

Forced Development and Multiple Displacements: Places Confronting Dams¹

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Introduction:

In Brazil, the implementation of large-scale infrastructural projects lays the groundwork to strengthen the country's strategy of insertion in the global market. The notion of *development*, as a frame of mind (SACHS, 1992) underlines the justifications presented to undertake such a strategy. The widespread use of such a category produces a feeling of inevitability of these projects in the context of market "demands". Within this viewpoint, the social and environmental consequences of these interventions are considered "externalities" to be identified, measured, internalized and efficiently managed by programs of risk-mitigation and compensation.

Characterized as "social effects of large projects", involuntary displacement and forced resettlement (OLIVER-SMITH, 2006) are dealt with by means of this same managerial perspective. However, a growing vulnerability can be observed among certain social groups on the basis of a variety of experiences of involuntary displacement, the distinct features of which reproduce historical patterns of environmental injustice. This is the case of riverside communities affected by the implantation of two hydroelectric dams in the Jequitinhonha Valley of Minas Gerais State, Brazil. This paper intends to discuss multiple displacements caused by dams, with a focus on situations which do not involve *strictu sensu* relocation, but *displacement in situ* (FELDMAN et al., 2003, p. 9) .

It is worth mentioning that the organization of Brazil's energy grid concentrates its generating capacity on the exploitation of the hydrologic potential. The expansion of hydrologic generating capacity – a strategic component of the plan of national economic growth – PAC - is a response to the growing demand of electro-intensive sectors. The

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result is the multiplying of dams, including the retaking of old projects, such as the Belo Monte project in the Amazon. According to Silva and Rothman (2011, p. 729):

the PAC includes 67.3 billion Euros in public and private investment in hydroelectric power generation. The principal investments were to be in Amazonia and Minas Gerais. In 2007 there were 210 hydroelectric dams in operation in Minas Gerais and the Programa de Geração Hidrelétrica em Minas Gerais (Programme for the Hydroelectric Generation in Minas Gerais, PGHMG) 2007-27 proposed the construction of 380 additional dams, of which 45 would be large dams (*usinas hidrelétricas*, or UHEs) and 335 of small or medium proportions (*pequenas centrais hidrelétricas*, or PCHs).

Such projects attract attention not only by the volume of resources mobilized but also by the significant socio-environmental impacts: involuntary displacement of local populations (BLOEMER, 2001; OLIVER-SMITH, 2006; 2008; ROTHMAN, 2008)³; loss of large areas of fertile land (SIGAUD, 1987); interruption of ongoing local economic activities; elimination of native vegetation; alteration of the entire aquatic environment; as well as impacts on human health by the dissemination of vectors which transmit diseases and the deterioration of water quality (NAJAR, 1990; COSTA, 1991; COUTO, 1999). These effects are aggravated by the sequential construction of multiple dams within the same river basin, producing cumulative impacts. In the Jequitinhonha Valley, the Information System of Brazilian Hydroelectric Potential identifies at least twenty inventoried projects, thereby producing perspectives of multiple displacements as a result of the transformation of the local environment.

Space, population and power

We propose to reflect on this multiplicity of forms of displacements, their effects and the underlying logic which guides state actions of territorial planning and re-ordering. Our focus will be on power relations inherent in such processes, which will allow us to view involuntary displacements as a particular form of population movement in space, marked by a dynamic which interlaces violence and production of the subjects.

Notions of space, population and compulsion are present as central analytical categories of the *modus operandi* of state territorial and human population management, in the same manner in which the analytical categories of public interest and poverty are central to the justifications of development policies.

³ According to Michael Cernea (apud OLIVER-SMITH, 2008:03), “development projects are estimated to displace more than fifteen million people a year”.

Reflections about the category of space are associated with the relation of space and modernity in relevant literature. Important works indicate the tendency of the annihilation of space by time (HARVEY, 1992), the constitution of “phantasmagoric place” affected by absent and distant others (GIDDENS, 1990) or even disjunctive processes which permeate stages of territory, culture and nation (APPADURAI, 1990, 1997). However, despite the contribution of these studies, their focus is on the association between the modern condition and tendencies of uprooting, limiting themselves to the examination of perspectives of mobility in which space assumes preponderance over place. Nevertheless, even in the context of phenomena such as transnationalism and globalization, Escobar (2001), highlights the role of *place* in the constitution of the life of many people:

[...] place continues to be important in the lives of many people, perhaps most, if we understand by place the experience of a particular location with some measure of groundedness (however unstable), sense of boundaries (however permeable), and connection to everyday life, even if its identity is constructed, traversed by power and never fixed (ESCOBAR, 2001, p. 140).

For Escobar (2001), an anthropology of space is needed as the other of the anthropology of non-places and that of de-territorialized cultures. This shift of interest in relation to place is marked by an effort to think the production of the locality as a complex interplay between differing potentials of mobility, which translate into the dynamics of de-territorialization and re-territorialization. Localizations are produced by the restriction, confinement and obligation of submission of certain groups while, at the same time, localities become prominent by means of their “subaltern struggles” in “progressive defense” of their place.

In this perspective, attention to “places” can be especially important for the discussion of involuntary displacement processes, given that such experiences exemplify power differentials in relation to global flows and movements. It is precisely in the sphere of global provincial processes, which impede a progressive conception of place (MASSEY, 2000, p.179), that we can identify the strict association between mobilities or forced localizations and the expansion of development programs. If we examine “development” as a governmental project characteristic of the Modern State, that is, as an effort to produce governable subjects (LI, 1999), notions of legibility and population become central. The population is the object, the means and the end of development, but to manage it, it must be made legible.

State interventions for the ordering of space with the classification of possible, legitimate and desirable uses implies a capacity of control over the subjects and their respective territories (SCOTT, 1998, p. 2). The rationalization and standardization of the social fabric are thereby imposed as conditions to make it legible and governable. In the case of dams, a “cartorial and patrimonialist” logic prevails which transforms subjects with their intricate networks of social and environmental relations into numerical units – populational or habitational, for example, as found in the Environmental Impact Study and Summary (EIA-RIMA) of the Murta Dam, which evaluates and passes judgement on the communities in this manner:

THE PROPERTIES ARE SUBJECT TO INVOLUNTARY MIGRATION

Subjects are thereby reduced to properties, with a consequently disparaging evaluation which alludes to a particular conception of poverty.

On the other hand, it is valid to compare this to the struggle of these same people affected by the dams, who reject this logic which denies them their condition of subjects of rights. In the case of the Irapé Dam, the dam-affected people produced, by means of the language of the *cordel*⁴, a type of counter-EIA-RIMA which we reproduce here:

[...] Ladies and gentlemen those of you who are not familiar with the north of Minas Gerais, pay attention to this true story. It was made completely with the people and many of their communities, research which lasted several days to discover the truth [...] It is a wholesome place where we were born and raised and live since the time of our most backward grandfathers [...] Those who think that everything here is the same are sadly mistaken; at each stretch of the river, every person is different. Everyone has his own system of weeding, planting and harvesting; the ways they do it are different; it's not easy to understand. [...] Anyone who thinks that the people are all alike are mistaken [...] They [the dam entrepreneur] just don't see the difference; they mix the atheist with the faithful, the strong with the weak, those who have teeth with the toothless [...] (Cordel of the Dam-Affected People, 1997)

Involuntary displacement and displacement in situ

Therefore, processes of compulsory displacement are not caused by flaws or gaps related to the functioning of modern institutions, nor do they constitute “externalities” resulting from the developmentalist program. By contrast, the multiplying of such experiences is an integral part both of the formation of nation-states, as well as their

⁴ Cordel literature refers to cheap pamphlets, magazines, etc. which are displayed hanging along a cord on the sides of a newsstand.

economic restructuring aimed at the promotion of development (GEISLER & SILBERLING, 2003).

It is based upon this viewpoint that we examine the association between development projects and involuntary displacements. The megaprojects consist of interventions which “transform the landscape rapidly, intentionally and profoundly and require coordinated applications of capital and of State power” (GELLERT & LYNCH, 2003, p. 15-16).

According to Gellert and Lynch, 2003, the course of these projects in space and time requires the differentiation of primary and secondary displacement processes. The former refer to direct actions of population resettlement across space, including the groups affected by the construction and the contingent of workers mobilized and/or attracted by dam construction. The latter refer to indirect processes unleashed as domino effects resulting from changes in the quality of the environmental and social environment.

Nevertheless, physical relocation is not a necessary condition for the characterization of compulsory resettlement, according to the notion of “*displacement in situ*” (FELDMAN et al., 2003, p. 9). An apparent contradiction in terms, the notion of displacement *in situ* reveals, in contrast, that groups can experience the compulsive nature of these processes without effectively leaving their places of origin, as they see their resources and forms of social reproduction compromised by the effects of other interventions. Therefore, displacement *in situ* refers to processes in which people remain in their place, but have their conditions of existence significantly altered, modifying their social position, especially their conditions of vulnerability and risk. In this way, involuntary displacement refers not to the physical movement in itself, but to relations of inclusion and exclusion through which people lose access and control over their conditions of existence and social reproduction, including natural and material resources, housing, security, solidarity networks, confidence and kinship (FELDMAN et al., 2003).

To exemplify, we cite the current situation of inhabitants who live downstream from the Irapé dam. They were not relocated by the Irapé dam because the State recognizes as affected people only those who live in the area flooded by the dam. Since they live downstream, they continue in their places of origin, but this place is not the same as before because the control of water flow of the river is now under the direction of the

energy entrepreneur. Therefore, knowledge they had regarding regularity of flows, seasonal fluctuation of high water and low water, which enabled them to practice floodplain agriculture (*agricultura de vazante*), for example, does not apply to the current situation in which low waters and high waters occur in an unexpected and irregular manner, subject to the needs of the dam. In fact, they live in a modified environment which impedes material reproduction, forms of organization of life and labor. It is in this sense that we identify them as displaced *in situ* – as a result of the loss of their abilities developed in the historical circuit of social and environmental relations (in the sense of Ingold). They live in a strange environment over which they have no control and which they now struggle to comprehend. Another effect is demographic emptiness. With the loss of the wet lands, many inhabitants, in particular those of working age, enter into the migratory process, now as non-seasonal workers.

In the region of semiarid climate, the productive organization of families is characterized as an interdependent system, whose reproduction requires the articulation of small farming, animal raising and prospecting. In turn, this articulation is dependent on the coordinated production in the domains of cleared land-vegetable garden, that is, the functionality of the binomial tableland-floodplains (that is, *tabuleiros e vazantes*). Floodplains constitute a productive domain independent of rainfall since their fertility is linked to the dynamic of seasonal inundation and fluvial waters. We should emphasize the indispensable character for the local way of life, since the irregularity of rains in the Semi-arid makes subsistence production of the open fields a very risky undertaking in which the investment of resources and family labor may not correspond to the expectations and family calculation of expenses.

The elimination of flooded lowlands results in disarticulation of the small peasant farm in that the control of these wet lands provides families not only with the mixture and complementary aspects of the open field-vegetable garden spheres, as well as masculine-feminine labor, but also – and above all – that which inhabitants call “guaranteed agriculture”. The loss of this control results not only in the compromising of animal raising and the emergency maintenance fund of these families, but also exposes them to conditions of food insecurity resulting from the productive de-structuring and ecological imbalance.

In the case of the Middle Jequitinhonha, there is an inversion which is taking place – from abundance to scarcity. The loss of seasonal inundation gives rise to an experience of emptiness: emptying of the communities, draining of savings with the increase of expenses and the multiplying of expenditures at the weekly open market, women deprived of their vegetable gardens, and departure of older children due to the increase of permanent migration. The invalidity of this matrix which organizes the peasant logic is therein associated with the insufficiency of resources for family maintenance and the sterility of land now strictly dependent on the irregular rains of the Semi-arid, which result in the men and heads of household feeling an inaptitude for work, with the consequent feeling of impotence which forcefully leads them to abandon the *right* of origin as they seek better conditions in near-by villages.

For the purpose of the present analysis, the case of the Murta dam is illustrative because it demonstrates the association between multiple displacements: on the one hand, the threat of relocation by a hydroelectric dam; on the other, the compromising of conditions of social reproduction due to the impacts produced by another hydroelectric dam – Irapé upstream. Furthermore, the complexity of the case suggests the limits of risk mitigation and corrective policies, the private property logic of which is centered on compensations and cannot apprehend the effects and implications of Irapé for those upstream communities which were not relocated.

Thus one can observe the connections between control over territories and their effects, since compulsory displacement can refer not only to movement in space, but also to remaining in the locality, but with the reconfiguration of the actors in new economic and social positions, in which new conditions of vulnerability, insecurity and impoverishment are frequent. The vulnerability and insecurity refer to the always present possibility of undergoing subsequent displacements which, although not always directed institutionally by others, take on a compulsory character by the effect of exposing these subjects to processes which will displace them again.

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