MONÇÕES
REVISTA DE RELAÇÕES INTERNACIONAIS DA UFGD

DOI: 10.30612/rmufgd.v11i22.14990

The Claws and Fangs of Neoliberalism: The (New?) Political Administration of the Capital

As Garras e as Presas do Neoliberalismo: a (Nova?) Administração Política do Capital

La Garras y Comillos del Neoliberalismo: la (¿Nueva?) Administración Política del Capital

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Abstract: The main objective of this essay is to analyse neoliberalism as an alternative for political administration. According to the political administration theory, this concept encompasses both macro and micro-management principles to represent the interests and agenda of a social class, or some fraction of it. In this work was pursued a theorical-historical approach, form second-hand data, to develop the main argument on the patterns of the neoliberal political administration. The main findings are that the neoliberal rationale and its management principles—efficiency, accountability, performance, and competition—are employed to reprogramme entire societies to transfer wealth to rentier capital. That is why wherever it takes root, neoliberalism brings unemployment, impoverishment, economic instability, exhaustion of natural resources, and income inequality.

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Palavras-chave: Neoliberalism. Efficiency. Performance. Accountability. Political Administration.

Resumo: A ideia principal deste ensaio é analisar o neoliberalismo como um tipo, ou um projeto, de administração política. Segundo a teoria de administração política, esse conceito engloba princípios de macro e microgestão para representar os interesses e a agenda de uma classe social, ou de alguma de suas frações. Neste trabalho foi empregada uma metodologia teórica-histórica, a partir de dados secundários, para elaborar o principal argumento acerca da administração política neoliberal. As principais conclusões são que a lógica neoliberal e seus princípios de gestão — eficiência, accountability, performance e competição — são empregados para reprogramar sociedades inteiras com o objetivo de transferir riqueza para o capital rentista. É por isso que, onde quer que se enraíze, o neoliberalismo traz desemprego, empobrecimento, instabilidade econômica, esgotamento dos recursos naturais e desigualdade.

Keywords: Neoliberalismo. Eficiência. Performance. Accountability. Administração Política.

Resumen: El objetivo de este ensayo es analizar el neoliberalismo como un tipo o projecto de administración política. Este concepto se presenta bajo la premisa de que los intereses y la agenda de una clase o fracción de clase se manifestam a través de principios de macro y microgestión. En este trabajo se persiguió un abordaje teórico-histórico, a partir de datos secundarios, para desarrollar el argumento principal sobre los principios de géstion del neoliberalismo como una especie de administración política. Los principales hallazgos muestram que la lógica neoliberal y sus principios de gestión (eficiencia, responsabilidad, desempeño y competencia) son usados para reprogramar sociedades enteras y transferir riqueza al capital rentista. Por eso, dondequiera que arraigue, el neoliberalismo trae desempleo, empobrecimiento, inestabilidad económica, agotamiento de los recursos naturales y desigualdad.

Palabras clave: Neoliberalismo. Eficiencia. Desempeño. Responsabilidad. Administración Política.

Recebido em
25/07/2021

Aceito em
21/07/2022

INTRODUCTION

Economic and social formations in the capitalist world are regulated by immanent macro-management standards, which articulate organizational processes from companies to the Government, and beyond (CRISTALDO; RIBEIRO; PESSINA, 2017). These standards are what we recognize as the capitalist "political administration" (PAÇO CUNHA, 2019, p. 155). The political administration is understood here as the social macro process that gives logical sense and direction to uncoordinated decision-making throughout the whole system. Not as a somehow all-pervasive collusion, but as shared beliefs on *what is* rational and desirable in organizational management enfolding businesses, state, and even the social arena (PAÇO CUNHA, 2020).

Accordingly, the political administration of capitalism appears in the micro-managerial level in companies, the state, even NGOs. The wide collection of technique and principles known as business management and public administration are what we understand as "professional administration" (CRISTALDO, 2009, p. 57). Alongside it, there is an ideological component to the political administration of capitalism that establishes what is considered rational in terms of organizational management (CARIBÉ, 2008). Together, these principles, techniques, and ideology materialize the interests and agenda of the dominant class (PAÇO CUNHA, 2019).

However, this managerial order is far from harmonic. Indeed, since the very idea of shared interests comes from the way a collective may structure their social relations to build its material base (MARX, 2013), any singular mode of economic integration engenders distinct interests, political, and cultural agendas (JESSOP, 2016), which means different political and professional administrations (CRISTALDO; RIBEIRO; PESSINA, 2017). Consequently, class struggles and its fractions indicate that their dissimilar, even contradictory interests take the shape of the debates (or the confrontation of power) regarding political administration.

In a way, the idea of *mode of development*—which is complementary to the concept of mode of production, as a "[…] connection between a way of obtaining an improvement in hourly labour productivity (at the macroeconomic level) and a way of using this improvement to change the living conditions of the population" (BILLAUDOT, 2002, p. 140)—has a very important contribution to this debate. The same can be said about the concept of mode de régulation as "[…] *la régulation de la coévolution des divers ordres (économique, politique et domestique) qui ne font pas système sur un mode fonctionnel mais ne forment un tout que sur le mode symbolique, communicationnel*." (MONTAGNE, 2018, p. 82).

Our thesis is that political administration encompasses both mode of development and mode de *régulation* in a comprehensive fashion, a concrete totality. Nevertheless, whi-

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le the French theory of *régulation* sees it as the institutional evolution of economic order, a somewhat natural and organic development of capitalist mode of production (at least at the national level), we advocate that the capitalist political administration is not a closed system, but a struggle space in which different projects and agendas compete for social hegemony. In other words, contradictory and conflictual macro-management principles, techniques and ideologies coexist as immanent evidence of the hoping-to-become hegemonic (or dominant) class fractions.[1]

To illustrate that, in this paper we wear both theoretical and historical arguments to analyse neoliberalism as one of those political administration agendas. As is widely known, neoliberalism emerged around the 1940s and became widely hegemonic in the last decades of the past century (HARVEY, 2005). It is a global class strategy (DUMENIL; LÉVY 2004) that combines individual behaviour reprograming (DARDOT; LAVAL 2016), management rules and principles (GURGEL, 2003) and a political agenda for State and Government reform (PALLEY, 2005). Hence, our objective in this essay is to highlight the organizational aspects of neoliberal political administration, trying to show that its management principles— managerialism (DUMENIL; LÉVY, 2020)—are its core feature.

This paper therefore is organised in three sections. Following this introduction, we present an interpretation of neoliberalism as a chameleon social process, which changes its features and agenda in distinct countries, historical contexts or political environments, in order to achieve its main goal: reprograming entire societies to transfer almost all of their wealth to a minority elite. Additionally, the second section highlights the management principles that feature neoliberal political administration as an immanent agenda of control. The third section briefly discuss the historical context regarding the economic and social achievements of neoliberal agenda in different countries in Europe, Latin America and US, emphasizing that wide development and social progress weren't indeed the main goal. Finally, we present the main insights that followed this debate in the conclusion remarks.

1 In this essay, we understand "social class", "class fractions" and "classes" as Gaiger (2021) presents, as social groups of individuals that shares beliefs, preferences, and concrete ways to achieve its material needs, which may or may not engender class conscience and jointed political action. The idea of classes derives of the concept of social division of labour — which separates workers from capitalists and other collectives by means the social ontology of their value-producing contribution —, and class fractions derives of the concept of technical division of labour, reflecting the distinct professions, economic activities, and hierarchical roles in organizations. One of the premises of this study is that neoliberalism accommodates the interests and agenda of rentier capital, which is understood as a capitalist class fraction that gets their social income valorizing capital mostly through financial instruments (DUMENIL; LÉVY, 2004).

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THE RISE OF THE NEOLIBERAL AGE

Reactions or subjections to what is known as neoliberalism have been emerging both in the form of macro-processes, such as the reconversion of Latin America (MARINI, 1992), the dismantlement of the Welfare State (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016) and the mundialization of capital (CHESNAIS, 1996); as well as meso processes, such as the restructuring of higher education (GIROUX, 2014), the re-signification of the land issue in developing countries (OYA, 2005), or even the incorporation of efficiency logics within large organized religions (BUCHARDT, 2017), among many others. In this section we assess the broad meaning of these agendas that, in our understanding, come to determine the spirit of our time, the logics of neoliberalism.[2]

Indeed, there is a dense, almost numinous mist enfolding the conception of neoliberalism. Although it is apparently a clear-cut and well-determined historical social process, virtually tangible nowadays, its description by critical thinkers is spread throughout numberless alternatives. If, according to mainstream economic sciences and conservative circles, this notion intermingles with truth itself, a synonym for Reason (NGUYEN, 2017), for alternative, heterodox or even critical currents of thought, neoliberalism plays the villain role, the source of all-evil, the opponent to be fought. This may be one of the few things that unite neo, new and post-Keynesians (PALLEY, 2005; SHAIKH, 2005), structuralists and post-structuralists (PETERS, 2002), Marxists (DUMENIL; LÉVY 2004), and even psychoanalysts (RUSTIN, 2014), among researchers from different intellectual fields.

"Neoliberalism is anything but a succinct, clearly defined political philosophy." (PLEHWE, 2009, p. 1). What we understand as neoliberalism, nonetheless, seems still imprecise: it is as if its existence were striking enough to be felt by everyone, at least as a ghostly negative presence; but its body were always too foggy whenever we try to precisely see it. We understand that this imprecision is not due to a lack of quality in those investigations which tried to understand

2 Despite one may find many different concepts for neoliberalism, it is possible to historically trace a trajectory of emergence and evolution of this social movement until back in the 1920s. We can point out a plenty of authors that carry out this analysis. Plehwe (2009), historically recovers the role of the Walter Lippmann Congress and the Mont Pelerin Society for the constitution of a critical mass of opinion-makers interested in the renewal of liberalism. Dardot and Laval (2016), in turn, recover the theoretical and intellectual trajectory of neoliberal thought, with emphasis on the contribution of the Austrian school of economics. Harvey (2005) also theoretically synthesizes neoliberalism, with an emphasis on the Chicago School, as well as politically traces the first concrete experiences of the neoliberal agenda. Jones (2012) specifically emphasizes Milton Friedman's contribution to neoliberalism. Saad-Filho and Johnston (2005) bring together several contributions by authors that provide an analysis of the emergence of specific agendas that came to compose what is understood by neoliberalism. In short, there is a whole literature that covers this trajectory. Due to space and scopus limitations, we choose to avoid engaging in this prolific, but well-covered debate.

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neoliberalism, but to the very nature of this social process. In other words, we believe that there are as many equally important colours as possible behind the notion of neoliberalism, because it is not a mere system of thought, nor only political, not even economic, whose understanding could relay solely in comprehending its inputs and outputs and its transformation and processing mechanisms. It is convenient, therefore, to briefly compare some of those explanatory alternatives of what we call neoliberalism. Still, "[…] neoliberalism remains a major ideology that is poorly understood but, curiously, draws some of its prodigious strength from that obscurity." (PLEHWE, 2009, p. 3).

Neoliberalism emerges in the third quarter of the 20th century, first as an intellectual movement (PLEHWE, 2009), then as a political strategy (HARVEY, 2005), and as an agenda for public management reform (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016). The neoliberal moto is to protect freedom of decision and that individual self-determination is paramount. To fulfil this target, they say that the freedom of market is the only way to reach social and individual freedom. Market is understood as a spontaneous order, with its own laws, resulting from—but not teleologically circumscribed—to human action in society. To protect market freedom, however, the state needs to supress any obstruction and intervention to its "natural" functioning, such as regulations, labour legislation, protections and rights, labour unions, customs tariffs etc. In other words, the Government, under the logic of neoliberalism, tends to guarantee broad freedom of economic action (for a minority) while restricting other ways of expressing freedom.

Following that orientation, the neoliberal agenda is materialized in a fairly short list of so-called reforms: (i) the deregulation of capital markets; (ii) the "de-bureaucratization" of labour relations; (iii) the disassembly of State-controlled social security apparatuses; (iv) the gradual or even immediate elimination of customs barriers; (v) the disarticulation of the claiming capacity of trade unions; (vi) the abolition of subsidies and other state-funded incentives to specific economic sectors; (vii) the monetarist reorientation of the macroeconomic management of the State, among others (Harvey 2005). Those principles were neither univocal nor universal; what we understand as neoliberalism was coated with particular characteristics in every space it has spread to, often sustained by principles sometimes opposed to those mentioned above (SAAD-FILHO; MORAIS 2018).

This chameleon feature is so because neoliberalism, before being solely an effort of economic liberation, is a strategy for collective action (DUMENIL; LÉVY 2004). The movement gained strength since the crisis, criticism and burial (not necessarily in that order) of the Welfare state in core economies of world. The events of the first half of the 20th century, which culminated in the Second World War, have helped to shape a scenery shift within the capitalist

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world. The new post-War order was characterized by the consolidation of the great enterprise (big business) as the dominant institution of capitalism; by the separation between possession and control of capital—and the consequent growth of the power of workers in management positions; and by a social pact that articulated a Keynesian macroeconomic management of state-funded social security apparatuses to institutional forms of decision-making coordination for the economic planning in tripartite arrangements among capital, labour and the state, the so-called neo-corporatism (SCHMITTER, 1974).[3]

The neo-corporatist coalition was responsible for one of the most distinguished periods of growth in capitalist history, the thirty years of the "Golden Age", 1945-1975 (HOBSBAWM, 1995, p. 8). Nevertheless, a very disturbing anomaly emerged from the 1960s, a systemic decline in profitability that would especially harm capital owners. This decline, which soon began a widespread crisis (from the perspective of the capital, naturally), would have motivated a collusion among the rentier minority of core capitalist countries for, throughout its most traditional representative, the financial industry, to claim back the control of the state and of economies as a whole (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016).

The British geographer David Harvey (2005) describes the (almost) hostile takeover of the US Republican Party performed by conservative portions of the North-American society in the second half of the 20th century. The Tory party in England was led by Margaret Thatcher towards a neoliberal turn, which became a crusade against labour unionism and the Welfare State (ARESTIS; SAWER, 2005). Even (self-proclaimed) progressive parties and politicians in Latin America embraced the new credo, such as the Mexican Partido Nacional Institutional, Fernando Henrique Cardoso in Brazil, or the peronista Carlos Menem in Argentina (SAAD-FILHO, 2005). The objective was (and still is) to create and reinforce mechanisms of wealth, income and power transfer from every other portion of society to the 1% (DUMENIL; LÉVY, 2004). In some cases, that strategy was deliberate and planned; in others, it emerged from disarray and crisis, but always following the same goal.

Since then, diverse ways of arranging capitalism under the plot of a neoliberal narrative came to light, representing dissimilar cultural environment and economic structures, interna-

3 Advocates of the French theory of regulation presented the concept of "Fordist regime of accumulation" (Boyer 2015: 76, translated by the author) to characterize the scenario that lasted until the first half of the 1970s. According to Boyer (2015), the State would act to maintain adequate levels of effective demand and investment induction, while the great enterprise would take advantage of scale and scope economies founded in mass production. This strategy aimed to achieve full employment of production factors, labor included. In this sense, the link between state, Labour and capital was not only political but was also, and above all, economic. As maybe never seen before in the history of capitalism (and probably never after either), that regime of accumulation flourished, associated to a specific mode of regulation.

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tional contexts, and (or, mainly) specific interests of rentier capital. For instance, the neoliberal state can be minimal (LAZZARATO, 2015), necropolitical (ESTÉVEZ, 2018), or "entrepreneurial, prisonfare & workfare" (PUELLO-SOCARRÁS, 2021, p. 40, translated by the author), among others, whichever helps the capital to gain the most value. Although the neoliberal agenda spreads itself widely throughout society, that confirms that the political administration of the capital depends on the state apparatus to flourish and thrive (PAÇO CUNHA, 2019).

The neoliberal strategy was mostly characterized by the rise of international finance as its global proxy, its most visible shade. However, banks and other financial institutions were not that powerful in the past. Until the 1970s, in the core countries (and in many of the peripheral ones), the financial system was rigidly regulated by laws and conventions imposed around the 1930s and 1940s, aimed to limit its capacity of action (CHESNAIS, 1996). There were limits to capital inversion, prohibition to entry parallel markets, barriers aimed to limit operations to a single regional space, safeguards regarding foreign capital, lists of allowed financial products, among many others. These were measures created throughout the years to prevent crisis like the one of 1929. With the rise of the neoliberal class strategy and the coming to power of its representatives—first in Chile, then in the United Kingdom, arriving in the United States in the 1980s, and finally the in rest of the world (HARVEY, 2005)—practically every measure taken after that was done in order to end those regulations, ensuring financial markets were dynamic and had the flexibility to look for and put toward investment opportunities.

The financial industry, which in the 1970s was largely fragmented in a myriad of feeble organizations confined in a regional scope, faced many cycles of capital concentration and centralization—mergers, acquisitions, strategic alliances etc.—that enabled the constitution of powerful global conglomerates acting in multiple financial fields, a world hydra (MORIN, 2015).[4] All this power was employed to impose the financial rationale over any aspects of society. Rentier accumulation became the new reason of everything (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016). The main goal was to discipline the Government, through administrative reforms, privatizations and the end of the welfare-state, labour, using work flexibleness, trade unionism repression and unemployment, and even private and public companies, through corporate governance and other apparatuses of external management control (DUMENIL; LÉVY 2004).

4 Morin (2015) shows that at the time when his research was originally published, international finance was subject to the mood of only 28 banks, which had their hands in roughly USD 50.3 trillion (while the world debt would be of USD 48.9 trillion)—higher than the sum of the debt of 200 nations, approximately 90% of bank financial assets in circulation. Together, they controlled more money than the annual capacity of wealth production of the economies of the US, China, Japan, Germany, United Kingdom, France, and Brazil (the seven largest world economies then) together.

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Nonetheless, if the rise of international Finance to rule the capitalist world was the most striking feature of the neoliberal strategy, its essence is elsewhere. The ontological functioning of neoliberalism is that of being a new rationality not circumscribed to the management of the State nor of the Enterprise, but widespread, aiming at shaping even the most subjective individual characteristics (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016). Its main tactic is to inculcate people with an entrepreneurial mentality in order to subsume every choice, even personal or intimate, to rational calculus in an endless dispute. Every single aspect of social life, therefore, is assimilated and transformed by the neoliberal doctrine; only the useful knowledge to generating higher earnings or competitive advantage is good and true; social justice may only come through competition; a good individual character is understood as the capacity of accumulating wealth, and so on

However, it is necessary to shape people's mind to act that way, since this competitive behaviour is not natural to individuals, not even within the neoliberal ideology (PLEHWE, 2009). The market, the hero of every liberal narrative, appears with that function, not limited to being an economic institution, but gaining also a didactic and educational role in conforming individuals to the full realization of their potential (provided that selfish and egocentric) through competition (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016). It was necessary for the market to be supported from the outside so its main principles must be reinforced so it can work properly. That is where the state comes into play: not a minimal state, but a strong interventionist state in order to shape behaviours and mindsets according to the logic of market competition. The neoliberal state plays in practice the role of substituting the docile and easily dominated homo economicus state of modern disciplinary society (ESCOBAR, 1995) for an aggressive (yet not revolutionary) homo competitive one, equally unnatural, for this new hypermodern self-disciplinary society.

MANAGEMENT PATTERNS OF THE NEOLIBERAL ADMINISTRATION

Again, one can understand the ontological functioning of neoliberalism as a new rationality of action, not circumscribed to the management of the State nor of the Company, but widespread, aiming at shaping everything to its image and likeness. And this image is the monetary gain, the maximization of profit, and the ethics of winning at any (externalizable) cost (HARVEY, 2005). Thus, neoliberalism seems to be the spiritual heir of utilitarianism, for which any human decision is a result of rational calculation (PLEHWE, 2009). However, as Dardot &

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Laval (2016) state, neoliberals accept that human beings are not naturally inclined to act as a maximization machine: they need to be programmed to do so, and that is one of the strategies of neoliberalism. In that sense, under the neoliberal aegis, every aspect of human relationships becomes ruled by (i) *efficiency*, the quantitative maximization of outcome—which necessarily presupposes goals, indexes, measuring, comparing, ranking, and higher instances of control and evaluation, which is known as (ii) *accountability*, (iii) *performance*, and (iv) *competition*.

In the last decades of the 20th century, local (GEDDES, 2014), national (MORIN, 2015), regional (DONEGAN, 2006; SANTANDER, 2018) and even international/supranational (PESSINA, 2017) institutions, have embraced the core of the neoliberal management ideology as their holy grail, in which the concept of *efficiency* plays a central role. The idea of efficiency was pinched from private management principles as if they were universal, applicable in any case, context or scenario. However, private management relies on a very particular definition of efficiency, one that is ruled solely by profit. Leaving aside any idealism around the business praxis, its actual foundation is to exploit work, the natural environment, and technology in order to valorise capital (MARX, 2013). Thus, its rationale is driven by employing as few resources as possible to get the maximum revenue *in monetary terms* (KLIKAUER, 2013). No matter whether that means waste, environmental degradation, poverty, or violence, as long as more money is made. This distorted rationality allows companies and businesses to preach efficiency, but manage programmed obsolescence, induce consumerism, destroy rainforests, pollute water springs etc.

Alongside efficiency runs the concept of *accountability*, the idea that any strategy, action or decision should not be taken without supervision. Though apparently coherent and even desirable, accountability methods are one of the ways of political reaction against deviations from the well-being of the rentier capital. The agency problem, which was already described in the first half of the last century, although not with this terminology, by Berle Jr. & Means (1999), is the tendency of detachment of shareholder interests by hired agent decision-makers (managers). Withal, according to Fama & Jesen (1983a), the bigger the scope of the company, the worse the agency problem, as the increasing complexity of corporations reduces the capacity of shareholders to control decision-making. Besides the fact that the limitations of prediction by economic agents induce stakeholders to celebrate incomplete contracts—which will inevitably have loopholes and gaps—that could be used for opportunistic behaviour by managers (FAMA; JESEN, 1983b).

Around the mid-20th century, one of the pillars of the Fordist Mode of Regulation was the institution of big corporation and its close relationship with the Welfare State (BOYER,

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2015). Inside it grew a "technobureaucracy" (BRESSER-PEREIRA, 2018, p. 17, translated by the author), a social group of white-collar urban professionals who craved to become the dominant stratus of Western society. However, their concerns and interests not rarely diverged from shareholders, calling attention to the emergence of a so called "new industrial State" (GALBRAITH, 2007, p. 12) led by big corporation managers, in which *planning* and *strategic management* would be a consensus (BOYER, 2009), and an ideological manifesto (SHRIVASTAVA, 1986), all at once. Nevertheless, this new *planning state* was halted by the emergence of the neoliberal strategy. Through financialization—the growing role of indebtedness and the need for credit in the capital markets—in the last quarter of 20th century (HARVEY, 2005), it was possible to impose an agenda for external control of corporations, the State and even international agencies. It was called the apparently neutral concept of Corporate Governance.

Corporate Governance, according to the OCDE, encompasses "[…] a set of relationships between a company's management, its board, its shareholders and other stakeholders. Corporate governance also provides the structure through which the objectives of the company are set, and the means of attaining those objectives and monitoring *performance* are determined." (2015: 9, emphasis added). Following the OECD's *Principles of Corporate Governance*, one can understand that the primal goal there is to induce a higher instance of management control in the figure of *The Board*. Stakeholders and Shareholders—with an emphasis on the latter, of course—may use The Board to hold management accountable, controlling their choices and practices, therefore imposing the terms of what they understand as a desirable performance. Considering that shareholders (some individuals, but mostly corporate ones, such as venture capital funds) normally are the strongest members of the board in political means, and since they indeed represent the sources of capital, their interests tend to become imperative, even compulsory.[5] Consequentially, short-term financial revenues come to be the standards of the evaluation of management (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016).

It is not by chance that the *performance* of social [economic] actors has become one of the key concepts of neoliberalism. Since Marx (2013) revealed how the proper goal of capitalism is to increase the added value of labour working hours—misappropriating part of the surplus-value to increase profit—, we understand that the very essence of class struggle is the run

5 The very idea of something above management—*The Board*—shows how control is the goal of Neoliberalism. The OCDE's Principles state that "board members should act on a fully informed basis, in good faith, with due diligence and care, and in the best interest of the company and the shareholders." (OECD 2015: 45, emphasis added) but only to "[…] take into account the interests of stakeholders [solely if they have some time in their schedule?]." (OECD 2015: 46, emphasis added), clearly undermining the well-being of the latter. The board is not much no less than the presence of rentier capital.

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for productivity. This even led to the emergence of an entire field of knowledge dedicated to the exploitation and control of workforce: Management Science (Klikauer 2013). *Performance* refers to how much individuals, deeds or institutions contribute to rentier accumulation and valorisation of capital: in other words, to the capitalistic affairs. Philosophically, the idea of performance is somehow rooted in the synthesis of liberalism and utilitarianism posed by John S. Mill in the late 1800s (JONES, 2012). This idea was assimilated by neoliberal thinkers as the most important goal of any singular or collective social actor in a competitive world (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016).

Among these principles, *competition* reigns supreme. Though the idea of competition was added to economic reasoning only in the last breaths of the nineteenth century (HUNT; LAUTZENHEISER, 2011)—which bound economic science to Herbert Spencer's socio-evolutionism since then—, it was neoliberalism that promoted competition as its cornerstone. According to Dardot & Laval (2016), in neoliberal theory and politics, *competition* works as the basis for social regulation. In order to maximize performance and accomplish *efficiency*, companies, institutions, governments, and, above all, individuals, must compete with each other to prove who is the most gifted and capable. In the process, some would be righteously rewarded with wealth and luxury, and those unable to keep up should meet their demise. This would be the only social justice: every man, woman, and child for themselves. In the neoliberal ideology, every aspect of sociability must be regulated through the market. Well, markets depend on State apparatuses to ensure that society can assimilate competition as the only legitimate form of expression. Nonetheless, it is necessary to extinguish any remnants of social protection, collectivism and solidarity, since individuals must inculcate entrepreneurial reasoning. From the neoliberal point of view, market liberalism is the only way to fight poverty, help underdeveloped countries, and achieve freedom (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016).

Considering neoliberalism an alternative strategy for the political administration of capitalist societies, it is fair that it should be judged by its capacity to improve social and economic development, since development is the phenomenological form of capitalist dynamics (CRISTALDO, 2018). In the next section, this possibility is addressed.

NEOLIBERALISM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Neoliberalism, as a dynamic socio-historical process, manifests concretely with specific singularities in each social space, be it an organization, a city, a region or a nation, according to

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the respective historical and material context (PLEHWE, 2009). In the same way, assimilation and resistance to the advance of neoliberal rationale will be inevitably distinct due the historical trajectories, resource availability, roles in the international division of labour, habits, values and cultural traits, worldview patterns, institutions, and norms and laws, which are different for each human community (HARVEY, 2005). Although the principles of *efficiency*, *accountability*, *performance*, and *competition* are a constant trait—which neoliberalism imposes as universal, as Reason itself—, one may say that how those principles are adapted to the specific spaces where they land is neither plain nor humdrum.

There is a contradiction, though, haunting neoliberalism. The neoliberal agenda poses itself as the only way towards economic growth and development, as if it was a natural law. However, in practice, this agenda has produced very poor results over the years. According to Cooper (2012), both the US and the United Kingdom—nations that, after the experimental laboratory carried out in Chile during its dictatorship, were the first to openly bring about neoliberal reforms—managed to control levels of inflation as well as to revert the lowering profits trend. That was achieved, however, at growing unemployment rates, social insecurity, criminalization of trade unionism, and rising Government debt. Even in the 1990s, when those countries had a more impressive economic growth, it was clearly pulled by the financial industry (Morin 2015), while employment rates did not recover as fast, the working conditions deteriorated with salary reductions, labour flexibilization, dismantling of social security apparatus, ensuing a relative impoverishment of the working classes (PIKETTY, 2014).

Mexico, for instance, has embraced the neoliberal agenda since the 1980s—deregulating labour, allowing free flows of capital, carrying out privatizations, liberalizing the financial system etc.—both in the governments of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and of the National Action Party. Even when it managed to resume economic growth and profitability in the 2000s, the Mexican population was still living in poverty, while urban violence scaled up and trafficking networks grew integrated to crime related to demand for products in the US and Europe (MURILLO, 2017). The North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which integrated Mexico, Canada, and the United States of [North] America, had dubious effects. It has accomplished a large exportation increase, but also increasing importations (WADGYMAR, 2014), foreign direct inversions (FDI) from transnational companies (MILLÁN, 2014) seeking underemployment in conditions analogous to slavery (ARREGUI, 2016), and gentrification (MARTÍNEZ, 2015), among many side effects. Indexes like GINI (from 0.469 in 1990 to 0.435 in 2010), HDI (from the 60th position in 1990 to the 70th in 2010), the Purchasing Power Parity of minimum wage (PPP of USD 190 in 1990 but USD 188 in 2010), and the percentage of people under the

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poverty line (approximately 53% in 1990, and 51% in 2010), did not show any improvement or worsened in past years in Mexico.[6]

Similarly, countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Equator and Colombia—which also suffered with the neoliberal reconversion of Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s (MARINI, 1992)—, have shown dreadful economic and social outcomes from their neoliberal governments (ROJAS, 2015). In short, every place where the neoliberal strategy gained power observed dubious economic performance stricto sensu (SAAD-FILHO, 2005). In addition to unemployment, social insecurity, and impoverishment, there were also macroeconomic instability, financial crisis, and political distress, which have been associated to the stagnation and worsening of social conditions in general (SAAD-FILHO; MORAIS, 2018). As shows by the study conducted by Piketty (2014), during the last decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century—the neoliberal years—, despite the world economic growth, income inequalities among social, professional, and even national classes have increased more than proportionally. While dominant social fractions live in wealth and comfort, huge portions of the world population continue to live in extremely fragile conditions.

Even in core countries, an increasing impoverishment of the working class is observable, thanks to unemployment, lack of social security, and income inequality between those on the top of the pyramid and all the rest (PIKETTY, 2014). Ulrich Beck (2008: 110) draws a nefarious prognostic when he suggests that the developed world could engage in a "Brazilianization" process, a downgrade to poverty, extreme flexibility of labour relations, destruction of social security, gore enrichment of a tiny elite, and the individualization of the responsibilities of demise.

Broadly speaking, the processes of financial deregulation that are at the basis of the neoliberal strategy have promoted the transition to a mundialized economy under the aegis of the financial industry. In this context, free flux of capital reaches international markets in a volatile proportion that, eventually, will produce and maximize the effects of financial crises. Those crises, since the "Black Monday" of 1987, going through the crisis of the Mexican peso (1994), of Asia (1997), of Brazil (1997), of Russia (1998), of the dot.com in the 2000s, of Argentina (2001-2002), to the great recession of 2008-2012, among others, have demonstrated the system inability to ensure sustainable growth nor stability (ROBERTS, 2016). Howsoever, crises have a very important role in the process of capital accumulation and centralization, therefore

6 Data from the United Nations Statistics Division, World Bank Statistics. Available at: http://data.un.org/. Last access on May 22, 2020.

being tolerated and even desired by some capitalists that foresee, produce and then take advantage of it to broaden capital gains (HARVEY, 2011).

It is true that although neoliberalism has emerged as an answer to a crisis—the alleged crisis of the Welfare State—and has crystallized as common sense, as if there were indeed no alternatives, the neoliberal agenda has produced even deeper crises without being capable of presenting not even one single example of success. On the contrary, wherever it passes, it delivers only poverty, social disintegration, extreme individualization, and economic imbalance. The inherent contradiction of the neoliberal agenda is that, in spite of presenting itself as the only possible way of reaching social growth—which they cynically call *modernization*—, its main and more striking effect, the only characteristic that unites the variegated forms of neoliberalism, is regression. Therefore, that is the reason neoliberalism is a chameleon social process: to achieve its goal of ensuring income transfers to the rentier elite, it has to do everything, even against its own principles, to spread chaos and profit with it. In fact, neoliberalism is only a smoke screen to bare-knuckle capitalism.

CONCLUSION REMARKS

The main idea of this essay was to analyse the management principles of neoliberalism as a political administration.

Accordingly, the first section was dedicated to show the trajectory and the principles of the neoliberal agenda. Neoliberalism was presented as a global class strategy to reprogramme entire societies—including individuals, institutions, organizations, businesses, and the State Government—to transfer wealth to the rentier capital. The financial industry was identified as its proxy, but the ontological nature of neoliberalism sems to be a new *rationale* of social action.

This innovative way of rational thinking presented by neoliberalism was characterized in the second section of this essay trough four management principles: *efficiency*, *accountability*, *performance*, and *competition*. Ideally, neoliberalism is a way of modernizing societies in order to allow them to achieve its full potential. It endorses the idea of that can solely be done by mediating every aspect of social interaction trough market competition, thus selecting those individuals, classes, organizations, and so on, which best replicate these principles. The core of the neoliberal political administration can be summarized in those four principles—again,

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efficiency, accountability, performance, and competitions—which, we may say, drives every aspect of society under the rentier capital aegis.

The last section discussed the outcomes of the neoliberal agenda, both in Latin America and some developed countries. In general, neoliberalism was not able to fulfil it claims of programming more productive societies. On the contrary, although the neoliberal agenda was able to improve the revenues to the rentier capital, entire nations—even developed ones—suffer with income inequality (PIKETTY, 2014), impoverishment (BECK, 2008), unemployment (SAAD-FILHO; MORAIS 2018), working class political alienation (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016), exhaustion of natural resources (MCBRIAN, 2016), and economic instability (BRESSER-PEREIRA, 2018).

Perhaps we can conclude that the neoliberal political administration goals was never the collective well-being. Indeed, as Dardot & Laval (2016), Dumenil & Lévy (2004), Harvey (2005), Plehwe (2009), Saad-Filho & Morais (2018), among many others, state, neoliberalism was, from the beginning, a strategy for the gore enrichment of the rentier capital. In that sense, neoliberalism achieved a great success, perhaps greater than expected. One may think that is the reason it is so difficult to get rid of it.

It is with this perspective that we return to the metaphor in the title of this article. If neoliberalism is an all-pervasive but obscure social process—a class strategy (DUMENIL; LEVY, 2004), a new rationality (DARDOT; LAVAL 2016), an agenda for economic and political reforms (HARVEY, 2005), the most uncertain response to the capitalist crisis (BECK, 2008), and much more—, the way in which it traps and tears its prey is quite discernible. The claws and fangs of neoliberalism are its supposedly unquestionable rationality. Indeed, it is efficiency and the sacrifices required which, ultimately, washes the streets with blood.

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