

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BELO MONTE HYDROELECTRIC POWER PLANT: ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT AND THE DEVELOPMENT DILEMMA

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Introduction

If I had to sum it up in one sentence, I see Belo Monte as a possibility of development for this region. And for everyone here. Besides that, the country needs energy. (Businessman, Altamira, May/2011).

Our people need to survive, our people need sustainable development, to learn to produce and take care of what is ours. We are not fighting against development, but for our planet, for the world. (Indigenous Juruna leader, Volta Grande do Xingu, June/2011).

The development model is under dispute. It is also about what we want for the future of Brazil. Because Belo Monte is symbolic. Who will prevail in organizing the Amazon? Who will prevail in what I want for this country, what is the future, what the people want? (Human rights activist, Belém, August/2011).

In July 2010, the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant started in the cities of Altamira, Vitória do Xingu and Senator José Porfírio, in the Pará State, Brazilian Amazon. It is expected to be the third largest hydroelectric power plant in the world, with capacity to generate more than 11000 MW/hour – and a proportional capacity to create controversy and conflicts. Its implementation, currently the most prioritized effort in the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC, Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento) of the Brazilian Federal Government, was initially planned in the mid-eighties amongst the infrastructure and integration projects for the Amazon by the acting military government. Since then, protests by social movements and indigenous people, judiciary disputes and fortuitous changes in the national economy and politics have influenced the path of the project, turning its execution into one of the longest and most symbolic conflictive processes in the recent history of the country.

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This article approaches the conflicts surrounding the construction of this hydroelectric power plant. Its main objective is, while describing and analyzing the dynamics of this conflict, to discuss what in this process – which includes in its history a milestone of the emergence of socio-environmentalism and has controversially encompassed, for more than 30 years, diverse social groups, reports and technical opinions, governmental institutions, civil society organizations, the Amazon rainforest and the Xingu river basin – is pertinent for the analysis and interpretation of the relationships between society, environment and development.

The main argument we intend to demonstrate is that the conflict surrounding the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant is an *environmental conflict* due to the fact that, more than material and symbolic disputes over the usage of resources, the *experiences concerning the relationship between society and nature* are at stake, interspersed by the notion of *development*. Thus, the conflict manifests itself as a cosmopolitical dispute – i. e., it expresses concurrent ontological perspectives that collide with this modern development project. Therefore, we intend to stress the cosmopolitical sense of the environmental conflict concept, while associating its analysis to contributions proposed by Stengers (2003), De La Cadena (2010) and Latour (1994), in order to incorporate the demands through the opening of new compossibles, i. e., considering the existence of differences that are more ontologically consistent than what the environmental licensing analysis is able to encompass.

For this purpose, the following topics will present i) a brief history of the conflict and the issues that arise from it; ii) key elements identified in the conflict; and iii) a discussion of results regarding theoretical clues. Finally, we will present a few reflections as a conclusion.

Conflict history

The project for the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant dates back to 1975, with the beginning of the Hydroelectric Inventory Studies for the Xingu river hydrographic basin (Estudos de Inventário Hidrelétrico da Bacia Hidrográfica do Rio Xingu). These studies, which had their conclusions published by the Brazilian government in the National Electrical Energy Plan 1987/2010 (Plano 2010 - Plano Nacional de Energia Elétrica 1987/2010), highlighted that “due to its dimension, leveraging the Xingu river will possibly be the single largest national project of the end of this century and the beginning of the next one” (PNEE, 1986), indicating the Kararaô plant – currently denominated Belo Monte – as the best option for the initial integration of the Xingu river plants to the Brazilian Integrated System (Sistema Interligado Brasileiro).

From that moment on, a series of controversies, conflicts, protests, opinions and appraisals have been issued, maintaining the construction of the Kararaô-Belo Monte plant as a constant eminence, both as a catalyst for the local development and as a “ghost” for those who opposed its construction. An important milestone in the history of this process was the Summit of the Indigenous Peoples of Xingu (Encontro dos Povos Indígenas do Xingu), held in Altamira, in February 1989.

Organized by indigenous leaderships with the support of civil society entities, the summit achieved an unexpected notoriety, with massive international and national media presence, in addition to the participation of environmental and social movements. According to data collected by the Socio-environmental Institute (ISA, Instituto Socio-Ambiental), about 3,000 people were gathered in this event, among them 650 natives from several parts of the country and abroad; authorities such as José Antônio Muniz Lopes, the director and posterior president of Eletronorte, the president of the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources, (Ibama, Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis), the mayor of Altamira at the time, federal deputies; 300 environmentalists; about 150 journalists and celebrities such as the British singer Sting.

Iconically, during Muniz Lopes' speech on the construction of the Kararaô plant, the Kayapó native Tuíra rose from the audience and touched the face of the director of the state-owned company with her machete blade in a warning gesture, expressing her indignation. The scene was printed on newspapers throughout several countries and became historical. On that occasion, Muniz Lopes announced that, since it was a cultural aggression to the indigenous peoples, the Kararaô plant – which is a Kayapó war cry – would receive another name and no more indigenous terms would be adopted in hydroelectric power plants. The plant was later renamed as Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant. The event was closed with the launch of a National Campaign for the Defense of the Amazonian People and the Amazon rainforest (Campanha Nacional em Defesa dos Povos e da Floresta Amazônica), demanding a review of the development projects for the region, with the Altamira Indigenous Statement (Declaração Indígena de Altamira) and a greeting message by singer Milton Nascimento. The Altamira Summit is considered as a socio-environmentalism milestone in Brazil (ISA, 2010).

According to Carneiro da Cunha e Almeida (2009, p. 277), since then, a “surprising shift in the ideological course” has occurred, in which the traditional populations of the Amazon, “considered until recently as hindrances to ‘development’ or, at most, subject to development, were promoted to the frontline of modernity”, basically for their association with environmental conservation. The notion of “traditional populations” itself, defined as political subjects capable of establishing an articulation between conservationist practices and territorial rights, has emerged from that context. However, as the tensions at the Altamira summit demonstrated, questioning the ideological course of development does not happen without conflict.

On the contrary, this summit was held right after a process that began in mid-1980s, when a rubber tapper movement took the lead establishing a link between their political struggles and environmental concerns and created the Forest People's Alliance (Aliança dos Povos da Floresta), which culminated in the assassination of one of their main leaders, Chico Mendes, in 1988, a little over two months before the Altamira Summit. Zhouri and Laschefski (2010, p. 12) believe that the assassination of Chico Mendes represents a symbolic milestone in two senses: “on one hand, it stands out as the apex of conflicts between environmentalist and developmentalist points of view; on the other hand, Chico

Mendes and his companions have become emblematic for their new conception of socio-environmentalist actions”.

The word *socio-environmental* was created as an adjective at the time and, associated to it, processes that did not conform to the classic formulations seen in social disputes started to emerge. By congregating and opposing diverse social groups surrounding disputes in which “nature” had a central role, these conflicts, in the scope of civil society, started to drive the emergent *socio-environmental movement*, the “Brazilian environmentalism”, having little in common with “classical” environmentalism, which concentrates on technical or administrative issues in order to solve environmental impacts or to conserve nature (ZHOURI; LASCHEFSKI, 2010, p. 22). Academically, they resulted in a demand for the reformulation of sociological interpretations, transforming such conflicts into objects of analysis, as worded by Boudes (2008, p.15), “regardless of the interest sociologists had demonstrated for the environment until then”. In addition, they drove visibility in Brazil for people and communities that took their living from the forest in a way that demanded that the Brazilian state would position them, as said by Allegretti (2008, p. 49) “as protagonists of a sustainable development project, even before the Rio Conference, in 1992”.

Said protagonism, however, does not owe its acknowledgement to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, it merely reached its peak of repercussion during the event. Rio-92, which left as one of its main legacies the institutionalization of the adjective *sustainable* as necessary to the concept of *development*, both on public policies and within the social imaginary, had as one of its prerogatives the rights of traditional communities over the forest, through the Biological Diversity Convention (CDB, Convenção sobre Diversidade Biológica). As an International Law instrument, agreed upon and countersigned by 169 countries, CDB left to the traditional peoples the role of holders of knowledge on biodiversity, and, therefore, central actors in its conservation (CARNEIRO DA CUNHA, 1999).

Since then, a paradigm shift in development-related speeches was set in motion, both in the level of adopted vocabulary and political-institutional guidelines – such as Agenda 21 – or even in the private and corporate levels. Yet, although it was initially expected that the economic bias and the imposition of exogenous economic models would be surmounted alongside attempts to frame the concept of sustainable development, in a practical sense, this progress is not consensual. In what regards the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, the project was effectively halted after the Altamira Summit, in 1989, although the source of the interruption is controversial and seen by the social movements as a consequence of their actions, but by government representatives as an effect of the late eighties recession.

The Final Report of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Leveraging Viability Studies (Relatório Final dos Estudos de Viabilidade do Aproveitamento Hidrelétrico de Belo Monte) continued to be carried out amongst government organizations during the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s under social movement protests. In March 2002, during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso mandate, which had suffered a strong energy crisis, a Resolution from the National Council for Energy Policies (Conselho Nacional de Política Energética) created a Workgroup in order to study and present a viability plan for the

implementation of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant. This workgroup manifested the professed interest of the federal government in building the plant and displayed it as a strategic project towards raising the energy supply in the country and as a structural project in the “Amazon Development Axis”.

Concurrently, and extending from 2002 to 2010, a series of summits with the participation of social movements, indigenous leaderships, socio-environmental entities and local community associations were held in order to express rejection to the power plant construction project through demonstrations, seminars and open letters to the responsible authorities. In one of these documents, named “SOS Xingu: um chamamento ao bom senso sobre o represamento de rios da Amazônia” (“SOS Xingu: a calling to common sense on the damming of Amazon rivers”), 113 social organizations questioned the government’s reasons for considering the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant as a priority, also calling upon “all the environmental entities in Brazil and their partners abroad to [devote to] the debate on the sustainable usage of the Xingu river along with its population, agriculturist families, ribeirinho populations, traditional communities and indigenous peoples” and requested time: “we need to *decelerate* the schedule for the construction of dams [...]. We need *time* to absorb what is happening, to inform the local and national society as well as international NGOs about what these impacts and the cost-benefit ratio of this construction represent” (MTDX, 2010, highlighted by the authors).

Besides these mechanisms, an intricate legal battle started to unravel, opposing laws, direct actions and preliminary actions, involving the Supreme Federal Court, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, Federal Regional Courts and civil society organizations, such as the Socio-environmental Institute, Greenpeace, the Coordination for the Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (Coiab, Coordenação das Organizações Indígenas da Amazônia Brasileira) and the Missionary Indigenous Council (Cimi, Conselho Indigenista Missionário).

The environmental licensing of the plant became key to this controversy: it is the object of 12 of the 17 legal actions filed by the Attorneyship of the Federal Republic Prosecutor’s Office in Pará against the construction project of the hydroelectric plant¹; among these legal actions, the decision of which department would regulate the licensing (Ibama, a federal department or SEMA, a state department) and each of the three licenses granted for the project (previous license, partial installation license and installation license) are legally questioned, opposing different federal departments before the federal courts, such as the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office and the Attorney General of the Union, mobilizing scientists and entrepreneurs in their discussion.

In 2009 and 2010, the controversies were still strong and, despite all the appeals and legal actions, on February 1st, 2010, Ibama, the department responsible for licensing projects that cause environmental impact, issued a precursory license certifying the environmental legitimacy of the enterprise and approving its conception and location. On April 20th of the same year, the plant concession auction was held and concluded within ten minutes, amongst preliminary actions that suspended its validity and the repeal of said actions, under protests from the demonstrators and Greenpeace activists. Around

three tons of manure were dumped in front of the National Electric Energy Agency (Aneel, Agência Nacional de Energia Elétrica) About a week earlier, James Cameron and Sigourney Weaver, Hollywood director and actor, respectively, were present in a walking demonstration and associated the construction of the plant to the script of the highest grossing film in the history of cinema, "Avatar". The partial installation license, an innovation introduced in the environmental licensing of the Madeira river hydroelectric plants and also used for the Xingu river, authorizing the beginning of the installation actions at the Belo Monte site, was issued on January 26th, 2011. Since then, the developer was already authorized to deforest 238 hectares and establish camping sites in Pimental and Belo Monte, the locations where the two dams pertaining to the plant will be located. On June 1st, 2011, exactly four months after the precursory license was issued, Ibama published the concession for the installation license, effectively authorizing the beginning of construction work for the plant. With the beginning of works, the conflicts did not cool down: legally, the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office filed three more public civil actions against the project, totaling 12 public civil actions and two administrative improbity actions related to the project. Social movements, however, did not consider the beginning of construction as a sign that the completion of the plant is a consummate fact and are still pursuing strategies for resistance and mobilization. More recently, the largest of these actions was the Xingu+23 summit: which occurred simultaneously to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, named Rio+20 due to the 20 year anniversary of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio-92), Xingu+23 intended to join, at the Xingu river embankment location:

fishers, ribeirinho populations, small agriculturists, indigenous people, social movements, scholars, activists and other defenders of the Xingu river (..) to observe the 23 year anniversary of the first victory of the people against the river damming project in 1989, after the historical 1st Summit of the Indigenous Peoples of Xingu (XINGU, 2012).

Although its repercussion did not correspond to that of the previous summit in 1989, Xingu+23 created controversy by releasing the river at a cofferdam built by the joint venture, which resulted in an arrest warrant for the demonstrators and intense debating in the media and social medias.

In summary, what we observe is that, although the project has been included in governmental planning and also in the imagination of the local population as an impending possibility for about 40 years, it was only in the last few years that this process reached its peak: it shifted from the planning stage to the licensing which authorized its development, from a distant possibility to the beginning of construction work. The construction of the Belo Monte power plant started to materialize, intensifying the surrounding conflicts. In this context of expectations and tensions surrounding the beginning of construction, we conducted the field research that establishes the discussion proposed in this article. Spanning throughout the municipalities of Altamira, Belém, Santarém, Brasília and ten locations around Volta Grande do Xingu, 46 interviews were obtained, distributed among

federal and municipal government representatives, representatives of the joint venture responsible for the construction of the plant, representatives of different social movement entities, representatives of the indigenous peoples, members of the affected local community – fishers, ribeirinho populations, suburban areas, local entrepreneurs, legal department representatives – lawyers and attorneys, scholars and NGO representatives. Besides the interviews, we recorded meetings, demonstrations, conventions and events in which the conflicting subjects were present, amounting to 60 hours of recorded audio for analysis. During the entire fieldwork, from November 2010 to August 2011, in addition to the interviews, ethnographical records noted in the field notebook and photographs have demonstrated to be valuable tools for data collection.

Involved groups and key elements in the conflict

The scale of the project – the canal intended to diverting the course of the river in order to create the reservoir is predicted to be larger than the Panama Canal, according to the data presented in the Environmental Impact Studies –, the long discussion period, with its corresponding expectations and insecurities, and the social and environmental transformations that arise from the actualization of the construction enable the subject to evoke “heated arguments” both *for* and *against* the project in the locations that are directly influenced, as well as in the national media and public opinion.

Therefore, since there is an inflow of people to the encompassing municipalities, especially to Altamira, a regionally important town, whether to work on the construction, whether to support the movements that oppose the construction, or journalists and researchers intending to record the events, the key question that starts a great deal of the conversations and subjects within the cities is: “are you for or against Belo Monte?”. And, indeed, several groups are divided between these two positions, aligning in one moment and disbanding in another, displacing the opinion scale in the course of the conflicts.

By starting their characterization from the favorable position, which is the inductor of the construction project, the first group that emerges is, widely speaking, denominated as the *government*. References to the government are constantly made and, generally, concern federal government institutions: the Presidency of the Republic, mostly personified by President Dilma Roussef, who attends conflict events through representatives of the General Office of the Presidency of the Republic and the Social Articulation Office; spokespeople of the Ministry of Mines and Energy, notably through speeches by minister Edson Lobão for the media; the Energetic Research Company (Empresa de Pesquisa Energética), which also speaks through the press, via their CEO Márcio Tolmasquim; Ibama, whose issued licenses are central mechanisms of inscription into the conflict, which synthesizes most ambiguities within this process; the Indigenous National Foundation (Fundação Nacional do Índio), represented separately by *Funai Brasília* and the *local Funai*, intervening both through technical opinions and official notices as well as meetings and mediations between the affected indigenous groups and the national scenario.

Apart from this group, but eventually aligned to it, are the local *city halls*, that mostly manifest themselves through actions endeavored by the Belo Monte Consortium,

an association between the city halls of 11 municipalities within the area affected by the construction. The association was incorporated in 2001 and interacts with other groups through their representatives (especially the president and the executive secretary of the consortium) and through activities for the population, such as free concerts and prize raffles.

These groups can be correlated to the *Norte Energia* group, the joint venture that won the enterprise auction and that, locally, concerns not only to the joint venture itself, but also all those identified with the plant's execution, which includes Eletronorte, strongly associated to the construction due to the history of the project, as well as several third party companies hired by the joint venture, such as E.Labore, responsible for the communication with the local communities, ECSA and Leme, the companies that performed the topographical measurements of the affected areas and the registering of properties, the Belo Monte Constructor Consortium, responsible for the logistics of the construction, among others. The positioning of this group is announced through the speech of its representatives in meetings and events, as well as in brochures, forms, official notices and posts on an internet *blog*.

Defending the importance of constructing Belo Monte, *Fort Xingu* must also be highlighted, a forum that assembles 178 entities, including Pentecostal Christian churches, neighborhood associations, rural unions, and, above all, local entrepreneurs who declare that their objective is to protect "regional interests and opportunities for business" linked to construction of the dam. Fort Xingu hosts weekly meetings between merchants and Norte Energia. They also keep a *mailing list* and a *blog* through which they periodically publish news concerning the state of negotiations for the enterprise.

On the opposite side, against the project, the Xingu Alive Forever Movement (Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre) is the most notorious. This entity was created in 2008, amongst disagreements with local social movements (notably the FVPP – Live, Produce and Preserve Foundation - Fundação Viver, Produzir e Preservar) which, with the election of representatives from the Worker's Party (PT, Partido dos Trabalhadores) for the federal and state governments, ceased its opposition to Belo Monte. Xingu Vivo, as it is more commonly referred to, is formed by the articulation of people belonging to different entities (women's movements, student movements, African-American movements, among others) and is supported by several national non-governmental organizations, such as the Socio-environmental Institute (ISA), as well as international organizations, such as Amazon Watch and International Rivers. Their demonstrations generally occur through public actions such as vigils, distributing brochures, trips to communities, open letters to government departments and news posting on an internet *blog*.

A few entities bound to the Catholic Church are historically linked to Xingu Vivo and welcomed it in their headquarters when Xingu Vivo emerged, namely CIMI – Missionary Indigenous Council and the *Prelacy of Xingu*. The leadership of both entities is headed by Bishop Dom Erwin Kratler, a charismatic persona and a notorious defender of human rights.

The Movement of people affected by dams (MAB, Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens) has also presented itself as an influencing agent due to its national po-

litical importance, although their presence in Altamira and participation in the Belo Monte issue is more recent, since September 2009. While differentiating itself from Xingu Vivo by its adopted strategies and partnerships, and, as highlighted by their representatives “by the Marxist-Leninist vision of the damming issue”, MAB has been working on educating base members, dislocating their representatives to communities and participating in demonstrations and events against the construction work, often alongside Xingu Vivo.

It is important to stress that the conformation of these groups, as well as their alignments and disagreements, are dynamic: Fort Xingu, which in May 2011 was clearly aligned in favor of the project, started a billboard campaign throughout Altamira in August 2011 questioning Norte Energia’s slowness in meeting the required conditions, while at the same time disclosing in their monthly report that the internal groups favoring the plant’s construction would not run for the election of the association’s board of directors, creating a contention between the “neutral” and “contrary” sides only. Another example concerns the articulation of social movements: despite their characterization as a collective that includes more than 100 entities and their intention to strengthen their actions after the installation license was cleared, there has been a new merger of movements, forming the “Belo Monte Resistance Front” (“Frente de Resistência contra Belo Monte”), composed by the Xingu Alive Forever Movement, MAB, Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra), Missionary Indigenous Council (Cimi), Unemployed Worker’s Movement (MTD, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Desempregados) and the Educator’s Union (Sindicato dos Trabalhadores em Educação, Sintepp-Regional), among other organizations.

Family farmers, ribeirinho populations and fishers from the communities that are directly affected by the project are suddenly in the middle of controversy and feel frustrated in their ability to intervene in the process. Thus, the members of these groups frequently oscillate between the sides of the dispute: despite generally being contrary to the changes brought on by the dam, the expectation that is created by the undefined situation, the fear of being run over by the construction work and the possibility, in some cases, of being paid sums of money they had never been exposed to before, destabilizes the behavior of these groups: in their meetings, there are always updates about those who still *resist* and those who *surrendered*, i. e. those who have accepted negotiating their land and rights with Norte Energia. The agriculturists, ribeirinho populations and fishers that maintain their resistance to the construction position themselves in the debates by displaying concrete elements as arguments for sensitizing audience against the construction of the dam: records of the amounts of cocoa, rice, nuts, fish, fowl and fruit they produce in the affected lands.

The indigenous peoples, or, simply, the *indians*, despite their similar situation to that of the family agriculturists and ribeirinho populations, are a distinct group. Their decisions for or against the dam are taken in their own meetings and instances, and in some communities vary according to their relationship to Funai and Norte Energia, outlined by different criteria in regards to those available to other affected communities (such as, for example, the partnership between Norte Energia and Funai, which aims to

meet monthly requirement lists by the indigenous communities, denominated as *emergency actions*, providing up to 30 thousand reais a month to each indigenous village). Besides the indigenous people living within the surrounding areas of the construction – mostly belonging to the Arara, Juruna, Xipaya, Curuaya and Xicrin ethnic groups –, other groups exert influence on the conflict, such as the Kayapó from states of Mato Grosso do Sul and southern Pará.

The *residents of the urban outskirts* of Altamira stood out after the Installation License was issued and started to fulfill a key role that even surprised the social movements. Since real estate speculation – set off by the sudden raise in land and rent prices in Altamira – is one of the most significant consequences of the project permission clearance (there are several accounts of rent fees that roughly quintupled in a month in all areas of the city), residents of the outskirts of the city, known as *baixões*, started to spontaneously organize and occupy places while demanding responsibilities from the government and Norte Energia, either for having been left homeless for not being able to pay the new rent fees or because they fear their homes will be flooded, since the areas in question are already regularly affected by floods.

A very different, but not less significant participation is that of the Scholars, i. e., that of researchers and professors that put their intellectual capital into use in order to originate technical analyses concerning the project and its impacts, taking sides in the conflict. Their position manifests itself through contributions in lectures, courses, as well as published articles and books. We highlight, in this context, the creation of the *Specialist Panel* (Painel de Especialistas), a group of renowned researchers from diverse disciplinary fields (from engineering and biology to anthropology and health sciences), members of Universities throughout the entire country, which published a critical analysis of all volumes within the Environmental Impact Studies. Besides the scientific journals, letters from research associations (among them the Brazilian Anthropology Association - ABA, Associação Brasileira de Antropologia -, the Brazilian Society for the Progress of Science - SBPC, Sociedade Brasileira para o Progresso da Ciência -, the Brazilian Ichthyology Society - Sociedade Brasileira de Ictiologia, among others, amounting to 60 entities) are also providing important support to the demonstrations.

Finally, the *Federal Public Prosecutor's Office* presents itself as a fundamental agent in the guidance of the conflicts. The Office has functioned as an enforcement and pressuring agent on the enterprise through their 12 public civil actions and two administrative improbity actions against the installation of the construction, as well as the participation of their prosecutors in events and lectures and their *blog* explaining the content of the actions in an informative manner, also contributing with material enabling public discussions of the process. Still in the legal sphere, entities such as the Pará Human Rights Defense Society (SDDH, Sociedade Paraense de Defesa dos Direitos Humanos) and the NGO Land of Rights (Terra de Direitos) have filed an appeal in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights against the Brazilian government, demanding the immediate suspension of the hydroelectric power plant construction works, among other actions.

Belo Monte, nature and society: processes under construction

We infer from the preliminary analyses, gathered in empiric research, that the diversity of the groups, the varied artifacts used as tools in the conflict (brochures, letters, public civil actions, cocoa, nuts, *blogs*, manifests, leaflets, etc.) and even the space of the affected cities and ribeirinho locations have been in constant transformation since the beginning of the conflict surrounding the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant. Each step of the construction work, from the discussion of its necessity and its viability to the issuance of licenses and the arrival of the machinery, creates and unweaves networks and landscapes. This constant movement is precisely the main characteristic of the network found in the approach by Latour (2002), an open totality which is able to grow towards all sides and directions, presenting a knot as its only constitutive element – in this case, the construction of the Belo Monte plant. The point is, thus, to emphasize the flows, the negotiation movements and the changes provoked by them (FREIRE, 2006).

Among the milestones concerning changes affecting the course of the conflict, the most evident may be the process of environmental licensing. Each of the three licenses issued by the licensing department, Ibama, was preceded by a number of questions, debates, technical reports, official notices, negotiations and protests, configuring steps of *inscription* into the conflict. In the sense referred by Latour (1997), inscriptions are all types of transformation which materialize an entity in a sign, a file, a document, allowing for new translations and articulations, while keeping some forms of relationship intact (LATOURE, 2001). Freire (2006), while interpreting the approach by Latour, states that when considering scientists' conviction efforts towards the conception of a scientific fact, inscriptions perform an extremely important role, increasing either the mobilization, the presentation, the fidelity, or the discipline of allies whose presence is necessary for persuasion (LATOURE, 1990). In the Belo Monte conflict, each license, as a synthesis of technical and political negotiations prior to their issuance, and as a sign of potential future developments, resounded immediately in the opinions of entrepreneurs invested in the project, in the articulation or disarticulation of social movements, in protocols for the involved institutions and in demands and resources for city halls. This ability of a non-human object to interfere in social effects, i. e. of actively participating in social relations, is clearly evident regarding the licenses, but does not occur solely with them: maps and tables – such as the price table disclosing payable values for improvements in lands to be compensated by the developers – also act as inductors of social mobilizations, real estate speculation, resource clearance, and as motivators for alignments and divergences between groups.

In all of these cases, the key notion we infer is that of *translation*. In this case, to translate means to dislocate objectives, interests, devices, human beings. It implies a detour, the invention of a previously non-existing liaison that, in some way, transforms the imbricated elements (FREIRE, 2006). According to Latour (2002), the translation chains refer to the work through which the actors modify, dislocate and transport their varied and contradictory interests. However, in the conflict we are studying, translating is constantly necessary, not only for objectives and interests, but also for *timing perspec-*

tives that are often contradictory. The timing of the project is planned in a macroscopic manner, with geopolitical strategies in mind, and its execution must be quick in order to comply with market demands. The timing of local residents, indigenous peoples and ribeirinho populations is *slow*, as the river that has always run and that they wish will continue running. Representatives of federal government departments, responsible for mediating local needs and national projects, report their distress due to feeling pressured or, even worse, knocked down by the imposition of *dislocated* rhythms. In this sense, the cosmopolitical proposition by Stengers (2007) gains strength while suggesting that the dispute concerns the very parameters for the definition of what is more important in the configuration of the world.

Moreover, it is interesting to stress that, in this approach, cosmopolitics are characterized as *politics of the modernity crisis*, since Stengers (2007), as well as Latour (2007), ponders that the objective of cosmopolitics is the composition of a common world, a cosmos, which should be actualized alongside others, the ones that are excluded from the republican political modernity: the non-modern – “forest peoples”, rural communities – and the non-human – scientific artifacts, environmental reports, rivers, the forest, the animals – and/or supernatural – religions, beliefs, fetishes. And, in this case, environmental controversies linked to large infrastructural projects become more relevant when they claim public audiences and environmental impact studies, “enabling the evolution of this unstable balance between participation, environment and general interest definitions” and represent a new articulation between the technical and the political (LOLIVE; SOUBEYRAN, 2007).

However, among the key elements to be highlighted, nothing is as prominent as the debate over the definition of *development*. Given that in a context of economic growth and political stability, such as the one Brazil has experienced for the past few years, nothing sounds more offensive in the public debate than the accusation of being against development, the disputes have been shifting towards defining what *kind* of development is desirable. Within this classification, the relationship with nature implied by such development must have a central role in the debate, as well as the definition of who are the subjects that are able to intervene in the course of these processes.

Thus, what can be observed is that both in the presentation of the groups involved in the conflict and in the identification of people with their respective groups, either while producing promoting materials, either in informal conversations or interviews, part of the space is reserved to discussing development, whether to reaffirm its necessity:

Belo Monte is important to our country, it is important for our development, not only locally, but Belo Monte is important for the development of our country because it will avoid big blackouts. We, the ones who live here, support it because we are Brazilian too. (Mayor of Altamira, interview, Altamira, July/2011);

The energy generated by Belo Monte is essential in order to support economic development in the pace that Brazil is adopting, so everything concerning Belo Monte is grandiose. (General Office of the Presidency of the Republic, interview, Brasília, August/2011).

Whether to state different criteria in its definition:

The government doesn't do what should be done, public policies, policies for paving the Transamazonian road, this is development for our region. We have suffered a lot with this so called development and haven't developed hardly anything. What develops us is integrating with society and ending everything we have from our culture? Is that development? To me, it is not, to me this is killing. Killing all you have from your traditions. That's what this kind of development means to me, it kills a person's traditions. Then it really destroys the people, you cannot develop if developing is the same as integrating. (Indigenous Juruna leader, Altamira, June/2011).

I get sad when people say that the construction of Belo Monte will bring development to the city of Altamira. But we know it's not exactly like that. We know from the other dams that there isn't much difference on the development, on the ecology, for the municipality and the region. Because it all stays the same, and, in most cases, even worse, with those dams set by the government. [...] We get very worried about Belo Monte. What we wanted was for this development to come in another way, so that we could see our people in peace, planting rice, gathering corn, gathering cocoa, because we have a wonderful land for cultivating. We have lots of beans here. We have to remember that, besides rice, corn and cocoa production, we have açai berries, cupuaçu, and flour (family agriculturist from Volta Grande do Xingu, interview, Cobra-Choca district, June/2011)

We understand, therefore, that since the United Nations Conference on the Environment, the concept of development is being rediscussed towards increasing the participation of local communities in its definitions, in the current Brazilian context; 20 years after the Conference, this inclusion, in practice, is far from being put into practice. As a premise for quality of life improvements, development is considered unanimous; however, it is known that as a general model for modernization, not everyone fits as a beneficiary of the process. In the discussion towards redefining the criteria for interpreting development, culture and nature – not as abstract entities to be conserved, but as possibilities for the existence of the communities, land to be cultivated and fruit of work – are presented by local communities in order to oppose the use of abstract criteria such as energy generation and growth. However, these demands for the definition of criteria do not resound in decisions for public policies, which, in many cases, generate more conflict than development:

Because if we continue with those PAC projects, the mining projects, our energetic planning as it is conceived today, the Amazon will stop being what it is and become a mere source of natural, mineral, energetic resources and that is the end of it. And if you take the human development indexes of the region, they are the lowest in the country.

So, this hasn't generated development in the region at all. (Xingu Vivo activist, interview, Altamira, July/2011)

It's a complex process. It's very hard, because it's a process that was born out of conflict. Any development process that involves the environment and ethnical differences creates antagonisms, they still haven't found a harmonious way to deal with them. So it is already born in conflict. (Funai coordinator, Brasília, August/2011).

Therefore, from the analysis of the conflict surrounding the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, we can observe the longevity of a conflict that expresses the incompatibility between the modernizing conception of development, in which energy generation for industrial and economic growth is seen as a national priority, and the conception of local communities, "forest peoples" and socio-environmentalists, for whom the knowledge and practices that have been indissociably elaborated from nature and culture are the main criteria for the definition of quality of life and, therefore, the priority.

However, the conflict surrounding the Belo Monte plant, although emblematic, is not the only one: in the last decades, many conflicts have emerged everywhere in Brazil with little variance to the general script, as shown in researches by Acserald (2008), Carneiro (2009), Zhouri and Laschefski (2010) and Almeida (2010).

It is specifically with the objective of stressing the unity between the demands involved in this conflict in mind, on one hand, and, on the other, of stressing their recurrence, both of which represent aspects that increase the need for "taking such conflicts seriously" as objects of sociological analyses, that we intend to group them under the concept of environmental conflicts. Even though these conflicts encompass fights for land, fights for recognition as referred by Honneth (1996), fights for the acquisition of resources, symbolic fights, among others, when we group all of these disputes in a wide concept, what we wish to stress is the holistic character of the conflict: more than isolated disputes, they are background disputes that have to do not only with a project in the Brazilian Amazon or with other scattered developments in Brazil, but have to do with the cause of diverse conflicts that share the struggle against the imperative of development, against a development that is, in practice, expropriatory. And in this context, to define the place of nature in the development process is to define precisely which society we intend to build, i. e., what kind of development we wish or, above all, what is the meaning of development for our society.

Note

1. It is important to highlight that, including all legal actions filed against the hydroelectric plant construction by other entities, such as the Public Defender's Office of the Pará State and non governmental organizations, the number of lawsuits against Belo Monte in the judiciary system reaches a total of 57.

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BELO MONTE HYDROELECTRIC POWER PLANT: ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT AND THE DEVELOPMENT DILEMMA

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Abstract: In the current Brazilian context, recent economic growth and political stability have provided conditions for the notion of development to return to the core of the debate, as a rule, via the transformation of “natural resources”. However, the predominance of this concept does not present a unanimously defined meaning – quite the opposite; in fact, many social groups question the type of development that should be stimulated, and even the need for development itself, highlighting the implied relationship with nature and bringing it to the core of the debate. Based on a field research about the environmental conflict surrounding the construction of what is purposed to be the third largest hydroelectric power plant in the world, the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, we propose the analysis of the relationships between society and nature as a key to interpreting development processes, in regards to the definition of the subjects that are qualified to intervene on the course of these processes.

Keywords: environmental conflicts, dams, development.

Resumo: No contexto atual brasileiro, o crescimento econômico recente e a estabilidade política têm proporcionado uma retomada da noção de desenvolvimento ao centro do debate, via de regra mediante a transformação de “recursos naturais”. Contudo, o protagonismo desta noção não traz consigo uma unanimidade a respeito de seu significado – inversamente, são vários os grupos sociais que questionam o tipo de desenvolvimento a ser estimulado, ou até mesmo a necessidade de se desenvolver, deslocando para o centro do debate a relação com a natureza nele implicada. A partir de pesquisa de campo sobre o conflito ambiental em torno da construção daquela que pretende ser a terceira maior usina hidrelétrica do mundo, a Usina Hidrelétrica de Belo Monte, analisa-se as relações sociedade-natureza como chave na interpretação dos processos de desenvolvimento, especialmente no que diz respeito à definição de quem são os sujeitos habilitados a intervir nos rumos desses processos.

Palavras-chave: Conflitos ambientais; Barragens; Desenvolvimento.

Resumen: En el contexto actual de Brasil, el reciente crecimiento económico y la estabilidad política colocaron nuevamente en el centro del debate el concepto de desarrollo, en general entendido a través de la transformación de los “recursos naturales”. Sin embargo, varios grupos sociales cuestionan este tipo de desarrollo fomentado, o hasta incluso la propia necesidad de desarrollarse, descentrando el debate hacia la relación con la naturaleza implicada en esos tipos de desenvolvimientos. A partir del trabajo de campo realizado sobre el conflicto ambiental en torno a la construcción de la planta hidroeléctrica de Belo Monte, proponemos analizar las relaciones entre naturaleza-sociedad como clave en la interpretación de los procesos de desarrollo, especialmente en la definición de quiénes son los sujetos con derecho a intervenir en el curso de estos procesos.

Palabras clave: Conflictos ambientales; represas y desarrollo
