

Petrochemical Complex of Rio de Janeiro/Brazil: a contemporary resistance in Guanabara Bay

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Abstract

The Petrochemical Complex of Rio de Janeiro –COMPERJ– is one of the largest developments in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Since the time of its announcement in 2007, it has always been considered a problem for the environment and for people who take their livelihoods from nature, such as artisanal fishermen. The Guanabara Bay is the main field of the environmental conflicts originating from the petroleum industry, and it is not different with COMPERJ. Environmental conflicts in the Guanabara Bay have been widely debated, however, it has been necessary to discuss them in the context of the slowdown of the enterprise, to bring a contemporary panorama of the resistance of the counter-hegemonic groups. Through qualitative research, from interviews and field visits, it was possible to verify that even with the deceleration of the enterprise, it is still seen as a threat to the environment.

Keywords: COMPERJ. Guanabara Bay. Environmental conflicts. Resistance.

Introduction

Even in the midst of a political and economic crisis that affects Brazil since 2014, and even after giving in to foreign interests in order to validate actions that harm the environment and the populations, the Petrochemical Complex of Rio de Janeiro (COMPERJ) is still a hazard to nature and to those who do not domesticate. Therefore, it is notorious that Petrobras and COMPERJ still represent a threat both to the ecosystems and to more vulnerable social groups.

This article aimed at discussing the situation in which some resistance movements against COMPERJ find themselves in, especially

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those related to the Guanabara Bay, even after the decrease in the enterprise activities. We also intend to discuss the roles of the actors that rise as resistance, such as the fishermen from AHOMAR (Portuguese acronym for “Association of Men and Women of the Guanabara Bay”), and the managers of the Protected Areas. Besides that, we also wish to present facts that triggered the tensions between Petrobras and the counter-hegemonic actors. To achieve these goals, field trips and interviews were made, as well as extensive bibliographic research on environmental conflicts used to better understand how these problems have developed.

The genesis of the environmental conflicts related to the COMPERJ

The Petrochemical Complex of Rio de Janeiro is part of a new-developmental context, the prevailing economic model from 2002 on, and it intended to boost Brazilian economic growth. According to Perez and Rougemont (2013), new developmentalism policies basically maintain the reproduction of base capital.

Bresser-Pereira (2010) defines new developmentalism as a national development strategy based on Keynesian macroeconomics and on the Theory of Economic Development, which is grounded in the defense of a strong state and a strong market, considering there is no contradiction between them. The state is in charge of investing in key sectors, such as the construction of infrastructure for the oil sector. Branco (2009) states that new developmentalism can be understood as a contemporary movement born following the national developmentalism tradition, with the aim of creating a national project to achieve economic growth, along with improving the distributive standards in Brazil.

This political model is materialized by the PAC – “Plano de Aceleração do Crescimento” (Growth Acceleration Plan). The PAC was created to favor investments in mega development enterprises, which

focused mainly in logistics, through great infrastructure projects. The intention was to use massive governmental investments to attract private companies, especially the ones related to relevant sectors in the national scenario, such as oil and energy, so that production costs (like product distribution, delivery of inputs, energy demand) would decrease, and the market would not be able, or not interested in doing that. The PAC anchored and promoted the creation of COMPERJ, since it was part of an infrastructure in which the Government was interested because it would attract new industrial centers, due to all the inputs produced at the Complex (BARRETO; QUINTO JUNIOR, 2012).

On the other hand, Svampa (2013) concludes that mega enterprises, like the COMPERJ, create new asymmetries and inequalities that only deepen the dynamic of land, resources and territories dispossession, besides enabling new methods of dependency and dominance. That is the logic in which environmental conflicts are born or intensified, resulting from a clash between private interests and collective goods, and also from the tension among the multiple uses natural resources have in a certain territory or location, as well as their appropriation and/or domination.

Thus, it is possible to notice that the COMPERJ is part of the logic that (re)produces the capitalist space. It was created under the argument of job creation and the narrative of economic development, but ended up being intrinsically related to the rise of the environmental conflicts in Itaboraí and the Guanabara Bay (BARRETO; QUINTO JUNIOR, 2012). Viegas (2009) says that the conflicts also represent a struggle for meanings that start in the symbolic dimension of representations about the environment, but they are mainly by a material appropriation of a certain territory, thus expressing the resistance of popular classes in the face of dominant classes that want to impose their production social relations over the actions and socio-cultural practices that belong to other social groups.

At the Guanabara Bay, the fights for territory between companies and traditional populations have existed for at least 50 years, since the establishment of REDUC – “Refinaria Duque de Caxias” (Duque de Caxias Refinery), also belonging to Petrobras. It was a hallmark for the fishermen at the Guanabara Bay in 2002, when an oil pipeline from REDUC busted and the oil hit 50 km of mangrove forest and 54 km of beach, and fishing was suspended for about 30 days (PEREZ; ROUGEMONT, 2013; VIEIRA, 2015).

Herculano (2012) asserts that:

[...] the confrontation between fishing and oil extraction has a background that consists of the contradictions between two basic needs: food and energy, between keeping ourselves alive by eating healthy food and having our modern daily needs of transportation, communication, mechanic energy e lighting equally met. This confrontation between fishing and oil is also about the contradiction between local fishing and life territories and the process of deterritorialization of the contemporary form of globalized production, which contrasts local onuses with benefits provided for globalized consumerists (HERCULANO, 2012, p. 40).

The artisanal fishermen of the Guanabara Bay have historically been among the most vulnerable populations, since the occupation initially occurred with newly freed or escaped slaves who became shellfish gatherers, fishermen and loggers along the mangroves of the bay. This way, they became invisible beings and no one considered their existence, even if the Federal Government considered the beaches of the Lake Region, in Rio de Janeiro, not populated enough (HERCULANO, 2012).

Perez and Rougemont (2013) observed that, before the year 2000, artisanal fishermen occupied 78% of the water mirror at the Guanabara Bay. In 2013, they used 12% of the area to work. Families who directly or indirectly live off fishing went down to approximately 6 to 9 thousand a year. Before 2000, the total amount of fish caught was 400 kg/day. In 2013, it decreased to nearly 20 kg/day, which represents a 90% fall in the catching rate.

From 2000 up to the present moment, the relationship between the community and Petrobras has become even more tense. The fishermen felt threatened once again because the construction of COMPERJ would directly interfere in the configuration of the fishing areas, in which some artisanal fishing spots would be excluded (PEREZ; ROUGEMONT, 2013).

As a result, it is possible to notice, just like Barreto and Quinto Junior (2012) have done, that the COMPERJ was and still is a threat to the traditional populations, because of the socio-environmental impacts inherent to such a huge project, responsible for changing the territorial configurations both at the Guanabara Bay and onshore. This only confirms that big projects intended to create market advantages also enhance environmental conflicts, due to the process of land dispossession among various communities.

Therefore, it is possible to state that the core and the genesis of the environmental conflicts involving the COMPERJ are born from the appropriation/expropriation and domination/submission to the idea of creating a territory at the Guanabara Bay, along with locational bribery, the strictly economic and technical rationale about the different forms the Bay could be used. They also reflect the fact that the State supports hegemonic interests, by taking advantage of the weak environmental law enforcement, not following the laws on purpose, putting pressure on the employees who work at the environmental bodies to give up licenses, among other reasons.

The resistance of the fishermen from Itambi, in Itaboraí/RJ

According to Santos (2006), the territory is the opposition arena between the market and civil society, which involves every person, with no distinction, and it is crossed by centripetal and centrifugal forces.

Santos (2000) defines centripetal forces as a converging factor that forces aggregation, because of a socio-economic process that might be related

both to the unexpected intersubjectivity and to the production process. The centrifugal forces, on the other hand, represent a disaggregation factor capable of taking away the possibility of the region to make their own decisions.

Thus, Santos believes “centripetal forces lead to a process of horizontalization, and the centrifugal forces lead to a process of verticalization (SANTOS, 2000, p. 194)”.

In a globalized world, the territory works as support and basis of the networks that transport verticality. In the words of Santos (2000), “verticalities can be defined, in a territory, as a group of points that form a space of flows (p. 51)”. This space of flows, in its turn, is a subsystem inside the space-totality, whose role is to integrate more comprehensive economic and special levels. However, Santos (2000, p. 52) highlights these integrations as:

[...] vertical, depending and alienating, since the essential decisions concerning the local processes are foreign to the place and obey to distant motivations. In these conditions, the tendency is that corporative interests prevail over public interests, regarding the evolution of territory, economy and local societies. Such domination is also the bearer of the hegemonic rationale and whose contagious power simplifies the search for unification and homogenization.

In other words, this group of points is formed accordingly with the hegemonic actors, logically related to rationality and to dominant economic activities. The hegemonic actors take advantage of the fluidity resulting from globalization and become capable of determining the internal action modalities. That is to say, they become eligible to mold/adapt/organize local practices, subordinating them to global interests. Therefore, “the verticalities are vectors of a superior rationality and of a pragmatic discourse of hegemonic sectors”, intended to dominate daily routines, making them obedient and disciplined. Soon, the forces of verticalities and horizontalities will be structuralizing elements in the territory production

process, once their actions represent a convergence of divergent aspirations (SANTOS, 2000).

The author also points out that, as far as the external actors and the verticalities start to impose disturbances when trying to tame the daily routine, there is a disruption, sometimes a very deep one, with local nexus (SANTOS, 2006).

To better meet our goals, we are going to replace the categories of daily routine and local nexus with the category of territoriality. According to Raffestin (1993), territoriality is multidimensional and inherent to life in society. Saquet (2011) complements this idea, asserting that territoriality is the group of what is lived in a daily basis, a social phenomenon involving individuals who are part of a same group and/or different groups, closely attached to each place, that gives them an identity.

The Community of Fishermen in Itambi is an example of how the influence of verticalities over territoriality of more vulnerable and counter-hegemonic populations takes place.

The fishermen live in an area called “Bacia”, in the east part of the Guanabara Bay, surrounded by mangrove forests, at the “Recôncavo da Guanabara”. The community there depends on the extraction of crabs from the mangrove, fishing, or on the cutting of trees from the mangrove to make and sell craftsmanship, so their way of life is directly linked to the environment they live in. However, from 2007 on, the arrival of the COMPERJ propelled other actions promoted by the Acceleration Plan. One of these actions started to threaten the livelihood of the population of Itambi. This happened because there were important attempts to remove the residents of that area and transfer them to a housing complex built with resources provided by PAC. In other words, at that moment what was happening was an actual attempt to take the territory away from the community, what would affect the livelihood of those people and break their

connection with their territory, deeply transforming the local nexus (MOYSES, 2016).

Consequently, the horizontalities of the community were intentionally weakened, in a process guided by an exogenous rationality, which leads to systematically broken relationships between environment and population. Soon, their territorialities would be put at stake, due to the new reconfiguration of the territory imposed by foreign agents. In this case, we can observe how the force of verticalities has a relevant effect on the location, reflecting on a deterritorialization process of a community, which, in turn, greatly threatens the existence of that community (MOYSES, 2016).

During a visit to this community, we talked to one of main leaders of the fishermen, and it was possible to notice that, due to an intense mobilization and organization, they have remained firm against the rehoming attempt and are currently still living in the area.

According to what was proposed by the Growth Acceleration Plan, the fishermen would be taken to a housing complex, with dozens of apartments. Moyses (2016) observes that the residents would move from their houses in October 2009, but this date is constantly being rescheduled because of some problems, such as the construction works stoppage in 2011 and 2013.

This process of “expulsion” had the participation of several actors, for example, the public power and agents from the PAC, who forbid people from building new houses or expanding the ones already there, in a clear attempt to force the fishermen who lived there to leave their homes. They were also offered a kind of “social rent” that would be paid to the ones who accepted to leave the community, in order to undermine the resistance movements. Many residents have left the area (MOYSES, 2016).

In spite of being in a small number, some fishermen still use wood burners to prepare the crabs they catch, which is impossible to do in a small apartment. Another important point is proximity; if they moved to the housing complex, the fishermen would have to commute carrying all the fish

caught during the day all the way from the docks to their homes. Moreover, the boats would be left alone, with no security.

The leadership of the fishermen association has stated that 62 families reside in the area and do not wish to leave, so they are quite resistant to this kind of change. In spite of the power the Federal Government holds, the fishermen from Itambi faced it and won. They were able to guarantee, up to the present moment, the right to remain where they are.

One more point that deserves to be analyzed is that the agents from the Acceleration Plan used to treat the community as a “backward” population, who needed to leave that place in order to improve their lives, as reported. What those agents did not consider was the fact that the fishermen had all the material resources necessary for them to develop their social relations; the difference in their way of life did not necessarily mean they were “backward” or lacked modernity. On the day of the field visit, the fish warehouse, much like all the fish stores being built on that location, were overtaken by vegetation. It is clear that some improvements must be made in the infrastructure so that the fishermen would have better conditions and would not need to be deterritorialized.

As far as Petrobras is concerned, a worrisome fact is that several enterprises are being developed in the Guanabara Bay, creating more “exclusion areas” that will deprive the fishermen of their activity, which is not only the source of their income but also a vital condition for their existence.

It is also clear that the fishermen who live in Itambi need to be there materially due to some reasons, including the discovery of a large area to perform fishing tasks, the proximity to the docks and the simple fact of being close to their workplace. Besides that, the fact that they have lived in that location for decades and have a special connection with nature should be taken into account, and that can be proven by observing how close most

of the houses are to green areas. Lastly, the housing complex to where the families would move is completely abandoned.

Hence, it is possible to understand that the financial crisis in Brazil, along with the strengthening of horizontalities concerning the territoriality of the community, have allowed the fishermen to empower their resistance movement to defend their right of remaining in their territory. However, in spite of feeling threatened, the leadership of the movement has reassured they will not leave their land, at any moment; they are making sure resistance movements go on.

AHOMAR: the artisanal fishermen's movement of the Guanabara Bay

The contradictions between artisanal fishing and oil extraction might be understood from two diverse and extreme perspectives. On the one hand, more realistic views on force relations and a possible conciliation between the fishermen and the company. On the other hand, a deeper questioning to the socioeconomic structure and to a more radical action (Herculano, 2012).

The Association of Men and Women from the Guanabara Bay (AHOMAR) chose the developmentalism perspective to follow. The movement, created in 2003 by 11 leaders from the fishing community, was born because of the crescent degradation of the Guanabara Bay, provoked mostly by Petrobras, especially after the accident in 2000. The Association stands for their values with a combative attitude, wishing to radicalize the fight (VIEIRA, 2015).

Another interesting point regarding AHOMAR is that the artisanal label attributed to the group goes beyond the "handcraft" techniques; they believe their main reason to fight lies in defending tradition and identity

politics, clarifying that the struggle goes beyond the limits of neighboring territories (MOYSES, 2016).

As shown by Vieira (2015), AHOMAR officially represents about four thousand fishermen from various cities of the Metropolitan Area of Rio de Janeiro. In their resistance front, AHOMAR has adopted some strategies, such as the stoppage of construction works at the COMPERJ, demonstrations at sea, in which several fishermen sail their boats to protest. They also organized onshore demonstrations in front of Petrobras, created maps, documents, photographs and videos to expose environmental crimes, and formed an Environmental Patrol at the Guanabara Bay, among multiple other initiatives.

AHOMAR's mobilization and radicalization of the struggle has brought some light to socio-environmental and territorial conflicts at the Guanabara Bay. As an obvious consequence, there were several attempts to undermine the movement. Because they were one of the most active critics of the proximity of COMPERJ to the Bay, Moyses (2016) observed that the Association had to deal with even more serious consequences, including death and exile from their life territory, as well as the shutting down of their headquarters in August 2012.

Perez and Rougemont (2013) believe many retaliation cases were registered regarding AHOMAR. In 2009, a demonstration against some COMPERJ facilities ended with two fishermen being murdered. Since then, the president of AHOMAR, Alexandre Anderson, was enrolled at the Protection Program for Defenders of Human Rights, and had to be escorted by the police 24 hours a day. In 2012, two more fishermen from the Association disappeared after leaving to fish and were found dead two days later, at São Lourenço Beach (Magé) and Luz Beach (São Gonçalo).

As a resistance strategy, AHOMAR empowered their speech and their actions. According to Moyses (2016), there is a clear construction of truths (the ones about artisanal fishing) as a way of disputing the truths created in the COMPERJ area, especially to evoke the issues of belonging, memory, territory and identity, which make their speech similar to other groups' affected by great industries in Latin America. They started questioning the political project behind this logic, based on the assumption of the ones who have ruled a/or colonized their main references. It is also important to highlight that the artisanal fishermen's speech is based on a broader environmental awareness, that does not separate the environment and society. At the core of this speech, it is possible to see the fight for the right to territory, to their territorialities, and the right to maintain their identities and to rescue their memories. The author emphasizes:

[...] it is possible to understand that the struggle of these subordinated subjects in the process of installation of the COMPERJ is thus directly linked to the questioning of the hegemonic development model itself (introduced as sustainable) of the enterprise [...] The artisanal fishermen from AHOMAR bear in their speeches and in their actions a resignification and reappropriation of the environmental cause (MOYSES, 2012, p.52).

The words of Alexandre Anderson, activist and one of AHOMAR's leaders, in an interview to El País (ARAUJO; VECIANA, 2015) about the enterprise, show the meaning of the Association's struggle. He criticized especially the model chosen to deal with natural resources and the fishing communities' rights:

We are vulnerable because the rule of law is vulnerable. We are not against Petrobras, but we are against the way it is run. [...] They are destroying a historic process of fishing, inherited for generations, that we are not going to hand on to our grandchildren (ARAUJO; VECIANA, 2015).

Lastly, AHOMAR is still an active movement, fighting against the impositions of the companies who wish to own the Guanabara Bay. They give no signs of backing down, because of the constant threat. The fishermen's fight is for survival, and that is the reason why, even in moments of crisis, it is not possible to see any indications that their struggle might be getting weak and empty.

Conservation Unit: APA Guapimirim and the Mosaico Central Fluminense

The Environmental Protection Area (APA) in Guapimirim, with a 138,25 km² area and a 71.541m perimeter, was the first conservation unit specifically intended to take care of biomes occupied by mangroves that comprehend the east portion of the Guanabara Bay in the cities of Magé, Guapimirim, Itaboraí and São Gonçalo. In these regions, there are fishermen groups, agricultural activities and also some urban zones with a low-income population. The Protection Area resulted from an environmental movement involving representatives of the organized civil society and the scientific community (BENAVIDES et al., 2009; IBAMA, 2001).

The APA has a Management Plan (IBAMA, 2001) according to which the division of the area is as follows: mangrove areas (44,7%), dryland areas (19,6%) and waters from the Guanabara Bay (35,7%). Inside the Protection Area, there are about 2000 residents. APA Guapimirim is constantly being threatened by anthropogenic factors, since it is located in towns under accelerated expansion and that are surrounded by large enterprises, like the COMPERJ.

The Mosaic of Protected Areas of Central Atlantic Forest of Rio de Janeiro comprehends and an area of 233.710ha, 13 cities, 22 Protected

Areas and their buffer zones, and over 3.7 million residents. The Hall of Biodiversity of Serra do Mar is considered an extreme priority for conservation. This Hall constitutes a great part of the Central Mosaic and comprehends the Serra dos Órgãos mountain range, the Massif of Tinguá up to Macaé de Cima, including the east part of the Guanabara Bay (ALBUQUERQUE; LINO, 2007).

It is of utmost relevance to preserve and maintain this Mosaic due to its geobiophysical characteristics, since it represents several types of biomes and brings great physical connectivity between most of the Protected Areas that form this Mosaic, and, in their turn, represent a continuity in the areas of mountain range and low lands.

Thus, implementing and regularly operating the enterprise causes considerable socioenvironmental impacts to the Protected Areas. According to Coelho et al. (2015), there are clear contradictions between the ecological conditions of the area and the impositions the industrial activity that reproduces the expropriating character of the new developmentalist model.

In environmental justice, it is possible to understand that the area chosen to house the COMPERJ is a sacrifice zone, because of the asymmetry in the distribution of negative effects of environmental degradation, with a strong class component. However, to Moyses (2016), before the COMPERJ arrived, there were already numerous conflicts and uneven power relations between the managers of the Protected Areas - APA Guapimirim and Estação Ecológica da Guanabara – and the communities that used to live under their jurisdiction. This situation occurred because the management of the units in Guapimirim was based on the idea that their legal competence lied solely on protecting, watching and supervising the natural resources, not considering any social aspects.

When the COMPERJ arrived, with a strong preservationist speech and threats to the community, the managers of the APA Guapimirim and the fishermen were drawn to the same side (MOYSES, 2016). Due to the facts described above, it was possible to observe that the managers of the APA Guapimirim, through their advisory board, as well as the Central Mosaic, have manifested against the enterprise. The board of the Protection Area issued a motion to the licensing bodies, containing reports about the negative effects the construction would have on the protected areas and local populations. Coelho et al. (2015) describe a symbolic fact that happened in one of the board meetings, when an NGO sponsored by Petrobras proposed a Project that would demand significant financial support to preserve the waters of APA Guapimirim. Nonetheless, the board concluded that, if they accepted a project funded by Petrobras, it would create a binding with the enterprise that would harm the neutral position of the Conservation Unit. Therefore, once more the APA Guapimirim made a statement reassuring their combative attitude against cooptation attempts the enterprise was making.

Just as APA Guapimirim, Mosaico Central Fluminense also considered the proposal to use the river Guaxindiba for waterborne transport of heavy equipment to the COMPERJ to be environmentally unfeasible. They issued a motion that was forwarded to the licensing bodies and to some other entities, such as the Prosecution Office, the National Congress and the Ministry of the Environment – MMA (COELHO et al., 2015).

Thus, it is possible to notice that the articulation between the Protected Areas and Mosaico Central Fluminense is significantly important to resist against the negative impacts COMPERJ brings with it, because

they allow a more active social participation of the populations who are directly involved in this enterprise. This union enhances the relevance and magnitude of their values, even more than when they were isolated. Therefore, we conclude that the mosaics result in a deeper social participation in the management of protected areas.

Final Considerations

At a moment of economic crisis and political instability, it is clear that the COMPERJ complex brings more disadvantages and frustrations to the local populations, and the speech of all the political actors involved in this scenery reflects this frustration. The abandonment is materialized in the almost non-existing initiatives of enterprises created to assist a great number of people, with hotels that were not even opened or empty corporate buildings. The perversity of capital is revealed, showing it is capable of leaving entire populations on their own in order to guarantee its profit.

Petrobras represents a continuous threat to the managers of the Protected Areas. The company's interventions are constantly changing and their conditions are not met (determinations imposed by the public power expressed in the Environmental License granted by the environmental body), it is a worrying factor for those who wish to preserve the ecological conditions of the Guanabara Bay and guarantee the preservation of the environment. The fishermen from AHOMAR are in a similar situation. Petrobras is still a greater threat than it was before, since the Brazilian crisis has exposed the state's coercion techniques. Therefore, the workers will remain organized as a way to resist the imperatives of the COMPERJ

and fight against the setback to their rights, such as the misappropriation of natural resources and the privatization of the Guanabara Bay.

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