

The Conflict of the Belo Monte dam: Frameworks of Rhetoric

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Abstract:

In this essay, I analyze the types of rhetoric used in the debate of the Belo Monte dam in order to understand the long and ongoing conflict. I'll be using this scenario to talk about how place and environment is interpreted differently for both sides of this conflict, which is the core issue that leads to such a diverse use of rhetorical strategies in their arguments. This example will emphasize the importance of environmental rhetoric and how people view place for controversies nationally and internationally.

Critical Question:

How do different interpretations of place and frameworks of place influence argument and controversial situations such as the Belo Monte Dam? Which types of rhetorical strategies are derived from ecocentrism and what makes each of them effective?

Methodologies:

In order to answer my critical question I will be analyzing specific quotes, pictures, and writings by political figures, protesters, and tribe members rather than analyzing general rhetorical strategies being used and how it is rooted in ecological identity. Much of this essay will be influenced by a paper written by Ed Atkins exploring frameworks of the conflict.

Introduction

Near the city of Altamira in the Amazon Rainforest, Brazil has been building a dam called Belo Monte for over 30 years with the purpose to provide clean, renewable energy to the rest of the country. The process has been a slow legal battle, with government officials and political figures claiming the dam to be a great source of renewable energy for the country, while others argued that the dam was harmful in other ways.

The indigenous people suffered as murky red water from construction debris has flowed all the way to Manaus Brazil, making water undrinkable for the indigenous and citizens who live off of the river. This has contributed to the dying out of many species of plants and animals, such as the river dolphin and many plants along the banks.

For clarity, I categorized each argument into a public and counterpublic. A public, for purposes of this essay, is a group of people with the dominating argument that affects the most change with the majority and the most powerful people. The counterpublic is a group of people with an argument opposing the public. According to Michael Warner in *Publics and Counterpublics*, each public or counterpublic is put into motion by texts. I'll be analyzing these texts, and the fact that all of them are motivated by each sides' sense of place and identity.

Place and identity will be seen through the lense Deborah L. Williams and Elizabeth A. Bradt have created through *Sense of Place, Identity, and Cultural Continuity*. In regards to place, they say that, "...places mediate our experience in the world helping us to organize reality." (Williams and Bendt, 44) They also claim that "Identity is enacted, embedded, and constituted through activities and conceptualizations held by individuals within specific places." (Williams and Bendt, 44)

Public

In the case of the Belo Monte dam debate, those who consider themselves "pro-dam" translate as the public since not only has it caused the most change, but is supported greater numbers and powerful people. There are a few key reasons as to why this side of the debate has been most popular, despite the gravity of negative consequences associated with it. Three of these issues will be addressed through the first half of this essay.

I'll start by showing a popular narrative framework that has a strong presence in the discussion of the dam, especially of the general public. It will demonstrate how narrative can affect our values of place in a significant way. My next example will introduce a concept keyed by Ed Atkins called Deflective Discourse, a strategy used by the pro-dam public that heavily involves frameworks of ideas, which is used by political figures often in Brazil.

The Public's Narrative Framework

Frameworks are, by my own definition, a series of ideas or beliefs associated with another belief or word. A narrative framework is even more powerful. According to Walter Fisher, narration can be an even more compelling argument than facts or reason in his article *Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument*. Humans tend to be the most convinced through storytelling, even in an argument that warrants factual evidence and reason- it is the easiest for people to relate to emotionally and apply to their own situations.

The narrative paradigm challenges the notions that human communications,, must be an argumentative form, that reason is to be attributed only to discourse marked by clearly identifiable modes of interference and/or implication, and that the norms for evaluation of rhetorical communication must be rational standards taken essentially from informal or formal logic. The narrative paradigm does not deny reason and rationality; it reconstitutes them, making them amenable to all forms of human communication.” (Fisher, 376)

That’s why when Fernando Ferro started making predictions alluding to a certain narrative in 2005, it shifted the way a lot of Brazil’s public understood the situation. “If new electricity generators do not come into operation by 2010, we may have an energy collapse. The concrete fact is that we have a political responsibility for the country’s energy... The worst of all worlds is where there is lack of energy.”

Before this was said, Brazil experienced a series of traumatic national blackouts in energy. The country had been trying to progress and became increasingly reliant upon energy, hence the need for an electro-hydro dam. When Ferro makes these claims, he’s not only predicting, but portraying a narrative that stops the progress of Brazil. Not continuing the construction of the dam then means, for this side of the argument, that they will live in a world that now depends on modernization and energy but no longer has it. It narrates a world of terror and chaos, much like the first few power outages caused for citizens and officials.

The reason this strategy works so well is because it uses a tunnel vision technique that only allows people to see one part of the effects of the dam. For them, not building the dam isn’t just unproactive, but unjust towards the people as they may live in the dark. It shows that those against it are unwilling to give Brazil’s people the quality of life that they deserve.

“Places are also narratives. Discursively created and sustained, they are inherently dialogical... Discourse in and about our places, helps shape our experience, relationships, interactions, understandings, and knowledge.” (Williams and Brandt, 44) This quote embodies why narrative frameworks are so convincing for the public. Especially in terms of place and identity, narrative is apart of who these people are, what they fear, and what they want to see happen.

Deflective Discourse Used by Public Figures

In an article written by Ed Atkins titled *Dammed and divisionary: The multi-dimensional framing of Brazil's Belo Monte dam*, Atkins addresses these narratives and how they may be used for a term he uses called deflection discourses. Deflection discourse is a method of argument in which one side is unwilling to hear and receive anything the other has to say and, in order to do this, assumes the opposition is against their values no matter what they might have to say.

"This work follows these assertions regarding the reflective ineffectiveness of the opposition (anti-dam), by arguing that the articulation of Belo Monte by its proponents is characterized by a degree of deflection of opposition critiques. In doing so, the pro-dam coalition has been able to frame the construction of Belo Monte in a way that directly addresses, deflects and discredits resistance discourse against the dam." (Atkins, 281)

This strategy is a form of framing, since it associates anyone of the opposition to always be for or against a certain set of values. If someone is against the dam, a deflection discourse might assume they are against economic progress and that was the end of it. It neglects to understand the opposition is actually against the dam. The pro-dam public refuses to look outside of their own narrative framework.

Public figures in Brazil seem to have honed in this strategy best. Asdrubal Bentes of the Democratic party, for example, made this statement in 2001 when American influences began to comment on the issue; "(We have) an intolerance from those who do not want to see this country develop, and the Amazon be rationally exploited, producing well-being for its' people."

What's even more significant about Bentes' statement is that he, and a few others including Bornhausen and Aleluia, were associated with the party democratic party that was commonly against the dams and other projects like these, which increased their credibility. Leaders, according to Atkins, were trying to create fear against the wild and nature and showed that the dam was their way of conquering it, their economic issues, and unifying the nation to be one modernized country.

In a 2010 rally against the Belo Monte dam, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, or popularly known as Lula, reminded the nation of a past narrative that supported his agenda. Lula like many presidents before him, was for the construction of the Belo Monte dam. He thought back to the Itaipu dam and a rally against it he attended as a younger man. The Itaipu dam on the border of Argentina had almost sent Brazil into nuclear warfare. Conspiracies proposed that the purpose of the dam was to flood out a prominent city in Argentina directly beneath it. Argentina responded by threatening to develop nuclear bombs. Many Brazilians feared a repeat of these events and began to see the validity in his argument.

"The opposition – like these kids - for lack of information, used to say that an earthquake would happen, say that the Itaipu reservoir would cause an earthquake in the Itaipu region. And they used to say even more: used to say that Itaipu would change the whole climate of the region.

And they used to say even more: that the water would leak out beneath the Earth and it would change the Earth's axis, the Earth wouldn't be the same anymore," Lula said. "It's because of these constructed fantasies that we should not be afraid of debating."

In saying these things, Lula is discrediting anyone who believes that the dam could be harmful, even though the comparison may not be accurate to the Belo Monte dam as there was no threat of war or flooding in the same way there was with Itaipu. He is deflective about the actual problems that the people surrounding this dam face. His argument claims that because some arguments were false in an alternate scenario, so are the claims that Belo Monte would be harmful to anyone.

Lula then establishes his credibility by taking a stance in his ecological identity. "I can say to you, comrades: there's maybe somebody who loves Brazil just like I do, I doubt that there's somebody who loves it more than I do, I doubt there's somebody who wants to preserve the environment more than I want to preserve it. Now, I'm not ignorant to know that Brazil has a potential to produce more than 164 thousand megawatts of energy from our rivers, and we are going to use this cleaner energy that we produce and we're going to preserve the environment."

Instead of addressing the problems, he claims to love Brazil's environment and uses the dam as an excuse to preserve Brazil by creating clean energy. However, this still deflects any and all arguments about the natives, civilians near the Amazon, and the dying out of many species.

The problem with deflection is that it's like a mirror. When you look into it, all you can see is yourself and what you believe. It best explains why pro-dam people, especially on a political level, fail to address arguments the counterpublic makes.

Counter Public

Indigenous leaders, smaller political groups, locals along the riverside, and foreign campaigners all form together to form a coalition of those against the Belo Monte dam. However, since their campaigns have generally gained less traction over time, I will define them as the counterpublic. That is not to discredit their successes so far- these people groups are the reason the dam has not been completed so far.

Their arguments are often overshadowed by larger political figures, and even the Brazilian presidents throughout the thirty-year battle. Of course, part of the biggest reason this is a conflict of interest is because of the destruction to the Amazon this construction brings. Most political intervention done to stop this is done on an international level. European countries contribute the most, which we've seen previously has not bode well for some of Brazil's leaders.

In this section, I'll be showing two major groups apart of the counterpublic and types of rhetorical strategies each group is using in relationship to ecological identity and sense of self in the Belo Monte dam controversy. The first is a group centered in Europe and the UK that speaks on behalf of fishermen and indigenous people groups. In this part of my essay, I'll be talking

about other instances of international interference in Brazil's politics. I will then be analyzing the Indigenous groups, and how they argue rhetorically through visuals, actions, and statements.

Survival

Survival is an organization aimed to give tribal and indigenous people around the world a voice against oppression. In Brazil, they have intervened in many of indigenous affairs involving the Belo Monte dam. One of Survival's most impressive accomplishments was their campaign for a little known tribe called Arara. Arara was once a large tribe located downstream from the Belo Monte dam. In 1970, they were hunted down and murdered after being accused of killing construction workers that had been working on a highway that ran right through their territory. The next time Arara was contacted was in 1981, only 30 tribe members remained.

Since the construction of the Belo Monte dam, they have grown to be at least 250 members. With the polluted waters and the tribe's vulnerability to diseases loggers and construction workers carry, they remained at risk of dying out. It seemed to be the same story again and again.

That was when Survival started influencing the people to lobby to give tribes people their own section of land in which they could remain safe from diseases, though it only partially solved their problems. After journalist George Monbiot released a document on BBC about the conditions for the Arara people during the Belo Monte conflict, the government developed a compromise in 2016. They began clearing out settlers from the deforested lands of the Arara and created boundaries that outsiders could not cross so that the tribe could live in peace.

The difference between these campaigns and the arguments of the public are their values. Survival valued the identity of the land by its' people. Part of the ineffectiveness of the opposition is the fact that their ecological identity isn't inserted into the mix. However, their ecological identity does extend towards the people who live there, and that they define the land due to their reliance on it. The main problem with this is that these people are never given a chance to voice their own ecological identities, and so they require the help of others, or at least, that's what organizations like Survival seem to believe.

Visual Rhetoric and Action

On the contrary, those most harmed by the construction of the Belo Monte dam have found ways to voice their concerns beyond the use of representative group. In 1990, international groups found themselves involved with the task of protecting the Xingu tribe. In Altamira, a protest triggered one of the most famous images that seemed to represent the Xingu's take on the situation.



In this image, the leader of the Xingu tribe, Tuira, held her knife against the cheek of an engineer who attended the protest to defend the construction of the dam. Instead of using words, she cleverly used a form of symbolic action that would spread across Brazil and bring awareness to the issue of indigenous rights and quality of life as a result of the construction of the Belo Monte dam. It postponed plans to construct the dam until 2003 with Lula's election.

The most significant aspect of this image is the way it shows the ecological identity of the people directly affected by the dam. Even though their rhetoric may not look the same as those on a political platform, we can see that their values depend on their culture and land being preserved.

Concluding Thoughts

Whether you look at coalitions for or against the construction of the Belo Monte dam, the core issue is the each side's perception of the land and how it should be used. On one end, active groups involved and international groups see the environment as something to be kept preserved, especially for those who have come to rely on it. They see their identity as the protectors as life as it is, and the dam effects that quality of life. Pro-dam publics see the land as something that can help Brazil develop internationally in power and economics. They see Brazil as a nation progressing quickly, and that the people have become reliant on things like energy.

Their ecological identities depend much more on class and what resources each group relies upon. It goes to show that conflicts such as these often rely upon how place is perceived. Sometimes environmental rhetorics can be the very root of political issues like the controversy of the Belo Monte dam.

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