

Discourse Strategies to Legitimize the Belo Monte Project

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Abstract

This is a study of the discourse strategies used to legitimize the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant project. From an analytical model adapted from the works of Schmidt (2008) and Suchman (1995), the study scans a total of 84 journalistic texts published in the national press between July of 2009 and June of 2010. The State is the actor whose actions require justification as a result of typical environmental disputes. The study looks at the sociological problem of legitimacy in the sphere of ideas and discourse. It highlights the role of the Pesquisa Energética Company, especially that of its president, Maurício Tolmasquim, when facing criticisms of the hydroelectric plant project. The actions of this actor suggest that the discourse strategy used to defend Belo Monte favored the mobilization of ideas regarding the broader program that supports the project. It also suggests that ideas from the more abstract field of political philosophy, although only implied, seek to associate the project with a determined concept of the State. The project is presented as a distinction between the current government and its predecessor.

Keywords: Belo Monte, legitimacy, discourse strategies

Introduction

The period of approximately two months between the previous environmental license concession for the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant - 1st February 2010 – and the State-public energy auction – 20th April 2010 – was marked in the mass media by an extensive chorus of arguments in favor and against the conclusion of this project. Although there had been some protests, during this period they became more serious.

The Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant was originally thought of during the time of the military government (1964-1986) in the 1970s decade and was put forward at that time as the future third biggest hydroelectric power plant in the world. It was to be only slightly smaller than the Three Gorges in China and Itaipu in Southern Brazil. The Belo Monte project became the main point in a debate that began a long time ago: is it possible to conciliate the growing demand for the use of natural resources (including energy resources) - taken as the premise of social and economic development - and the need to respect environmental limits?

It is understandable that this project led to protests: the energy power plant had been planned for the center of the Amazon region, a place known for being one of varied regions of biodiversity in the world, and also close to the largest Brazilian Indian Reserve, the Xingu National Park.

This area has many symbolic and representational constructions (Moscovici, 2003) that attract the attention and interest of a variety of social groups, some of which lie outside the national sphere. This controversy resulted in numerous suspensions and resumptions of the statutory public bidding.

In this context, it is interesting to note that the controversy surrounding the Belo Monte Project, particularly when exposed by the great media, focused on a considerable number of problems such as regional climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the change in the hydraulic level in order to eliminate the habitat of thousands of living creatures. But besides the numerous solely environmental problems, there were also the sociological ones, marked by the question of legitimacy.

The Amazon Region has been seen by the Brazilian State as a huge empty space disconnected from all the other regions of Brazil. This is a way of justifying the public policies that seek to integrate it with the rest of the country and leverage its development, even when this development is related to the exogenous interests of the native people of that region. To assume this great responsibility, the State appointed itself as the legitimate actor in charge of this duty or mission (Becker, 2005).

There are many examples of state policies such as rural settlements, subsidies for mining and agro-industrial projects, an industrial pole (Free Trade Zone of Manaus) and the construction of many routes to allow the flow of goods and people. These public policies have been hailed as legitimate actions, and any argument against these policies was viewed as contrary to the national interest, in some cases as subversive ideas. Furthermore, the economic “euphoria” of the 1970s overshadowed any criticism of government actions at the economic and territorial level.

The aforementioned actions were spread over space and time. After the State underwent a period of crisis (1980s), with fewer resources to achieve its goals and after a period in which the occupation was delegated to macroeconomic interests (1990s), the State rose again as the agent responsible for the consolidation of territorial integration economic development of the region.

The period of time that separates this new rise of the State and the conception of public policies was marked by a number of social transformations that modified the basis for comprehending the dichotomy of development and preservation.

The first change in comprehension is related to scientific knowledge of the fragility of the Amazon region, as occupation of other regions led to premature and irreversible depletion. It is well understood nowadays that the examples set by of projects such as Pro-Várzea1 should never be repeated. The second point of this change is that scientific knowledge is not restricted to the academic community that generates it, but spreads to other social groups like Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), public and private corporations, significant portions of the society and even to the Government. In this case, it is common sense that the Amazon region is environmentally vulnerable, and public policies without adequate understanding of this reality can only make matters worse. The third point is related to the development of means of communication and its restricted articulation with environmental problems.

These changes in how the subject is understood led to the notion that any form of occupying the Amazon region could result in more losses than benefits, irrespective of which actors are the beneficiaries and which bear the brunt of these results. In situations in which there are different viewpoints regarding occupation, any new initiative, such as the construction of the Belo Monte Power plant, must be founded on due legitimacy.

It is precisely the sociological problem of legitimacy that serves as the background for the present study. More specifically, its purpose is to analyze the discursive strategies set in motion by the state for the purpose of legitimizing the Belo Monte Project. Guided by premises of Weberian sociology by which legitimacy cannot simply be possessed, but is gained through the construction of a relationship, Suchman (1995) suggests that this phenomenon may be treated as a cultural process, oriented by communication and dependent on a variety of acts that portrayed meanings. These suggestions justify the reasons why, in the limits of this study, legitimacy is related to discourse.

In terms of analytical procedures, the State plays the role of an actor that concurs with the legitimacy of its own actions in the environmental field. From the point of view of discursive institutionalism (SCHMIDT, 2005), it signifies that the State can be conceived by ideas and discursive strategies that are adopted to sustain itself.

At the same time, the metaphor of field (ACSERALD, 2004 e CARNEIRO, 2005) implies the refusal of the environmental variable as an autonomous value that is imposed with normative power. On the contrary, this object is crossed by disputes that allow the articulation of conflicts and coalitions.

The problem of the present article can be couched in the following terms: in which way does the communicative discourse related to the Belo Monte Project articulate normative and cognitive ideas? Considering the fact that the Project has been discussed for decades by sectors of the Brazilian State associated with energy policies and due to the fact that the analyzed discourse has been oriented to the general public through the media, the communicative perspective is justified over the coordinative one.

As for empirical reasoning, this article was structured using information obtained from documental research in three widely circulated national magazines between July of 2009 and June of 2010. Eighty-four journalistic texts were analyzed and submitted to the method suggested by Bardin (2008) in order to distribute those results in an interpretative model adapted from Schmidt's proposals (2008 and 2009).

Basically, this model divides the ideas, taken as the substantive subject of the discourse, into three levels: public policies or specific projects, political programs and political philosophies. In sequence, the discourse itself was taken as an interactive process of communication ideas and was analyzed as a typology adapted from Mark Suchman Works (1995) that distinguishes three legitimation practices: those oriented by pragmatist interactions, those that originated from moral judgments and those oriented by cognitive processes.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the article is divided into two distinct blocks. The first one discusses the theoretical and conceptual elements that have been mentioned so far. The second part relates those elements with empirical data. Considering the limitation of these data and the restricted range of its proposals, it may not be a simple rhetoric exercise to finish these introductory notes, and further studies may be required to probe deeper into the proposed problem.

The Environmental Field: State, Discourse and Legitimation

The notion of a group of material elements whose existence is progressively threatened is a central representation of what has been done to the environment. From that notion, the idea is derived that, because of its common good condition, the environment is the starting point for the emergence of a normative path that gives rise to sustainable values and practices.

In order to question that notion, Acselrad (2004) proposes that the environment is an object crossed by sociocultural senses and differentiated interests from which, besides cooperation, contestation and conflict can arise. These elements, on a privileged occasion, enable contradictions of a specific social configuration to be viewed.

Adopting the concept of field, as formulated by Bourdieu (1983 and 1994), Carneiro (2005) carried forward the argument of Acselrad, proposing that the environmental field, in recent decades, can be characterized by the consolidation of the "sustainable development" argument as a result of a valuable and cognitive component that defines the limits of: what can be problematized, the vocabulary that can be problematized and the interlocutors that can be considered legitimate in order to mark any valid positions.

Living on a second plane, critical connotation, expressed by the idea that the notion of sustainability becomes a hostage of a capitalist logic of development, the present article incorporates the observations of Acselrad (2004) and Carneiro (2005) regarding the delimitation of the social arena, where the State acts in order to provide legitimacy for its own specific policies and extended programs. Thus, if the environmental variable does not play an independent normative role, but is a central notion in the debate, in that arena, a discursive counterpart is still required to defend, for example, the construction of a huge energy power plant in the Amazon region, for which there is a plausible justification.

Understanding these kinds of discursive counterparts constitutes the characteristic aspect that Schmidt (2005) has referred to as discursive institutionalism. By this approach, the State is conceived in terms of ideas, related to a communicational logic, in order to justify and deliberate political actions in an institutional context. While the ideas are treated as a substantive content of the discourse, the discourse itself corresponds to the interactive process of communication the previous ideas of the object

In another study, Schmidt (2008) details the analytic schema of that approach, and claims that ideas have to be identified at three different abstraction levels. The first level is related to public policies or specific programs that are taken as political solutions for delimited problems. The second level is related to more extended programs that are associated with paradigms and premises that guide public policies. These extended programs have objective problems to be solved, targets to be achieved and specific instruments applied to their actions. The third level is related to ideological politics that inform specific world visions, values and principles that influence these policies and programs.

At each of these levels, ideas can be divided by order of the predominance of cognitive and normative elements. The cognitive ideas are those that respond to a specific problem, its relevance and what has to be done.

The normative ideas, otherwise, indicate a moral judgment (what is good and what is bad) about what has been done and on the horizon makes an evaluation of what should be done.

The three levels mentioned above and these kinds of ideas constitute the elements that have to be articulated for a discursive strategy. Because it derives from an interactive process, this strategy depends on who says what, and to whom, when, why, how and where; in order to respect the classic formulation in the field of discourse studies (Gibbs, 2009). According to the case in question, a discourse can mix technical and scientific elements with more accessible narratives that translate the arguments made by specialists. Alternatively, it can be associated with myths or with the construction of apocalyptic scenarios in order to sustain that the reasonable action is the only one possible.

In other words, the format of a range of substantive ideas that are communicated always constitutes a problem to be explored in an analytic way. Schmidt (2008) recommends that a distinction should be made between coordinative discourse and communicative discourse. The former integrates the actors that are directly associated with the creation, execution and justification of specific policies. It works as a link between these different actors and offers a necessary coordination for the share and practical observation of ideas. The latter occurs in a sphere where specific actors adopt a task of specific policies for the general public in order to configure a massive process of communication of political ideas. In either case, each in its own way is a necessary stage of the legitimation process of ideas in a institutional context.

However, one question still requires clarification: how should the sociological problem of legitimation within this analytical schemata be operationalized? And, in a more elementary form, what do we understand about legitimacy?

Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as a generalized perception that actions of an entity are desirable, acceptable or adequate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions. Suchman (1995) breaks this definition down into a typology distributed into three main modes of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral and cognitive.

Pragmatic legitimacy lies in a reason/calculation of interests of the public affected by a line of action. At the simplest level, it converts itself into a kind of Exchange – support for a line of action is based on the benefits that a specific group expects to gain. It can appear on a more sophisticated social level, converting into a kind of influence, with support occurring either because part of the affected public has been incorporated into the decision structures or because valuable paths of this public have been adopted in order to monitor the results of a line of action. A third manifestation of pragmatic legitimacy, the kind involving disposition, occurs when the public takes the actor – in the sense of the organization – as an individual with personality, desires and feelings, and with the capacity to answer for its own desires and feelings.

The moral legitimacy does not rest in judgments made in the light of the possible benefits of a specific line of action. Instead, its judgment is based on the congruence between this line of action and what is defined as correct by the value system that is socially constructed by the public in question. It is a logic oriented by social benefit that differs fundamentally from individual interest. Generally, it appears in a form that is distinct from consequences, procedures, structures or the leaders that are responsible for or who are behind a line of action.

Finally, cognitive legitimacy is dissociated from an instrumental or evaluative judgment and appears in two variants. Legitimacy based on comprehensibility occurs when available cultural models enable plausible explanations for a line of action.

Legitimacy based on the “taken-for-granted” appeal puts that line of action in a group of given things that in its own representation (close to something natural and unquestionable) minimizes any possibility of doubt. In that case, the line of action is taken as legitimate because it would be impossible to be present it in any other way.

It is necessary to emphasize, however, that the separation of the three types of legitimacy results in an analytical operation. In real terms in the empirical world they can coexist, and they continue to be analytically operationalized, this separation enables valuable heuristic distinctions:

- Pragmatic legitimacy is in the public interest, unlike moral legitimacy and cognitive legitimacy. If a specific public passes its own judgments based on utility calculations/reason, the responsible actors for a specific line of action may try to make them legitimate through the concession of tangible rewards for this public.
- Both moral and cognitive legitimacy depend on cultural rules that are more extended and go beyond utility calculations. In this case, the concession of tangible rewards can reduce the prestige of the actors that are responsible for that line of action, even in the perception of the favored public.
- Both pragmatic legitimacy and moral legitimacy are associated with discursive evaluations. Different publics make their own judgments – of calculation or valuation - that are made in the public sphere. In this case, actors that are interested in the legitimation of a specific line of action need to participate actively in these discussions/debates.
- Cognitive legitimacy is associated with implicit assumptions that do not necessarily need to be verbalized, only insinuated because they are gifted with objectivity and with the façade of contents that are taken for granted.

Through these observations it is possible to deduce that, from pragmatic legitimacy, passing to moral legitimacy and culminating in cognitive legitimacy, discourse can migrate through social dynamics with growing complexities in terms of obtaining and manipulating. More profound and self-supporting when effectively established, cognitive legitimacy may be the target of discursive strategies that appeal to elements that are necessarily based on the collective imaginary and are extensively shared.

When combined, Schmidt’s analytical model, which is related to the three levels of political ideas, and the Buchman model – related to the three dynamics that indicate types of legitimacy – result in a matrix that can orientate the interpretation of discursive strategies to be shown in the results section.

Discursive Strategies to Legitimize Belo Monte

During the period immediately before the previous environmental license concession for the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant – 1st February 2010 – there were many reports in the mass media that labeled the project as controversial. Questions were raised regarding the formal licensing procedure and the origins of the project during the days of the military regime, and the media pressed for further clarification of the Belo Monte project. A brief outline of the questions raised is necessary in order to contextualize the discursive strategies in defense of the project.

In short, the arguments used to attack the project itself may be organized into three classifications in line with the study conducted by Sevá Filho (2005): human, technic/economic and environmental dimensions.

The first dimension is concerned with the human impacts of the project, described as greater than publicly admitted by the government so far. It is claimed that the number of people affected by the project is higher than the official estimates. The inhabitants of Altamira, the “barranqueiros” (traditional people) of Xingu and indigenous communities will be forced out of their own lands, plunging these unfortunate people into further depths of misery.

The second dimension is associated with the complexity of the project and its cost. It is claimed that because of the magnitude of the interference of the project in the region, the cost of the project will not be lower than R\$30,000,000 and that the taxpayer will be obliged to foot this bill. In a correlated way, it is also claimed that because of the hydrographic characteristics of the Xingu river, associated with a long period of drought, the average power required to generate energy force costs up to astronomical levels, far above the market reality.

Finally, the third dimension is associated with the destruction of the ecosystem, delimited by the “Volta Grande do Xingu” region which, in addition to its inherent environmental function, is unquestionably of great aesthetic importance.

The possibility of the destruction of this eco system can be described without parallels or akin to the disappearance of other great Brazilian falls like “SeteQuedas” in the Paraná River because of the construction of the Itaipu Power Plant.

Besides these questions regarding the project itself, two more general doubts were frequently voiced. The first has to do with the licensing process conducted by the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) and the other argument is related to the financing model that involves the participation of the National Bank of Social and Economic Development (BNDES).

The contesting of the environmental license granted by IBAMA extrapolates the scope of the project itself, because it comes into collision with the Justice Department of the State of Pará and the Federal Justice of this State on the one hand, and the General Federal Advocacy and the Federal Regional Tribunal of Brasilia on the other.. While the first two organizations support actions that look forward to revoking the environmental license, the others are in favor of maintaining it.

Therefore, the bid to retain the viability of the project remains on schedule as defined by the Federal Government. As for the content that caused this dispute, it is clear that a project established at the federal level is not easily accepted or supported at the regional level.

As for the doubts raised over the financing model, beyond the determination that the BNDES would be responsible for 80% of the Project in a period of 30 years, there is an objection to the fact that one of the main consortiums interested in participating in the bidding for the construction of the project has a stake of approximately 50% of companies subsidized of the Eletrobrás Group – a holding that is controlled by the Federal Government and operates in the sector for the generation, transmission and distribution of energy. This condition alone would place restrictions on the participation of private companies, and shows high level of risk run by this company.

Given the situation as outlined above, how did the communicative discourse regarding Belo Monte Project articulate ideas at the specific levels of the project itself, through the extended government program and philosophical/ideological policies, and how did these ideas reflect the drive for legitimacy associated with the pragmatic, moral and cognitive dynamics?

At first, the content of the reports in question indicated that the main representative in the communicative discourse concerning the Belo Monte Project, from July 2009 to June 2010, was the president of the Energy Research Company, Mauricio Tolmasquim, who had been in the Ministry of Mining and Energy in 2005. He was also the coordinator of the working group that elaborated the management model of the current electric industry in Brazil. Predominantly impersonal, the enunciation of his discourse is anchored in technical elements, sporadically presenting a fusion between metaphors and content with a more extended popular domain. The following quote is a point in question:

The region gained a winning ticket because it will develop itself while preserving the environment. (O Estado de São Paulo, 16 June, 2010)

Taken on its own, this fragment may suggest a number of inferences. For example, comparing the possibility of conciliating development and preserving the environment with obtaining of a “winning ticket” – supposedly like that of the lottery – given the lowest probability associated with the lucky process instead of a dimension of rights or citizenship, he compares the Belo Monte to a kind of a gift. As observed previously, however, this trait is used too sporadically to characterize his communicative discourse as a whole.

In its more appellant form, the discourse initiates with a general proposition that becomes more detailed due to its technical arguments. An example of a general proposition is presented below:

The construction will be a landmark for the country in all senses, both environmentally and in terms of engineering sense. Furthermore, we will have the third largest hydroelectric power plant in the world, and it will guarantee Brazilian development. It is a plant that produces extremely competitive energy. Without saying anything about the environmental effects, because we are talking about a renewable source that does not issue carbon dioxide. Belo Monte will also bring uncountable benefits to the North region and improve the life of the local population. (O Estado de São Paulo, 4 February, 2010)

Regarding this proposition, the figures represented by the Idea of a landmark and with the intentional use of superlatives, he uses terms such as “Brazilian development”, “competitive energy”, “environmental effects” and “regional benefits”. For each one of these elements there is a technical counterpart. If not, there are the considerations given below:

Regarding the Term “Brazilian Development”

The National Energy Plan, prepared by the Electric Energy Company, even with different future consumption projections associated with the destiny of the internal and global economy, demonstrates that the need to expand the offer of energy cannot be doubted. By 2030, at least double the current energy capacity will be necessary. Industrial consumption will rise less than domestic consumption. In the coming decades, the requirements of the average family will rise by 5.1% per year, as opposed to 3.8% for companies. (Folha de São Paulo, 28 April, 2010)

Regarding “Competitive Energy”

In any hypothesis there will be a revision of the energy prices set in the bidding or in the terms of the contract. The fact that two consortiums have made bids lower than the top estimate, even the small differences between both proposals, shows that the price per megawatt is not impossible to work with. From the time of the bidding, the price will have to be set by the entrepreneur rather than the government or consumer who will pay for the eventual higher cost of the project. (Folha de São Paulo, 28 April, 2010)

Regarding “Environmental Effects”

The current project has changed numerous times since it was first conceived during the military regime. It has reduced the waterlogged space to 516Km², one third of what was previously defined for the reservoir. The plant will operate in a waterline model, meaning it will only count on the output of the river to produce energy, with almost no storage of water. This reduces the environmental impact. On the other hand, it decreases the medium capacity for generating energy. (O Estado de São Paulo, 16 June, 2010)

Regarding “Regional Benefits”

The absolute majority of the local population is in favor of the project because it will bring benefits to the region. The entrepreneurs have to invest R\$3.3 billion in towns like Altamira, which is located near the plant. This is 19 times the entire budget of Pará State, to be invested in a small region of this state. It will be the salvation of the region. The entrepreneurs will be obliged to provide sewers, treated water and paved roads. They will also have to train people to work on the construction of the plant, which will provide many of them with a new profession. (O Estado de São Paulo, 4 May, 2010)

Having demonstrated the typical form of the discourse of the main discussant, the interpretative matrix mentioned in the previous section will now be presented, with the classification of its most appealing ideas (Figure 1).

Types of Legitimacy Ideas Level	Pragmatic Legitimacy	Moral Legitimacy	Cognitive Legitimacy
Specific Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The cost is low - It brings development to the country - It brings development to the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The original Project has been reviewed in order to reduce the potential for reducing environmental damage. - The project is a good example because it respects all legal norms of consultancy 	
Political Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The National Program of Energy proves the existence of demand. - The National Program of Energy demonstrates the infeasibility of other modes of energy production. - The National Program of Energy indicates the need to explore the Amazon region. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - According to the government plan, hydroelectric Power plants have to be the vectors for sustainable development, not only energy producers. - Current government performance corrects the need for investment of the previous government. - The performance of the current government rescues the Brazilian energy matrix. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Without energy there is no development. - Hydroelectric energy has less environmental impact than other energy sources. - The hydroelectric potential of Brazil gives the country an advantage over other countries.
Philosophical Policy		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is a duty of the State to develop mechanisms to develop an energy policy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Without state intervention, projects the size of Belo Monte would not be feasible.

Fig. 1: Interpretative Matrix for the Discursive Strategy Related to Belo Monte

The interpretative matrix (**Fig. 1**) shows the predominance of discourse that places ideas within the perspective of moral legitimacy and presents the Belo Monte project as part of an extended government program that justifies it and gives it significance. When ideas are concentrated in specific projects and related to pragmatic or moral legitimacy, they are limited to denying the more frequently raised doubts by using a variety of technical arguments. On the other hand, at the level of philosophical politics, the ideas that are voiced associate the Belo Monte project with a State concept described as fundamental and at the same time act as a distinction between the current and previous government.

One aspect that is particularly associated with the State is the fact that the discourse concerning Belo Monte repeatedly evokes a scenario of contrast characterized by the identification of a distinction.

The lack of investments during the previous government caused the biggest blackout in the history of the nation. There was a lack of planning when it came to building plants, which caused slowed the country's growth rates and affected the availability of energy. We will not force the Brazilian people to relive those times. Brazilians have a right to energy and good quality energy. In the past, Brazil stopped building hydroelectric power plants and focused on thermoelectrics. Even today the country is using only one third of its hydroelectric potential. What we propose is to rescue the Brazilian energy matrix. (O Estado de São Paulo, 8 April, 2010)

The term blackout, used as a synonym for disorganization and lack of foresight is used to show the distinction between past and present. This contrast suggests that the reconstruction of the State capacity to plan and execute an adequate energy policy is what sets the current and previous governments apart. In this sense, the legitimacy of the project is no less symptomatic. It follows an institutionalized path and has insisted on restarting the debate concerning how desirable State action is when it comes to organizing social life.

Conclusion

It is nothing new for environmental issues to give rise to disputes in the various sectors of society. As a regulatory and legislative element, it falls to the State to conciliate the various social concerns.

However, the State does not act impartially and independently in this case. It can declare itself in favor of some projects and opposed to others. In other words, within the government sphere of influence, it can support political actions that result in benefits and economic gains for specific groups.

Regarding environmental issues, there is evidence that the relationship between public policies on this matter has become increasingly divergent. This was obvious during the bidding for the Belo Monte plant. When faced with protests against this undertaking, the government used different discursive elements to gain legitimacy for the building of the plant. In this aspect, the different forms of gaining legitimacy encompass the pragmatic, moral and cognitive.

The discourses that were used show that the effort to afford legitimacy to the project was vital to economic development, despite all the protests against the construction of the plant for environmental and social reasons. The comparison with project of the same size in the past was an attempt by the current government to show that it had made a great effort and that this justified its actions.

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