

Hydroelectricity as an extractive industry in crisis in Brazil

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Through a historical review of the institutionalization of electric energy sector in Brazil, the paper emphasizes the naturalization of the use of water as the nation's main source of electricity – hydroelectricity was, at the same time, a constitutive part and the object of a discourse around Brazil's natural vocation since the 19th century. The adoption of hydroelectricity and widespread promotion of the construction of large dams is associated with an imperative of necessity that is attested to by the history of the sector – a history that is intimately connected to the expansion of extractive industries in Brazil.

According to this study, the characterization of hydroelectricity as a renewable resource, associated to sustainability concerns and green economy policies, was incorporated into the sector's discourse much later as a response to environmental politics at the turn of the 20th century. Despite several reforms operated in the electricity sector in Brazil (that went from a private model, to public, and later a hybrid one) and the enactment of laws that supposedly democratize the governance of the sector (including for example provisions that protect the rights and guarantee the participation of indigenous and riverine peoples in decision making processes), the historical underlying modes of operation of the sector still prevail.

The paper concludes that the sector has been constructed on the basis of and progresses by policies of crisis contention: the need to provide ever more electricity to the urban centers and industrial sectors and without which the nation would face unavoidable economic chaos. This mode of operation has not only affected the long-term planning of the sector, but also kept discussions around social and environmental sustainability, the search for alternatives, and democratic participation at bay.

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