

## **Identity and strategy in the formation of the Brazilian Environmental Movement<sup>1</sup>**

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### **SUMMARY**

Relying on a conceptual synthesis provided by the Political Process and New Social Movement theories, this article analyses the strategic and symbolic dimensions of the Brazilian environmental movement's formation process. The authors argue that three political opportunity structures — Redemocratization, Constituent Assembly and Rio 92 — provided the parameters for environmental groups to arise and face common dilemmas regarding their frames and mobilizing strategies. Through this process, a shared identity came about.

**KEYWORDS:** *Brazilian environmental movement; political opportunity structure; collective identity; mobilizing strategy.*

In July 1982, close to the shores of the Foz do Iguaçu waterfalls in Guaíra, a southern Brazilian town, 3,000 people took part in the re-enactment of an indigenous funerary ritual (a *quarup*) in protest against the construction of the Itaipu hydroelectric dam which threatened to destroy the Seven Falls National Park: "Marching to a melancholic drum beat, demonstrators made seven stops along their route, carrying a tree sapling and a white flag with a tear-shaped petal in the middle, as well as a banner with the slogan 'Seven Falls Will Live.'"<sup>2</sup> Organized by a coalition of small environmental groups from various regions of the country, the Seven Falls Farewell Quarup staged a number of political and cultural events over a three-day period.

Itaipu was one of the mega-projects implemented by Brazil's military governments as part of its developmentalism. By opposing construction of the dam, the environmental activists were also

effectively opposing the authoritarian regime itself. Hence the episode reveals the connection between the early environmental movement and the movement towards redemocratization. Although this connection was a prominent feature of various events around the time of the Seven Falls Farewell, the vast, largely Marxist-inspired literature produced in Brazil on social movements during the cycle of redemocratization protests focused primarily on the popular movements and paid little attention to environmental activism, a more middle-class phenomenon. The process behind the formation and internal dynamics of the Brazilian environmental movement provoked few systematic analyses, most of which were limited to case studies.<sup>3</sup>

Just as the collective mobilizations provoked an avalanche of studies, so their cooling following the conclusion of the redemocratization process led to the dissolution of this research agenda. In fact, the institutionalization of various social movements in the form of formal associations or political parties was negatively interpreted by much of the literature as a sign of demobilization or co-option. This assessment was refuted at the turn of the 1990s by studies showing that the apparent decline in social movements could be explained by the dynamics involved in their interaction with the State and the ensuing dilemmas in terms of strategy, or indeed by the fluid nature of the movements themselves with the highs and lows typical to protest cycles.<sup>4</sup>

However, in the 1990s the literature did not pursue these leads. After the crisis in Marxism and the incorporation of the New Social Movements Theory, analysis shifted from the popular social movements to the 'post-material' movements, seen as the new collective agents of social and political change. The cultural and symbolic dimension of activism became the focus of study, especially the formation of collective identities.<sup>5</sup>

This was the period when the environmental question took off as a research topic in Brazil – alongside issues relating to groups such as women, Afro-Brazilians and homosexuals. However, simultaneously, as part of the reformulation of the concepts of 'civil society' and 'the public sphere,' the studies of social movements themselves ran out of steam and were replaced by analyses of associativism and civil society's involvement in decision-making forums and in providing services to the State.<sup>6</sup> Analyses of environmental issues adopted the same tack,<sup>7</sup> setting aside the problem of the formation of an environmental social movement.

The present text addresses precisely this question. We look to reconstruct the formation process behind the Brazilian environmental movement through an approach that combines the two main

explanatory traditions in the area: New Social Movements Theory and Political Process Theory, which came to the fore in the international literature in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Taking these as our framework, we focus on the material and strategic dimensions emphasized by Political Process Theory – in other words, the political opportunities structures in which environmental groups took shape and in response to which they adopted particular mobilization strategies. Simultaneously we examine the symbolic dimensions emphasized by New Social Movements Theory, how the processes of micromobilization in which collective identities were constructed, and how the frames – that is, the interpretations of the environmental question – were generated by activists. Adopting this approach, we argue that over the course of three political opportunities structures – the redemocratization process, the Constituent Assembly, and Rio-92 – groups of environmental activists formed independently and confronted common dilemmas relating to their frames and strategies of mobilization. As these structures evolved, the strategic and symbolic alliances between groups produced a network of activism referring to itself as the ‘Brazilian environmental movement.’<sup>9</sup>

## **THE FORMATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS (1970-85)**

### **THE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES STRUCTURE OF REDEMOCRATIZATION**

Political Process Theory emphasizes that social movements typically emerge when changes in political opportunities – that is, in the formal and informal dimensions of the political environment – increase the possibilities for social groups to mobilize, opening or creating new channels for expressing demands.<sup>10</sup> This may occur in three ways.<sup>11</sup> Firstly through an increased openness among political and administrative institutions towards civil society’s demands, provoked by crises in the political coalition in power. Secondly through changes in the style of political interaction between the State and social movements, especially less repression of activism. And thirdly through the presence of potential allies, such as social movements, political parties, the media and dissident elites. These factors raise the chances for dissatisfied social groups to express their demands in public.

In the Brazilian case, a change in the political opportunities structure (POS) took place at the start of the process of redemocratization. The possibilities for collective action expanded in the second half of the 1970s when a crisis erupted within the coalition heading the regime. New channels for political mobilization were opened. Forms of political expression were liberalized in 1978 and

prior censorship of communications media was reduced. The following year the Amnesty Law and the abolition of the two-party system catalyzed the emergence of a wide variety of leaders and the transformation of social movements previously sheltered under – or sympathetic to – the Brazilian Democratic Movement (the MDB in Portuguese) into new political parties.<sup>12</sup> This ‘opening’ culminated in the MDB winning a series of victories in the elections for the local, state and national governments in 1974, 1978 and 1982. This success had a demonstration effect for activists from various sectors of civil society – workers, middle class professionals, public employees, residents of urban outskirts – precipitating a cycle of protests.<sup>13</sup>

Four dimensions of this new structure of political opportunities are essential to understanding the emergence of environmental protests in Brazil. First the political ‘opening’ led to a diminution in the repression of social protests in general. Second the environmental activists found allies among other social movements, as well as the Catholic Church and the Brazilian Bar Association (the OAB), all potential supporters of protests against the dictatorship at the end of the 1970s. Third the political and administrative institutions became more receptive to civil society’s demands. Since the creation of the Special Office for the Environment in 1973, the environmental legal/administrative infrastructure has been expanded through the creation of agencies and specific legislation, providing activists with new political spaces and new mobilization structures to channel their demands. Finally an international environmental agenda was rapidly evolving during Brazil’s period of redemocratization. The Stockholm Conference – a UN summit on the environment and development held in 1972 – cleared the way for *national* public discussion on the environmental issue in Brazil. Additionally, international environmental associations and newly-formed national green parties offered new organizational models and mobilization strategies.

Taken as a whole, the multidimensional political opportunities structure formed by Brazil’s redemocratization process generated the conditions for the emergence of the environmental groups that would later form the backbone of the Brazilian movement in the 1980s.

## **MICROMOBILIZATION CONTEXTS AND THE FORMATION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES**

Although, as Antuniassi suggests, all the Brazilian environmental groups that emerged in Brazil in the 1970s and 80s can be described as members of the 'middle classes,' this shared social origin is not sufficient to define them. Many of the political mobilizations during the period included middle class activists. The variation between the groups owes more to the distinct 'micromobilization contexts' in which they formed. In other words, the microcontexts of social interaction, such as professional institutions, cultural groups and friendship networks, in which common citizens were transformed into environmental activists. The connection between activists is primarily manifest in sociocultural and personal interactions through which common interpretations, affective bonds, community loyalties and a feeling of group belonging are constructed.<sup>14</sup> In this process collective identities emerge, involving "perceptions of group distinctiveness, boundaries, and interests, [producing] something closer to a community."<sup>15</sup>

Hence different kinds of social and political experience invest each group with specific features and define their distinctive styles of activism. In our present case, environmental identities emerged from four micromobilization contexts.

At the origins of environmental activism in Brazil is a group with a strictly conservationist profile: the Brazilian Foundation for the Conservation of Nature (the FBCN), founded in 1958 in Rio de Janeiro. Its members were primarily agronomists and natural scientists, working in the state bureaucracy and involved with environmental issues for professional reasons. From the outset, their status as public employees gave the members of the FBCN the profile of an interest group looking to influence State decisions directly through lobbying rather than public mobilizations. This strategy was successful before and during the dictatorship: the FBCN influenced the creation of environmental laws, agencies and policies and its members rose to executive positions in the area.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the trajectory of its members merges with the formation of the Brazilian environmental administrative structure itself, effectively making the FBCN a para-state entity until the 1970s.

The 1970s saw the emergence of groups that began to explore the more political dimensions to the environmental issue.

The origins of the Southern Brazil Association for Protection of the Natural Environment (Agapan), founded in 1971 in Porto Alegre, were very similar to the FBCN. It was also begun by researchers in the natural sciences with a professional interest in ecological issues, many of them

with prior experience working for local conservationist associations. Like the FBCN, Agapan became closely involved in the development of the environmental bureaucracy, influencing the formulation of legislation and implementation of environmental public policies at state level.<sup>17</sup> However, Agapan differed from the FBCN in the mobilization strategies used, which included public information campaigns, talks and symbolic forms of demonstration. Through these strategies, Agapan attracted young activists from student groups and moved steadily closer to the redemocratization movement.

The Art and Ecological Thought Movement (MAPE) emerged in São Paulo in 1973, formed by visual artists, writers and journalists linked to the counter-cultural movements and concerned about urban pollution. MAPE adopted expressive and symbolic strategies from the European new social movements and made particular use of artistic language as a form of expression, organizing art exhibitions, literary happenings and diverse forms of entertainment. The profile of its members, who lacked formal technical expertise in the area, meant that MAPE remained distant from public environmental posts and worked more intensely with civil society, including mobilization in support of redemocratization.

The São Paulo Natural Protection Association (APPN) was also formed in 1976, with a membership composed of liberal professionals and small businessmen with previous organizational and political experience. The APPN was born as a community protest against a government project set to impact the area where its members lived: the construction of an international airport in the southwest region of Greater São Paulo. The APPN used conventional campaign strategies like petitions to mobilize residents from the area under threat as well as leftwing university academics from the University of São Paulo (USP), also located in the area, who established connections with the MDB.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the local protest unintentionally acquired national scope, receiving the backing of the redemocratization movement. In this way the APPN consolidated the previously weak links between environmental activism and the political protests against Brazil's authoritarian government.

In each of these micromobilization contexts isolated individuals formed small groups of environmental activists, leading to the emergence of two kinds of collective identities as 'environmentalists':<sup>19</sup> the technical experts, based on professional connections among natural scientists already incorporated into the State bureaucracy, and the politicians trained in the human sciences and connected to the redemocratization movement.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL FRAMES**

Various analysts of social movements emphasize that any collective action depends on the activists' skills in constructing interpretations of the political setting in which they are immersed and, through these, transforming personal discontent into mobilization. 'Frames' are cognitive tools and guidelines for action that enable activists to question a given social situation previously perceived as unproblematic, attribute responsibility to groups or authorities for this state of affairs, and propose strategies for altering it.<sup>20</sup>

Diani identifies two frames typical to environmental activism. The 'conservationist' frame defines the environment exclusively as the natural world in its wild state, seeing any intervention as a technical issue restricted to natural scientists. The 'political ecology' frame, on the other hand, includes the urban world in its definition of the environmental problem. The causes of environmental degradation are traced to capitalist development and the modern lifestyle. From this derives a sociocultural critique of capitalist society, shifting discussion of the environment to the political arena.

The Brazilian environmentalist movement was split along the same lines. Variations in the experience and perceptions of the POS of redemocratization led groups of environmental activists to develop two distinct frames: one conservationist, the other socioenvironmentalist.

The FBCN disseminated classical conservationism in Brazil, adopting a biocentric vision of the society-nature relationship. The environment is wild nature to be preserved from the harmful action of social groups through the creation of national parks and environmental reserves. Its discourse is scientifically grounded: specialists in natural sciences possess an incontestable expertise when it comes to defining environmental problems and policies. From both angles, conservationism segregates the environmental question from any social dimension and presents it as apolitical.<sup>21</sup> Although the POS of redemocratization along with changes in the international setting forced the FBCN to incorporate into its discourse 'management' of natural resources in those forest areas already inhabited by traditional populations, the core of its conservationist was largely unaltered, its epicentre remaining the preservation of native wildlife and flora.

Socioenvironmentalism only emerged with the process of redemocratization, adopted by practically all the associations set up in the 1970s. In this frame the definition of the environmental problem shifts from the natural to human sciences with an emphasis on the relationship between social and natural processes. The humanism of the counter-culture is incorporated in the form of a demand for an 'ecological ethic.'<sup>22</sup> The very idea of the environment is redefined as a relationship between social groups and natural resources. These social dimensions were incorporated in varying ways by Brazilian activists. Agapan emphasized rural issues, such as the use of pesticides, while MAPE criticized the degradation caused by the expansion of the consumer society<sup>23</sup> and the APPN associated the problems with the 'Brazilian model of development.'<sup>24</sup> In the latter two cases, the environmental discourse absorbed the critique of the industrialization process unfolding in the country in the 1970s and demanded changes to the urban-industrial lifestyle. Hence the new frame strongly associated environmental problems with political and economic causes. For this reason, we refer to this frame as socioenvironmentalism.

The two frames, conservationist and socioenvironmentalist, have existed in competition ever since. Which frame gained ascendancy during each of the different formative periods of the Brazilian environmental movement depended on the issues being debated on the public agenda and the capacity of activists to connect these issues to the different political opportunities structures.

## **THE FORMATION OF THE BRAZILIAN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT**

By bringing together activists and building particular collective identities, the environmental groups that surfaced during the 1970s established the groundwork for an environmental movement in Brazil. But the process was only completed when the groups came together to coordinate their action collectively. Here we must recognize that a social movement is not just a set of activists but "networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations engaged in political or cultural conflicts and based on shared collective identities."<sup>25</sup> Groups follow their own established campaign strategies, interacting intensively among themselves whenever crucial questions enter the public agenda. In a given POS, challenges presented by opponents, or exceptional opportunities to place issues on the public



agenda, strengthen the ties between groups and enable joint mobilization. In POSs in which various groups organize to express their discontent in public, a cycle of protests develops.<sup>26</sup>

In order to coordinating their actions collectively and form a social movement per se, the previously independent Brazilian environmental groups had to resolve three successive problems: create a network to connect with each other, define mobilization strategies, and develop a common frame. Each of these problems was resolved through three distinct political opportunity structures: the redemocratization process, the Constituent Assembly, and Rio-92. In each of these POSs, protests cycles emerged and the environmental groups had to define a minimum set of shared ways of thinking and acting.

### **PROTEST CYCLES FOR REDEMOCRATIZATION**

The first coalitions between Brazilian environmental groups formed at the end of the 1970s. An incipient environmental network emerged in the form of joint campaigns around issues that allowed connections with the wider public debate. By tracing the causes of environmental problems to the 'Brazilian development model' implemented by the military regime, the socioenvironmentalist frame immediately connected the environmental mobilizations with the redemocratization campaign.

This was the case of the Amazonia Defence Campaign at the end of 1978, which opposed the federal government's plans to sign contracts with international companies to explore the Amazonian Rainforest. Led by the APPN and linked to Agapan and MAPE, the campaign gained the support of the MDB and transformed into the Amazonia Defence Movement, covering eighteen states plus the Federal District.<sup>27</sup> The other major coalition with a similar profile was the Campaign Against the Use of Nuclear Energy, formed a little later in 1980 and involving the same associations from the previous campaign, joined by a number of smaller recently-formed environmentalist associations such as Oikos (1982) and the Sap Ecology Group (1980). The issue attracted a larger spectrum of allies from the members of the redemocratization movement: the student movement, popular social movements, cultural movements, scientists, politicians, artists and religious leaders.<sup>28</sup> The third campaign coordinated by environmental groups was Farewell Seven Falls, organized in 1982 in opposition to the Itaipu hydroelectric dam. Led by MAPE, the campaign included Agapan, the APPN and other smaller associations, such as the Sap Ecology

Group and the Green Collective (1985), set up by former political exiles inspired by the counter-culture.

In all of these campaigns the existence of allies in the social arena and in politics encouraged the first really stable connections between previously autonomous groups, enabling the emergence of a network of environmental activists. The campaigns simultaneously prompted the formation of new environmental associations<sup>29</sup> and provoked a debate on the best organizational format for the emerging coalition.

MAPE proposed a national environmental federation uniting the various small environmental associations. This led to the creation in 1983 of the Permanent Assembly in Defence of the Environment (Apedema) in São Paulo, intended to maintain activism at civil society level. The APPN meanwhile invested in improving the coordination between the network of environmental associations and the MDB. However, internal conflicts over the proposal to form a political party eventually split the association into various small groups. Agapan, for its part, tried to project its main activist, José Lutzenberg, as a national leader. This strategy eventually proved the more successful. Agapan's discourse cut across the entire spectrum of the movement's frame from the conservationism of the FBCN to urban and counter-cultural issues, and its actions covered the entire range of campaign strategies from the kind of lobbying and use of the state bureaucracy pursued by conservationists to the public demonstrations and artistic performances preferred by the other groups. As a result Agapan became a central force in the 1970s environmentalism network and Lutzenberg acted as the broker between the conservationist tradition and the new socioenvironmental groups.

So the first stable coalition among activist groups emerged in the mid 1980s. The joint campaigns confirm the establishment of an environmental field with its own leaders and agenda. In addition, there was now a dominant frame. The conservationism of the FBCN was pushed into the background. The redemocratization agenda helped consolidate the politicized approach to the environmental question: socioenvironmentalism.

## **PROTEST CYCLES FOR THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY**

The second POS central to the formation of the Brazilian environmentalist movement emerged in the final period of redemocratization. While in the previous POS the environmentalist movement

is only evident in temporary coalitions formed in relation to specific issues, the prospect of a Constituent Assembly led to the formation of more stable coalitions as a strategy for including environmental issues in the new Constitution.

Since they are not institutions, social movements need to invent or appropriate organizations and communication channels to express themselves collectively. These 'mobilization strategies' range from more stable activist bases such as associations, parties, unions and public institutions, to informal strategies such as protest events, networks and campaigns.<sup>30</sup> For the newly emerged environmental network, the main problem posed by the new political opportunities structure in terms of collective action was defining the most suitable campaign strategy for including environmental issues on the political agenda. The redemocratization process had culminated in general elections for a Constituent Assembly, leaving the movement with the choice of either maintaining the campaigns at civil society level or founding its own party and entering the institutional arena, a route taken by a number of other social movements at the time.

When the Constituent Assembly was convoked, coalitions formed among the environmental groups around different strategies. First the demobilization that marked the end of the transitional period to democracy led some of the environmental activists to convert their protest groups into professional associations with a specialized area of work. SOS Mata Atlântica (Atlantic Rainforest) was set up in 1986 under this guise, bringing together activists from pre-existing groups, such as the APPN and the FBCN, and business groups previously distant from environmental issues. This more specialized profile meant that SOS, like the FBCN, Agapan and other recently formed conservationist associations, preferred to limit their relationship with political institutions to lobbying or backing candidates from any party claiming to support green proposals. On the other hand those groups working towards changes in lifestyle, such as MAPE and the Sap Ecology Group, preferred to continue campaigning at civil society level and propose independent candidates selected from their groups of activists or sympathisers of the environmental movement unconnected to any specific party. The third possibility was to put forward or support candidates from within the left-wing parties already up and running. Oikos, a breakaway group from APPN, invested in this alternative. The fourth path, never previously attempted by environmentalist groups, was to form their own party as a channel of political representation for the movement as a whole. The Green Collective in Rio, a faction of MAPE and smaller groups from São Paulo's ABC region and Santa Catarina, were all in favour of a green party.

Not all of these alternatives would prove viable, though. At the end of 1985 it was ruled that candidates for the Constituent Assembly had to be members of political parties, meaning that the possibility of participating directly in the assembly without party backing had vanished overnight. The environmentalists then split over the remaining alternatives. The coalition led by the Green Collective formed the Green Party (Partido Verde: PV) in January 1986, uniting activists who had been isolated in numerous small associations, especially from Rio de Janeiro. PV went on to lead a small coalition with its own candidates. In contrast, another coalition formed to promote the strategy of supporting candidates from different parties, so long as these were committed to a minimal environmentalist agenda, composed of a mixture of socioenvironmental and conservationist themes with pinches of counter-culture. These parties were named in a 'Green List.'<sup>31</sup> As a result, the start of 1986 saw the first attempt to formalize a national environmental network, the Inter-State Ecological Coordination Group for the Constituent Assembly (CIEC).

In fact, this proved to be the most successful strategy. Fábio Feldman, the main activist of Oikos and defender of the Green List, was the only candidate supported by the movement to be elected. Even in an eminently institutional arena such as the Brazilian Congress, the associations outperformed the party as the best channel for making the movement's voice heard. The electoral process surrounding the Constituent Assembly thereby consolidated the associations as a more effective form of environmental campaigning than the party structure.

The National Constituent Assembly also opened up channels of influence for social movements and interest groups. Over 1987 and 1988 the Constituent Assembly functioned without any preliminary project and with a decentralized structure of subcommissions. This allowed organized social groups to press for the creation of subcommissions on subjects related to their campaign areas. Civil society was also able to participate through 'Popular Initiatives:' 30,000 signatures enabled an amendment to be sent to the Constituent Assembly directly without the mediation of a deputy. These two channels of participation in the political process were mobilized by environmental activists. On one hand, the alliances formed by Fábio Feldmann in Congress resulted in the setting up of the subcommission for Health, Social Security and the Environment, under the jurisdiction of the Social Order Committee. On the other hand, informal mobilization strategies, such as petitions, proved to be just as effective, if not more so, as the party structure (the Green Party) as a route for introducing environmental themes into the debate: the

environmental groups succeeded in including 3 of the 83 Popular Initiatives eventually accepted by the Constituent Assembly.<sup>32</sup>

During the course of the subcommission's work, Feldman strengthened his position as a broker between the two arenas of environmental campaigning: civil society and the institutional negotiations in Congress. This combination of strategies resulted in the proposal for a chapter of the Constitution exclusively concerned with the environmental question.

However organized civil society's influence in drafting the constitutional text was curbed by the response of a block of deputies and senators from centre and right-wing parties. The 'Big Centre' vetoed any approval of left-wing law bills. In the environmental area, it blocked the proposed total ban on the use of nuclear energy and any criminalization of environmentally harmful behaviour.

This opposition forced the environmental groups to converge, sedimenting national coalitions among themselves and widening alliances beyond the movement. Under Feldman's leadership the National Ecological Action Front emerged, a congressional group working in support of environmentalist proposals and reiterating the pragmatic strategy adopted in the Green List.<sup>33</sup> The Front's strategy was to encourage direct pressure on members of Congress by environmental associations, promoting visits to environmental preservation and management projects. This course of action garnered enough support to safeguard the conservationist points in the environment chapter of the 1988 Constitution.

The mobilization cycle for the Constituent Assembly had important impacts on the process of forming the Brazilian environmental movement.

In terms of campaigning strategies, the Assembly confirmed the associations rather than the party structure as the best method for coordinating collective environmental action. The electoral process and the vetoing of proposals by the 'Big Centre' exposed the limits of the Green Party option and even of any exclusively left-wing political alliance. Moreover, by consolidating new legal instruments such as civil lawsuits, the Constitution provided civil associations with the opportunity to send demands directly to public institutions without the need to rely on political parties. Finally, by obtaining more influence as 'environmentalists' than as professional politicians during the Constituent Assembly, the activists had glimpsed the way in which

technical-scientific expertise could transform into symbolic power, making it their preferred route for legitimizing demands in the political arena in the future.

In terms of the frames for collective action, the Constituent Assembly began with a mixture of issues, dominated by the socioenvironmentalist frame expressed in the Green List. However negotiations led by the National Ecological Action Front gave prominence to conservationist themes, which were more palatable to the non-environmentalist deputies. These basically involved protection for Brazil's ecosystems, which became the core of the environment chapter in the Constitution.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, the POS of the Constituent Assembly played a decisive role in the formation of Brazil's environmental movement by sedimenting connections and commitments between groups of activists. The existence of a common enemy and the need to find allies forced the groups to overcome their differences. At least momentarily, group identities faded to be replaced by a shared identity. This is what empowered the associations to exert some influence on Constitution regulations relating to environmental issues and sedimented the national alliance of previously dispersed groups.

### **THE PROTEST CYCLE FOR THE 1992 RIO EARTH SUMMIT**

The United Nations' decision to hold its second Global Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in Brazil in 1992 once again altered the political opportunities structure for the network of activists and became a decisive event in the consolidation of a Brazilian environmental movement. The Rio Earth Summit presented a new problem in terms of coordinating collective action: the construction of a frame capable of unifying the environmental groups.

In principle, the POS for the Rio Summit was unfavourable to the environmental groups. Collor's victory in the 1989 presidential elections had shut off the state agencies to the environmental groups emergent in the 1980s, mostly aligned with the left. Lacking access to the state environmental bureaucracy and with the return of democratic normalcy, a number of these groups disappeared or turned into professional associations. In one form or other they distanced themselves from the political arena. The Collor government still tried to attract them, naming José Lutzenberger, the environmentalist leader from the 1970s, to the presidency of the Special Office

for the Environment. Lutzenberger, though, had lost the status acquired in the previous decade. He had left Agapan and taken little part in the campaigns surrounding the Constituent Assembly, severing his ties with the more long-standing groups without creating new ones. Without backing from the movement and lacking any party political experience, he was unable to make his presence felt in the political arena: he remained at the margins of the decisions taken in the run-up to the Earth Summit and abandoned the post before it began.

The separation of the activists from the federal government and the 'participatory' format of the Summit encouraged the environmentalist network to invest again in the associations as the best form for coordinating collective action and obtaining allies from civil society, rather than the State.

During preparations for the 1992 Rio Summit, the coalitions formed earlier during the Constituent Assembly tried to coordinate a new national alliance of the environmental movement. The National Ecological Action Front, led by SOS Atlantic Rainforest, reconnected conservationist groups, while the Green Party (PV) formed the Pro-Rio 92 movement, socioenvironmentalist in profile and including members of PT (the Workers' Party), local community groups, grassroots social movements and even business sectors.<sup>35</sup>

As in the case of the Constituent Assembly, where none of the coalitions had been able to impose in isolation given the limited scope of their frames, the Ecological Action Front was limited to the conservationist approach, while the Pro-Rio 92 movement did not go beyond socioenvironmentalist program. This exclusivity failed to combine with the UN's agenda for the Rio Summit, systemized in the Brundtland Report which included both thematic areas.

More than a simple aggregation of socioenvironmental and conservationist themes, the Summit's agenda proposed a new way of defining the environmental issue. The notion of sustainable development, proposing new technologies for the rational management of natural resources, was presented as a way of reconciling development with environmental preservation. The idea of biodiversity, meanwhile, focused on preserving the genetic heritage of all lifeforms, including human populations inhabiting conservation areas.

The new political opportunities structure forced the environmental groups to look for allies outside the environmentalist network as a way of complementing their agenda.

SOS Atlantic Rainforest adopted the strategy most in congruence with the new POS by forming a new national coalition with 1,100 associations, half of them without any prior history in environmental activism.<sup>36</sup> This movement led to the creation of the Brazilian Forum of NGOs and Social Movements for the Environment and Development in 1990, the environmentalist network's focal point and main campaign structure during the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

The Forum's composition threw into question the conservationist bias of the movement's agenda in the aftermath of the Constituent Assembly. The social movements introduced 'brown agendas,' criticizing social inequality, the unjust distribution of environmental impacts and the global model of economic development. As an alternative, they proposed a new pattern of modernization: 'sustainable development.' These new allies therefore contributed to a revival of socioenvironmentalism, reconnecting the environmental issue with the problem of development in the spirit of the Brundtland Report.

However, this did not mean that the socioenvironmentalist frame regained dominance within the national network. The new coalition was led by SOS Atlantic Rainforest, a group halfway between conservationism and socioenvironmentalism, which brokered the convergence between the two originally contrasting frames.

On one hand the socioenvironmentalist approach became more nuanced, moving towards conservationism. Indeed the notion of sustainable development was compatible with defending environmental protection and socioeconomic development simultaneously, working to achieve a fairer redistribution of resources. But although the macroeconomic dimension of environmental problems remained, the emphasis on the urban question – typical to the socioenvironmentalism of the 1970s – shifted to the living conditions of social groups living in close interaction with the natural environment in rural or forest areas.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, the conservationist frame was redefined with the notion of ecosystem being replaced by biodiversity. Through the latter concept, the protection of natural habitats was expanded to include social groups interacting with forest areas, so long as their lifestyles had 'little environmental impact.' The genetic and cultural heritage of indigenous communities and traditional populations, such as extractivist groups, became objects of environmental preservation. The forests, a theme typical to classical conservationism, became revalued as areas



rich in biodiversity. This inclusion of non-urban dimensions taken from the brown agenda distinguished this new frame from the conservationist tradition.<sup>38</sup>

This double process of blurring boundaries and reconciliation produced a common frame for the entire movement for the first time: neoconservationism. The polysemy of the notions of sustainable development and biodiversity allowed groups with initially divergent agendas to give their own twist to the same categories. Tackling social issues typical to the brown agenda and the green issues of the global agenda, neoconservationism became a lingua franca for all the groups from the environmental movement, spanning from the pioneers of the 1970s to those converted to the cause in 1992. Hence the new frame consolidated coalitions around meanings rather than merely isolated strategies. The new frame centred on Agenda 21, a document produced in the wake of the Rio Summit. The text combined items from the global environmental agenda such as forest protection (chap. 11) and biological diversity (chap. 15), with socioenvironmental topics such as capacity-building for socially vulnerable groups, enabling them to achieve sustainable means of self-subsistence (chap. 3).

To affirm itself, neoconservationism had to expel two elements from the 1970s socioenvironmental agenda. The political approach was replaced by a technical take on the environmental issue, formulated by specialists from the professional associations of the 1990s. Simultaneously the urban lifestyle ceased to be the focal point for activism, a fact evident in the main areas of work pursued the largest environmental associations of the 1990s, SOS and Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), both concentrating on forest areas. As a result, the Brazilian environmental movement headed towards a professionalization and consequent depoliticization of the environmental question – a process similar to what happened in Europe.<sup>39</sup>

The other impact of the campaign cycle for the 1992 Rio Earth Summit was the consolidation of a new mobilization strategy. The individual leaders prominent in the 1970s and 1980s were replaced by relatively long-lasting coalitions between associations. These polycentric and horizontal networks of activism, such as the Atlantic Rainforest Network (1992), Agupé – Pantanal, the Environmental Education Network (2002), the Cerrado NGO Network (1992) and the Amazonian Working Group (1992), became the preferred means of coordinating the movement and expressing demands in the 1990s. This occurred in three dimensions: as a logistical base for large-scale issue-based campaigns; as a means of receiving and managing

government and international funding; and as a channel for lobby and pressure work towards the formulation and implementation of national public policies.

Using these networks, Brazilian environmental activism was able to expand the radius of its actions and, at the same time, focus on specific themes and geographical areas. Thus the movement acquired a simultaneously decentralized and institutionalized structure.

The POS of the Rio Summit comprised the third stage in the process of forming the Brazilian environmental movement. During this phase a solution was found to the problem of coordinating meanings among distinct groups by configuring a frame capable of being shared by the movement as a whole. Its end result, therefore, was the consolidation of a national environmental movement.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this text we have looked to explain the formation of the Brazilian environmental movement by using a conceptual synthesis of Political Process Theory and New Social Movements Theory, a blend still seldom explored in studies of Brazilian and Latin American social movements. Analyzing in conjunction the political-institutional and symbolic dimensions involved in the emergence of an environmental movement in Brazil, we argued that this process is explained by two dynamics: the interaction of groups of activists with the distinct political opportunities structures and the interaction and coordination of the groups between themselves.

In terms of the first dynamic, three political opportunities structures were decisive. The POS enabled by the redemocratization process stimulated the organization of protest groups across civil society, leading to the conversion of environmentalist sympathizers into full-blown activists. But for these autonomous groups to be transformed into a cohesive movement they needed to respond jointly to the demands for coordinated collective action provoked by two other POSs. The Constituent Assembly forced activists to choose between different campaign strategies, which ultimately led to their convergence on a coalition of associations, rather than a party, as the best form of presenting their demands to the wider public. Meanwhile the 1992 Rio Earth Summit drove the coalition of associations to negotiate a single frame whose meaning could be shared by the movement as a whole. Thus the concept of POS allows us to identify the elements particular

to each of the different political settings that effectively influenced the construction of what Jasper calls a 'movement identity.'

On the other hand, reconstruction of the contexts of micromobilization reveals that activists did not mobilize around the environmental issue because of their social origin, as New Social Movement Theories argue. Different kinds of social and political experience led to the development of collective environmentalist identities. The strategic and symbolic merging of these autonomous groups of activists into a single activist network was not an automatic result of adherence to the same values, as Viola proposes. Negotiations over meanings and forms of action were crucial for the connection to become viable. The very meaning of the 'environmental issue' was continually transformed by the groups in order to facilitate alliances. Changes in the frames were required in strategic response to the equally shifting political settings. It was this adaptation to new POSs that led the two initially independent frames – socioenvironmentalism and conservationism – to converge in neoconservationism. This was the interpretation of the environmental question most likely to be shared by all the environmental activists, enabling a broad alliance between groups. This connection also depended on using the same campaign strategies. Use of the POS concept allowed us to reveal connections between environmental groups at long-term organizational level, such as associations, parties and networks, and at the short-term level of the looser connections made during demonstrations, electoral campaigns and lobbying. And most important of all, we showed how changes in strategies were linked to changes in the POSs, meaning they were not simply the result of the personal inclinations of the agents involved.

Analyzing the formation of the groups and the negotiation of frames and campaign strategies, we looked to demonstrate how the resolution of successive problems in the coordination of collective actions resulted in a shared collective identity. This does not mean that the differences and conflicts between the groups simply vanished, but it does point to their success in overcoming routine divergences during the most important POSs. When they presented themselves as a robust coalition, the activists managed to include the environmental issue on the public agenda. During these moments, they sedimented their identity as a 'Brazilian environmental movement.'

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<sup>2</sup> *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 25/7/1982.

<sup>3</sup> Examples include Eduardo Viola, 'Movimento ecológico e heterogeneidade política,' *Lua Nova*, v. 3, n. 4, São Paulo, Cedec, April-June 1987, and Maria Helena Antuniassi, *Movimento ambientalista em São Paulo: análise sociológica de um movimento social urbano*, São Paulo: Ceru, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Arguments encountered, respectively, in Ruth Cardoso, 'A trajetória dos movimentos sociais,' in: Evelina Dagnino (ed.), *Anos 90: política e sociedade no Brasil*, São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1994; Renato Raul Boschi, *A arte da associação. Política de base e democracia no Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro: Iuperj, 1987; and Götz Ottmann, 'Movimentos sociais urbanos e democracia no Brasil. Uma abordagem cognitiva,' *Novos Estudos Cebrap*, n. 41, March 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Sônia Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino & Arturo Escobar (eds.), *Cultura e política nos movimentos sociais latinoamericanos. Novas leituras*. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Evelina Dagnino (ed.). *Sociedade civil e espaços públicos no Brasil*, São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Angela Alonso & Valeriano Costa, 'Ciências sociais e meio ambiente no Brasil: um balanço bibliográfico,' *BIB - Revista Brasileira de Informações Bibliográficas em Ciências Sociais*, Anpocs, n. 53, 2002, pp. 35-78.

<sup>8</sup> A synthesis formulated, for example, by Mario Diani. *Green networks. A structural analysis of the Italian environmental movement*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> The research consisted of conducting structured interviews with leaders and collating information from the daily press, as well as the archives and sites of eleven associations that formed part of environmental protest campaigns and events in Brazil from the 1970s to the start of the 1990s (translations of names appear in the main text): FBCN (Fundação Brasileira para a Conservação da Natureza), Agapan (Associação Gaúcha de Proteção ao Ambiente Natural), Mape (Movimento Arte e Pensamento Ecológico), APPN (Associação Paulista para Proteção Natural), Oikos – Amigos da Terra, PV (Partido Verde), Funatura (Fundação para Natureza), SOS Mata Atlântica, Greenpeace Brasil, WWF Brasil and ISA (Instituto Socioambiental).

<sup>10</sup> Sidney Tarrow. *Power in movement – Social movements, collective action and politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Hanspeter Kriesi, *New social movements in Western Europe. A comparative analysis*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Maria D. G. Kinzo, *Oposição e autoritarismo. Gênese e trajetória do MDB, 1966-79*. São Paulo: Idesp/Vértice, 1988; Sallum Jr., Brasília. *Labirintos: dos gerais à Nova República*. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Boschi, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> William Gamson, 'The social psychology of collective action,' in: Carol McClurg Mueller & Aldon D. Morris (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> James Jasper, *The art of moral protest. Culture, biography, and creativity in social movements*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, p.86.

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<sup>16</sup> Examples include the Federal Forest Board, the Ministry of Agriculture Forest Service, the Itatiaia National Conservation Park, the Museu Nacional, and the IBDF's Department of Forest Research and Nature Conservation (Urban 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Elmar Bones & Geraldo Hasse, *Pioneiros da ecologia. Breve história do movimento ambientalista no Rio Grande do Sul*, Porto Alegre: Já Editores.

<sup>18</sup> Antuniassi, op. cit., p.26.

<sup>19</sup> The distinction between 'technical experts' and 'politicians' is taken from Guillaume Sainteny, 'Logiques d'engagement et logiques de rétribution au sein de l'écologisme français,' *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, vol. CVI, Jan-Jun 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Benford & David Snow, 'Framing processes and social movements: an overview and assessment,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, no. 26, 2000, pp. 611-39.

<sup>21</sup> "[...] we were more concerned with saving animals, creating protected areas; [...] some reserves had to be kept free of use [...] by people [...] to protect biodiversity" (member of FBCN, interview, 12/8/2004).

<sup>22</sup> Lutzenberger cited in Bones & Hasse, op. cit., p.187.

<sup>23</sup> "[...] standardizing cultural-behavioural patterns [...] create increasingly centralizing economies through the use of intensive capital and brute technology with little absorption of the workforce and uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, following the maxim of USE AND THROW AWAY" (*Boletim Peco*, Mape, no.1, 1978).

<sup>24</sup> "What we see today is a growing economic madness, erroneously called developed, which violates nature in every sense [and] even man. [...] And all this for a fraction of humanity to benefit from this material growth with adequate clothing, a house and food" ('Nós alcançamos o fim?', Manifesto of the APPN, 1975).

<sup>25</sup> Diani, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Tarrow defines them as "scaled sequences of action of greater frequency and intensity than normal, extending through various sectors and regions of society. [They] involve new protest techniques and new forms of organization [...]" (Sidney Tarrow, 'Struggling to reform: social movements and policy change during cycle of protests,' *West. Soc. Pap*, n. 15, Ithaca, Cornell University, 1983, p. 36).

<sup>27</sup> A typical event from this campaign was a public action held in São Paulo on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1979, which attracted around 1,500 people and led to an 'Open Letter to the Brazilian Nation' opposing the internalization of Amazonia and defending the preservation of the lifestyle of the region's traditional communities.

<sup>28</sup> The most significant campaign action was the 'Burying the Nuclear Plants' march in memory of the victims of Hiroshima and in recognition of potential Brazilian victims, which united approximately 1,200 people (Urban, Teresa. *Missão quase impossível. Aventuras e desventuras do movimento ambientalista no Brasil*. São Paulo: Petrópolis, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> In 1985 the country had around 400 active environmental groups (Eduardo Viola. "O movimento ambientalista no Brasil 1971-1991: da denúncia à conscientização pública para a institucionalização e o desenvolvimento sustentável." In: Mirian Goldenberg (ed.). *Ecologia, ciência e política*. Rio de Janeiro: Revan, 1992, p. 57).

<sup>30</sup> Kriesi, op. cit., p.152.

<sup>31</sup> The socioenvironmentalist issues primarily included responding to the environmental degradation of the urban lifestyle ("humanizing and depolluting cities – basic sanitation and waste recycling") and the rural lifestyle (health problems caused by agrochemicals). The counter-culture group focused on pacifism ("end of the arms industry") and the democratization of social relations ("end of all forms of racial, sexual, religious or ideological discrimination"). Conservationism was limited to "preserving national fauna" and to the "defence of Brazilian ecosystems." There was also a block that reiterated the agenda of the redemocratization movement: political and economic decentralization; local power; democratization of the press, etc.

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<sup>32</sup> Two of these Popular Initiatives referred to indigenous reserves, receiving support from social movements linked to the Catholic Church. The third prohibited any use of nuclear energy, even peaceful.

<sup>33</sup> The Front was founded in June 1987 by 71 environmental associations, including the FBCN, 9 senators and 82 deputies from the left and centre-left, but also with support from liberal and conservative congressional members (*Jornal da Tarde*, 9/6/1987).

<sup>34</sup> Measures were approved to protect the Amazonian Rainforest, the Atlantic Rainforest, the Serra do Mar mountains, the Pantanal and the Coastal Zone, as well as the country's genetic diversity, and partially prohibit the use of nuclear energy (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, 26/5/1988).

<sup>35</sup> SOS, Oikos and Cedi. "UNCED 1992 e as ONGS brasileiras," cited in Selene S. C. Herculano Santos, *Entre o heroísmo e a cidadania*. Rio de Janeiro: Doctoral thesis, IUPERJ, 1994, annex 1.

<sup>36</sup> Leilah Landin. *A invenção das ONGs: do serviço invisível à profissão sem nome*. Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional/UFRJ, 1993, p.66-67.

<sup>37</sup> "[...] you can't expand the system without taking into account traditional populations; indigenous lands have the double the size of conservation units in Brazil, [...] you cannot ignore them in your conservation strategy [...] we use the environmental and sustainable development issues for ends that are, in fact, social" (member of ISA, interview, 31/8/2004).

<sup>38</sup> "[...] originally the focus was heavily on protecting species, protecting species switched to protecting habitats and now protecting habits includes the sustainable management of natural resources and the welfare of the population living in the areas. [...], we no longer think simply of drawing a circle and excluding people from inside, but of how to work with people living within the environment [...]; it is a gradation, therefore [...]" (member of WWF Brazil, interview, 31/8/2004).

<sup>39</sup> Rootes, Christopher (ed.), no. 79, November, 2007.

Translated by David Allan Rodgers

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