, the advent of globalization as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon and the contribution of neoliberalism as economic, moral and political reason to the ascent of antidemocratic politics (Brown 2019). These are all factors that created new conceptions of the role of the state, but also of markets, individuals, families and societies.

Adopting this socio-historical configuration background implies acknowledging that the social and political capital of the climate agenda not only accompanies this succession of systemic transformations, but its economic dimension also responds to the demands that have been strengthened domestically in recent years for China and the EU. Therefore, there was a convergence between mitigation policies, business expansion and zero/low carbon targets, the opening of markets and technical and scientific training. As Liu et al. (2019) argue, China and the EU have common interests in the climate agenda, especially in the renewable energy sector, and mutual cooperation means that the carbon transition represents a ‘strategic opportunity’.

Liu et al. (2019) point out that in its 12th Five-Year Plan, China introduces a ‘normal new era of development’, characterized by changes in its industrial structure and emphasis on the quality of growth that should be sustainable and environmentally friendly. We observe this trend also in the case of the historical problem of European energy security, and in investments—both public and private—in the alternative energy sector. Such investments are associated with economic advantages resulting from less external dependence on energy and greater cumulative potential to compete in global sustainable energy markets. According to Romano (2014), the promotion of environmental sustainability, in particular the fight against climate change, endorsed the competitiveness of the European economy in relation to other markets. Present environmental protection under the cloak of pro-climate policies has given strategic interests a more political dimension; in addition, it has also helped solving issues of cost structure and resource scarcity. The coexistence of the EU’s strategic political-economic interests, the demands of an engaged scientific community and an active civil society were crucial elements for constructing social support inside and moving the European climate policy beyond its borders (Pavese and Torney 2012).

These aspects correspond to the economic capital repertoire of the climate agenda. Based on their new internal economic models of production and diffusion of services, sustainable technologies, regulatory patterns and investment frameworks in alternative energy sources, China and the EU have clear economic motivations to play a normative role in multilateral settings and to cooperate bilaterally and multilaterally. Nevertheless, from the perspective of China’s and the EU’s responses to demands from other countries, contradictions are more likely to occur, since understandings about strategic opportunities, and more specifically the confrontation of the climate crisis itself, do not always coincide with domestic priorities within a given country or a region. While in both Chinese and European discourses and positions the political will seems to mobilize more ambitious actions against global warming and ocean acidification, other practices raise concerns about the coherence of their respective commitments.³

³ The relevance of policy coherence is not well established in climate change academic and policy debates. For an in-depth analysis of policy coherence in international aid and development cooperation, see for instance: BROOKS, Jonathan. Policy coherence and food security: The effects of OECD countries’ agricultural policies, *Food Policy*, v.44, February 2014, pp. 88–94; FOSTER, J. & STOKKE, O. (ed.), *Policy Coherence in Development Co-operation*. London: Frank Cass, EADI Book Series 22. MIILLAN, N., SANTANDER, G. et al. *La Coherencia de Políticas para el Desarrollo en España. Mecanismos, actores y procesos*. Madrid: Editorial 2015 y más, 2012.

Chinese and European legacies and interests on climate change

At the onset of the twenty-first century, the EU had already established its position as a key player in the UNFCCC political-diplomatic sphere, in addition to building autonomous norms and rules as a community of law and projecting itself as a global setter of regulatory parameters. Adelle et al. (2009) note that the EU was able to promote climate change in its political narrative as a strategic vector for growth and an integrating criterium within the bloc. Hence, the European climate policy obeys the logic (and distortions) of economic, commercial and cooperation relations between the EU's own internal agendas and the external market, including building bridges for strategic partnerships under the environmental key.

Over the past 3 decades, the guidelines of Chinese climate policies have been the expression of decisions centred on Beijing's developmental priorities, under the diplomatic labels of a 'peaceful' and 'harmonious' ascent and in accordance with the canons of the Chinese Communist Party. This is related firstly to China's strategic vision of international politics—aim to maintaining the stability of the domestic regime and integrating Chinese visions into the reforms of the post-hegemonic and Western-led capitalist model. Secondly, it is associated with China's rhetoric of active participation in climate change governance as a player committed to global issues in a distinctive way from traditional powers. Hence, the Chinese climate policy projected policy-taker and policy-maker roles in multilateral instances, thus forming a joint front of resistance to developed actors, such as the EU, and allowing Beijing to take a leadership position amidst developing nations.

The idea of common but historically differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) as a negotiating principle is the founding paradigm that guided China's climate policy at the multilateral level, and, in turn, distinguished and elucidated the EU's power position vis-à-vis developing countries: the EU is an ally in combating climate change, but traditionally has been an actor from the Global North, which has as such applied political conditionalities in its cooperation strategies and has claimed the status of a norm-maker in the field of climate policy. The CDBR principle has become a pillar of legitimation that responds to how the relationship between development and climate change is a prism of the inequalities that still exist in the international order. It is, moreover, an important bedrock in building a sense of contestation in the collective pro-climate engagement. Both the EU and China, although coming from different positions in the North–South chessboard, claim to be leaders in climate justice, but both fail to act in a coherent manner (though with differences).

These landmarks are part and parcel of the semantic field of climate. In turn, these ideas and norms are frequently in question because, socially, the risk factors, the vulnerability conditions of the populations, the political and institutional instabilities or the alternation and emergence of social forces that question the legitimacy of norms and the reproduction of inequalities (like the current pro-climate youth movements) allow us to see the paradoxes within the political and economic dimensions of the agenda.

Under the aegis of a development model that attempts to reconcile new patterns of production, consumption and carbon finance, the repertoire of climate negotiations

broadened its themes (e.g., gender, food, and labour), concepts (adaptation, resilience, climate justice), cooperation mechanisms (investments in local funds and projects, monitoring, capacity building) and economic instruments (carbon pricing, emission trading). The economic models promising to expand sustainable development and regulating commercial relations based on mitigation standards and geoengineering constitute another step in the climate change agenda's increased degree of sophistication (not without contradictions) when it comes to capitalist transformations. Sustainability, the green economy, clean transition, net zero carbon, decarbonization and bioeconomy are all concepts that are part and parcel of the semantic field of the climate agenda. They unfold in the historical materiality of new modernity and capitalist experiences, thus producing key effects on the economic and social life of both China and the EU, who share the commonality of being capitalist powers and political supporters of multilateral practices in the construction of a planetary pro-climate collective action:

III. Fundamental thinking and strategy about socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era: 4. Persist in new concepts of *development*. [...] IX. Accelerate institutional reform of eco civilisation to build a beautiful China: 1. Increase green development. We must accelerate the implementation of a legal system and policy orientation in relation to green production and consumption, establishing and improving a green, circular and low-carbon economic development system. [...] We must advocate a simple, adequate, green and low-carbon lifestyle [...], to foster green ways of life. (Xi Jinping, Report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China 2017)

Climate change and the environmental degradation affect every human being. This needs a global solution. The EU is committed to: Leading by example, through the European Green Deal; Using diplomacy, trade and development cooperation to advance climate action; Setting standards for *sustainable growth* across global value chains [...]. The European Green Deal is our plan to make the EU's economy sustainable. We can do this by turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities [...]. (The European Green Deal, European Commission 2019)

In 2018, the 20th Meeting between the EU and China confirmed the strengthening of relations between these two actors, whose delegations released a *communiqué* with a series of commitments, including efforts to combat climate change, mainly with an emphasis on the energy sector.

1. The EU and China consider climate action and the clean energy transition an imperative more important than ever. [...] They underline that fighting climate change and promoting the global clean and low-carbon energy transition, especially towards sustainable, affordable, reliable and modern energy services, are mutually reinforcing objectives to achieve sustainable, secure and competitive economies. 5. The EU and China recognize the importance of developing global free trade and investment, and promoting the multilateral rule-based system to allow the full development of the low

greenhouse gas emission economy with all its benefits. (Joint Statement of the 20th EU-China Summit 2018)

China and the EU share a common view on the opportunities and the economic challenges that the climate agenda creates but also on its security threats. This may imply at the same time a set of solutions to domestic/regional issues and a leading role in long-term global economic development for both players. Furthermore, the withdrawal of the USA from the Paris Accords under the Trump administration had facilitated the creation of strategic convergences. In times of worsening China-USA trade wars, UNFCCC negotiations have become unstable, but China and the EU have so far endeavoured to come together multilaterally towards more climate ambition. The recent election of Biden and Harris in the USA opens a series of doubts and ambiguities in the way of China-EU strategic confluence of interests. How this situation will evolve under the Biden-Harris administration is still to be monitored, but as Wright and Nyberg (2015) argue, despite the need for dramatic economic and political transformations to deal with the climate crisis, capitalism continues to shape—whether through the distribution of wealth or the ‘business as usual’ of corporations—global practices, targets and solutions.

Chinese and European domestic-international climate nexus showcases that there is a long way between the establishment of climate institutional arrangements (from consensus building to the definition of norms and procedures) that ensure the legitimacy of multilateralism and guarantee reciprocity, on the one hand, and a pact for a just and equitable global action, on the other. Multiple factors intervene in this process, which goes beyond the states’ will and announcements. States are not a unitary and static entity, but instead they reflect a complex set of material conditions, ideas and institutions formed by minimally consistent social and political classes that negotiate their own interests (Cox 1987). Despite the increasing political relevance of the climate agenda, its specialized and expert-based regime still fails to create mandatory resolutions for states capable of producing effective policies that offer a minimum set of more ambitious mitigation and adaptation guidelines. The stance adopted by transnational companies, including European and Chinese state-owned and private corporations (Cariello 2018), and especially those relating to fossil fuels, infrastructure, agribusiness, forestry and mining, has been incongruous to their diplomatic discourses. This also corresponds to the shortcomings and challenges to overcome the contradictions generated by economic sectors in relations between and within countries.

Unpacking Chinese and European contradictions from a Brazilian perspective

This section focuses on Brazil’s relations with China and the EU. Brazil is home to the largest territory of the South American Amazonia, a G-20 member, and a big whale among developing countries that has also profiled itself as a Global South

democratic leadership in climate negotiations—features that justify our choice to illustrate through the Brazilian case some of Chinese and European inconsistencies vis-à-vis climate justice norms and debates. In addition, Brazil is the largest destination for foreign direct investment by the EU in Latin America and the fourth largest destination for EU investments outside Europe. Furthermore, China was distinctly relevant to the economic development experienced by Brazil at the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially in the sectors of infrastructure and high-tech imports. Brazil is the sixth largest global GHG emitter (approximately 1.939 billion gross tons in 2018, 2.9% of the world total), and something distinguishes it from the rest of the planet: Brazilian emissions are directly dependent on the variation of its deforestation rates (SEEG 2019).

The historical ties and relations between Brazil and China, as well as between Brazil and the EU, are translated into different experiences observed in a political continuum that ranges from solidarity to the defence of each party's own strategic interests. This solidarity-interest continuum is fundamental for (i) the mutually beneficial promotion of bilateral economic and trade relations in several areas; (ii) sustaining the climate change agenda as a bond of understanding for agreements, partnerships and projects; and (iii) the reproduction of a political rhetoric for the sake of stability of climate multilateralism. More recently, these bilateral relations have been facilitated by mutual interests in establishing win-win partnerships, but at the same time have generated paradoxical situations about the parties' positions as leaders on the global climate agenda. In view of the dynamics and trends operationalized by these relations, and especially considering the roles of China and the EU in international climate policy, we can highlight two central issues.⁴

First, contradictory practices give birth to policy incoherence. There is the issue of socio-environmental and climate impacts mainly caused by the means of production, which are often predatory and at the roots of the primary trade of goods and commodities between Brazil (the exporter) and both China and the EU (the importers). This is particularly true in the case of agribusiness, whose effects in the Amazonia and the Cerrado (the Brazilian savanna) have increased in the last years (Abramovay 2018; Marengo and Souza 2018). Also, European and Chinese projects and investments on energy and infrastructure produce relevant socioenvironmental effects in the Brazilian territory. In 2016, the year of the Paris Agreement ratification by Brazil, 51% of emissions were caused by deforestation; in January 2020, the Institute of Man and Environment of the Amazon (Imazon's Deforestation Alert System) detected 188 km² of deforestation in the Legal Amazon, an increase of 74% over January 2019, when deforestation covered 108 km². Deforestation remained, in the post-Paris Agreement scenario, an authorized practice in the context of fragile institutional governance and increase of illegal actions, following the inauguration of Jair Bolsonaro as the newly elected president of Brazil.

⁴ We do not argue that Brazil is exempt from responsibilities in the global climate justice debates; however, our focus in this paper is on China's and the EU's responsibility through the analysis of their foreign relations with Brazil.

Second, we identify significant contradictions within China's and EU's political rhetoric and diplomatic discourse, primarily observed in the continuity of normal relations with the Bolsonaro's government, even when confronted with constraints and disagreements due to the dismantling of the environmental state in Brazil (Simões 2019). In 2019, while China and the EU reinforced their leadership in multilateral climate governance, both players maintained normal economic and commercial relations with Brazil. Jair Bolsonaro is an openly climate agenda opponent whose government has dismantled environmental regulations and directly or indirectly disseminated anti-science and climate denial narratives, thus reinforcing a politics of climate obstruction nation-wide. We argue that, despite the countless reactions and contestations against Bolsonaro's environmental and climate policies, stemming from social movements, civil society organizations, academia and individuals occupying key positions in political institutions in the Legislative and Judiciary branches, Bolsonaro's setbacks and controversies have not unsettled business and other strategic interests of both players in Brazil. Our findings show that the theme has surfaced as a secondary concern way behind China's and the EU's economic and developmental motivations. Therefore, this behaviour has contributed to undermine the power of climate norms, the effectiveness of environmental regulation and compliance with human rights protection in Brazil.

In January 2019, Bolsonaro started implementing administrative and infra-legal decisions that have disrupted the bureaucratic functioning in the environmental sector. Responsibilities to manage federal agencies were given to the three main groups of his support coalition: the military, the neoliberals and the dogmatic religious sectors. These groups also correspond to the way class fractions are organized in Brazil, involving ultraconservative sectors, financial and political elites, middle classes mobilized by social resentment generated during the years of Lula-Rousseff administrations, and reflect the well-known historical inequality within the Brazilian society. It is not our aim to explain how Brazil has reached such a situation, but in a nutshell, the current social and political juncture has emerged from the worsening of the political, fiscal and economic crises; the strengthening of conservative movements; and the consequences of the recent destabilization provoked by traditional political actors, which generated a crisis in the representativeness of the democratic system and its institutions (Santos and Szwako 2016; Singer 2020).

As a result, the institutional support to Brazil's domestic climate policies and the organization of public debates, held nationally and internationally, on the protection of native and traditional peoples and biomes dwindled significantly. Climate change, which had been a transversal policy agenda across administrative and institutional arrangements of the Brazilian State, is nowadays a public agenda in notorious retreat within the national government. The Bolsonaro administration has associated the worldviews of the dogmatic sectors, including climate deniers, and the interests of the economic sectors, mainly the 'ruralista' group, in the implementation of anti-climate decisions. Several demands coming from civil society made the government first adopt a position of isolation and later reduce policy dialogues with non-governmental organizations and social movements. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (known as Itamaraty), the Sub-General Secretariat for the Environment, Energy, and Science and Technology, which had historically coordinated international

climate-related negotiations, was terminated. In the description of the current attributions of Itamaraty, there is no reference to the word ‘climate’, and besides, ambassador Ernesto Araújo (Itamaraty’s head between January 2019 and April 2021) also defied globalism as a left-wing ideology and climate change as a hoax produced by multilateral organizations and NGOs.

The Ministry of the Environment almost went extinct at the beginning of Bolsonaro’s government, but it was then saved thanks to pressure coming from sectors of the agribusiness, particularly those oriented towards foreign trade. Afraid of potential retaliations against agricultural exports due to the extinction of the ministry, the ‘ruralistas’ convinced Bolsonaro to keep it, even if with less management capacities and a smaller budget. In the current organizational framework of the Ministry of Environment, climate change has become a bargaining tool between Brazil’s federal government and international cooperation actors, including the EU and European countries such as Germany and Norway.

Adaptation targets and policies for reducing GHGs, as well as the very idea of ‘global warming’, have become secondary agendas in the Ministry of the Environment. The Ministry’s priorities were reduced to the flexibilization of environmental norms and rules. In 2019, the Brazilian National Institute for Space Research (INPE) reported an increase in deforestation in the Amazon region, estimating that the records of fire outbreaks in August 2019 were the highest in 7 years. The Brazilian government refuted the data, and the impasse led to institutional disagreements that culminated with Ricardo Galvão’s discharge from INPE’s general direction.

Despite all this, China and the EU have not significantly changed their bilateral relations with Brazil. In June 2019, Bolsonaro met with leaders of major world powers at the G-20 Summit in Osaka, Japan. At the time, the Bolsonaro administration was expected in two main policy issues: the ratification of the Paris Climate Agreement, which was threatened by the possibility of Bolsonaro following Donald Trump’s position,⁵ and the Association Agreement between Mercosur and the EU, mediated with great interest by the two parties. The Brazilian government arrived in Osaka with the decision to remain and follow the other G-20 nations in ratifying the Paris Agreement.

The deal between the EU and Mercosur was announced on 28 June 2019 at the G20 Osaka summit. Although Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron had both made public warnings against Bolsonaro because of his recent setbacks in environmental policy, the negotiations were not affected. A common understanding of the economic and commercial opportunities was at the roots of this agreement (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2020). The EU’s interests were based on the access to Brazil’s primary goods and domestic market for the EU’s industrial goods (Saraiva and Gavião 2020). In terms of climate negotiations, the inter-regional agreement does not incorporate procedures and instruments for monitoring, evaluating and

⁵ Casarões and Flemes (2019) highlight the similarity between Donald Trump’s and Bolsonaro’s foreign policy, their modus operandi on social media, mainly based on their common radical opposition to multilateralism, what they both have identified as “globalism” and the defence of what they frame as ‘national interests’ against internationally agreed global responsibilities.

accountability. In a Gramscian perspective, such absences illustrate that the climate agenda's historical materialism, since the beginning, has stressed the creation of a specialized space that hardly relates to the regimes that govern other global issues, such as security, trade and human rights. Moreover, through this agreement with Mercosur, the EU is challenged by the paradox of addressing climate solutions in another region and, at the same time, handling the negative environmental effects of its trade and investment portfolios. Transnational social forces of resistance to Bolsonaro's strategies have generated an unfavourable environment for the implementation of the Mercosur-EU strategic partnership: 2 years after the 2019 announcement, the agreement has not yet been ratified by the countries that compose the European bloc, and there is no unanimity among its members. Principles of climate justice claimed by the EU, such as impartiality, may become empirically controversial. In addition, climate change norms may become less statutory and more dependent on political variables that engage the EU in a much-needed conversation on policy coherence across sectors.

Since the beginning of the Bolsonaro administration, China and the EU have positioned themselves in such a way as to guarantee the legitimacy of institutions and sovereignty in a mutually respectful process. While the EU was more emphatic when raising concerns about the dismantling of the environmental state, China implemented the traditional principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. Despite such differences, both have preserved their 'strategic opportunities': no responsibilities were claimed, no sanctions were applied and negotiations were not discontinued.

Brazilian soy, meat, leather and iron ore chains have their main external consumer market in China (ComexVis 2020, Diálogo Chino 2019) and the EU (Comex-Vis 2020). In the case of meat and leather, both China and EU are exposed to consumption linked to illegal deforestation in the Amazon and Cerrado: more than half of the slaughterhouses that supply China and at least 20% of soy exports and 17% of meat exports to the EU come from land use illicit changes (MacFarquhar et al. 2019; Rajão et al. 2020). Intensive soybean cultivation in the Amazon and Cerrado has created huge production holes within the landscapes of these biomes. Thanks to the agricultural frontier's pressure, it has also increased GHG emissions, local social conflicts and impacts on food and water security.

Illegal fires, land grabbing activities and illegal extraction of wood and minerals in protected areas are all associated with this scenario. 'Land appropriation' is yet another practice that has increased in recent times: under the logic of 'non-occupied' lands, the process of nature financialization has further increased interest in Brazilian biomes. The value of the land business is reproduced in astronomical numbers and, consequently, opens up an even larger scale for the use of natural resources, acquisition or development of infrastructure projects and agricultural production for the global market (Borras et al. 2012, Human Rights Watch et al. 2020, IPAM 2017). The 'milestones thesis' for the demarcation of indigenous lands (Apib 2021) is currently one of the most relevant topics on the Brazilian justice, and it's on the core of those processes. Investments in land in Brazil by international pension funds with the participation of European nations, such as Germany, Sweden and the

Netherlands, have been operating in the Matopiba⁶ region, and have contributed to multiple social and environmental impacts (Buzato et al. 2018; FIAN International et al. 2018). The production of iron and the exploration of coal to steel production in the Amazon is also a serious situation that, as Veras and Casara (2004) point out, is one of the economic sectors most closely related to highly polluting emissions, slave labour and deforestation in Brazil. According to Russau (2017), Brazilian iron and steel are consumed by several multinational companies, including the former ThyssenKrupp (currently Ternium Brasil). Inconsistencies between a claimed pro-climate leadership and trade and investment relations leading to violations of native and traditional peoples' rights cannot be more evident.

As a result of reforms carried out by the Bolsonaro government, competencies such as policies to protect indigenous and *quilombola* populations' rights, agrarian reform and extractive activities have been transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture. Hence, agendas related to issues of land rights, natural resources and monitoring of forests are currently under the responsibility of the agribusiness sector, which is the main constituency of that ministry. The literature points out, however, that at least 65% of the deforested area in the Amazon (corresponding to twice the area of Germany's territory) is composed of low-productivity pasture with no significant impact on Brazilian economic growth (IPAM 2017). The dysfunctions of these commercial relations led to violations of native and traditional peoples' rights, who continue to defend their lives and ways of life. The predatory effects of these production patterns, which supply the global consumer market, cause anomalies from both an ecological and also a social point of view, further deepening the inequalities and injustices whose core lies in multifaceted forms of racism and sociocultural discrimination. Consequently, phenomena of climatic effects, such as desertification, soil erosion, biodiversity changes, impacts on human health (Human Rights Watch et al. 2020) and intensification of rainfall regimes, may be increasingly common and extreme in these regions. One of the most devastating effects may ironically be the increase in forest fires.

Projects linked to the renewable energy sector, such as wind and solar energy, are also part of the scope of investments of Chinese and European companies in Brazil (Russau 2017). Although the diversification of the energy matrix is a political-economic issue that is quite relevant and domestically challenging for China and the EU, there is a consensus that Brazil is a strategic partner and consumer of renewables technologies. This is due to subsidy opportunities and incentives for businesses, the expansion of energy parks (especially in the Northeast region of Brazil), and its power generation capacity. However, as scholars have shown, the installation of wind and photovoltaic parks has changed the environmental and ecological dynamics of local territories, specifically in the semiarid region and in coastal areas with dunes (Gorayeb et al. 2019). These impacts have interfered in the daily lives of traditional communities, causing health problems (noise pollution) and land conflicts.

⁶ Matopiba is a region that comprises an area of about 73 million ha, and was formed at the confluence of four Brazilian states: western Bahia, southern Piauí, southern Maranhão and Tocantins.

Furthermore, infrastructure projects funded by China and the EU have generated large-scale socio-environmental conflicts in the Amazon region and other territories in Brazil (Sant'Ana Júnior 2016). A more recent case is the construction of the Porto São Luís Consortium in Maranhão, whose project is headed by the Chinese company China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). The project, which accommodates local and federal developmentalist interests, has already removed countless families from the traditional Cajueiro community, who had been living in the region for more than 50 years (Pública 2019).

As a matter of fact, the Cajueiro community situation is one of China's most recent emblematic cases and impacts in Latin America and Brazil. Located in the rural zone of São Luiz, capital of Maranhão's state, the Cajueiro territory is formed by five communities (Parnauçu, Andirobal, Guarimanduba, Morro do Egito and Cajueiro) in the Northeast Amazon. Its population, mainly formed by fishermen, small farmers and extractivists, resisted violent pressure over their territories (Sant'Ana Junior et al. 2019), especially in 2019, when 200 ha from a total area of 600 ha were already occupied by the local economic actors, without legal authorization, to allow the Chinese investment to build the harbour. There is evidence of land grabbing, falsification of documents and environmental license acquiesce without proper impact studies among the several illegalities seen in this process. Deforestation, air pollution, noise, fragmentation of families, loss of local culture and practices, food insecurity and water scarcity are some of the impacts reported by the Cajueiro's residents. Although the land issue has not yet been solved, threats to the community continue, and the structure for carrying out the harbour's construction remains in place, such as machinery and private security.⁷

As far as China's interests are concerned, after the G-20 Osaka Summit, Chinese officials said that the crisis over the Amazon region would not impact Sino-Brazilian trade relations. Qu Yuhui, a diplomat in charge of political affairs at the Chinese embassy in Brasília, issued a public note emphasizing China's confidence in Brazil's environmental preservation standards (Mazieiro 2019). On the other hand, after harsh criticism of Brazilian environmental policy, Norway and Germany suspended funding for the Amazon Fund in retaliation for the socio-environmental setbacks of the Bolsonaro administration. Nevertheless, neither China nor the EU took to the climate high-level political sphere any responsibility for the instabilities and violations resulting from their economic and commercial relations with Brazil.

Concluding remarks

In this article we have argued that, although claiming to be climate leaders in multilateral settings, both the EU and China often fail to follow up on these normative commitments with appropriate economic and political action. From a Gramscian perspective, we have illustrated contradictions through the lenses

⁷ <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2020/09/02/um-ano-apos-despejo-violento-comunidade-do-cajueiro-ma-resiste-a-ameacas>

of both players' bilateral relations with Brazil. The maintenance of commercial flows, the access to markets and primary products and the strategic internationalization of both economies—Chinese and European—are today contradictory with their promotion of climate justice norms. Considering that this is an on-going research agenda, we have highlighted how states' bilateral relations may contribute to deepen inequalities, steer human rights violations and harm local–global climate, exactly the opposite of what both players claim to promote multilaterally. In our next steps, we intend to focus primarily on the role of corporations and how they relate to different fractions and sectors within the Brazilian public machinery, thus trying to move beyond a state-centric vision of the EU–Brazil and China–Brazil relations.

In comparison with China, the EU has played a less condescending role when it comes to Bolsonaro's government. It is true, however, that China has been coherent with its diplomatic principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. In both cases, there is the need to address actors' practices beyond the climate agenda's fragmented institutional spaces. There is a need to analyze existing contradictions outside climate regime's normative borders, as well as to rethink whether the development models that states and regional actors export generate the same conditions to which capitalism has historically submitted societies: global social inequalities, structured in different ways, from slavery to necropolitics (Mbembe 2019). This helps us to think how development and the discourse of global powers on 'good policies' and 'best practices' require another stance of more in-depth debates on climate justice involving antiracist economic and governance conditionalities.

The association of the zero/low carbon development agenda, which is proposed as a solution for the planetary future, with old practices of exporting the international political economy's asymmetries from developed to developing nations (North–South and South–South), calls into question the legitimacy of the constitutive norms of the climate agenda itself. As Björkdahl (2002) recall, 'norms are concerned with the desirability of means and goals themselves', which indicates that prescriptions that emphasize notions like responsibility, just transition and resilience through moral or ethical norms of behaviour must be analyzed more critically upon empirical scenarios of standard violations. From the analysis of the EU–Brazil and China–Brazil practices in this article, the harmonization of common interests presents great challenges for future climate norms and standards.

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