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Petrobras' Energy Transition Discourse: Nation, Science, and Community in 'A Brazil of Energy'

O discurso de transição energética da Petrobras: nação, ciência e comunidade em "Um Brasil de Energia"

El discurso de transición energética de Petrobras: nación, ciencia y comunidad en "Un Brasil de Energía"

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Abstract: This article contributes to research on fossil fuel companies' communication strategies through an analysis of Petrobras's energy transition discourse. It focuses on the documentary series *A Brazil of Energy* and examines how meanings of the energy transition are constructed, negotiated, and contested through symbolic and discursive elements in text and image. The analysis reveals a "micropolitics of language," as Petrobras legitimizes its expansion into the Equatorial Margin by portraying the transition as a project of community empowerment, scientific innovation, and reaffirmation of its historical role as Brazil's flagship company. Metonymic strategies tie Petrobras to Brazil's nature, geography, and relatively clean energy mix, while also invoking national pride in technological achievements. Although the company echoes global oil majors in its emphasis on development and "technological salvationism," it stands apart through a pronounced appeal to Brazilianness. This framing positions Petrobras as a national actor advancing a localized form of climate delay discourse.

Keywords: Climate delay; climate rhetoric; corporate environmental communication; discourse analysis; Equatorial Margin.

Resumo: Este artigo contribui para a pesquisa sobre as estratégias de comunicação de empresas de combustíveis fósseis por meio de uma análise do discurso de transição energética da Petrobras. O foco recai sobre a série documental *Um Brasil de Energia*, examinando como os significados da transição energética são construídos, negociados e contestados por meio de elementos simbólicos e discursivos em texto e imagem. A análise revela uma "micropolítica da linguagem", à medida que a Petrobras legitima sua expansão para a Margem Equatorial ao retratar a transição como um projeto de empoderamento comunitário, inovação científica e reafirmação de seu papel histórico como empresa símbolo do Brasil. Estratégias metonímicas associam a Petrobras à natureza, à geografia e à matriz energética relativamente limpa do país, ao mesmo tempo em que evocam o orgulho nacional por suas conquistas tecnológicas. Embora a empresa ecoe outras grandes petroleiras globais em sua ênfase no desenvolvimento e em um "salvacionismo tecnológico", distingue-se por um apelo marcante à brasilidade. Essa formulação posiciona a Petrobras como um ator nacional que promove uma forma localizada de discurso de atraso climático.

Palavras-chave: Atraso climático; retórica climática; comunicação ambiental corporativa; análise do discurso; Margem Equatorial.

Resumen: Este artículo contribuye a la investigación sobre las estrategias de comunicación de las empresas de combustibles fósiles mediante un análisis del discurso de transición energética de Petrobras. Se centra en la serie documental *Un Brasil de Energía* y examina cómo se construyen, negocian y disputan los significados de la transición energética a través de elementos simbólicos y discursivos en texto e imagen. El análisis revela una "micropolítica del lengua-



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je", ya que Petrobras legitima su expansión hacia el Margen Ecuatorial al presentar la transición como un proyecto de empoderamiento comunitario, innovación científica y reafirmación de su papel histórico como empresa insignia de Brasil. Las estrategias metonímicas vinculan a Petrobras con la naturaleza, la geografía y la matriz energética relativamente limpia del país, al mismo tiempo que evocan el orgullo nacional por los logros tecnológicos. Aunque la empresa se asemeja a otras grandes petroleras globales en su énfasis en el desarrollo y en el "salvacionismo tecnológico", se distingue por un marcado llamado a la brasileñidad. Este encuadre posiciona a Petrobras como un actor nacional que promueve una forma localizada de discurso de retraso climático.

Palabras clave: Retraso climático; retórica climática; comunicación ambiental corporativa; análisis del discurso; Margen Ecuatorial.

1 INTRODUCTION

In light of the irrefutable accumulation of scientific evidence, major oil companies such as BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil, and Royal Dutch Shell have abandoned openly denialist discourses on climate change and incorporated the notion of "energy transition" into their corporate lexicon. Even those that financed think tanks minimizing the consequences of carbon emissions now release advertisements aligned with IPCC arguments (Si *et al.*, 2023; Supran; Oreskes, 2021).

The metamorphoses of climate rhetoric have spurred new research on the institutional communication of fossil fuel companies (Brulle; Aronczyk; Carmichael, 2019; Lamb *et al.*, 2020; Li; Trencher; Asuka, 2022). These studies highlight the subtleties of the "micropolitics of language" in the communication strategies of major oil companies to protect their corporate image and shield economic activities from any activist interference. Supran and Oreskes (2021) drew attention to the nearly imperceptible semantic choices through which ExxonMobil framed climate change not as a reality, but as a "risk". They examined the company's tactics to deflect criticism by leaning on the false universalism of the notion that "*we are all to blame*" for global warming.

These companies sought to influence public debate without necessarily aspiring to legitimacy within the academic sphere. Their "intellectuals" constructed a discursive framework that did not intend to establish hegemony in the scientific field,

primarily because their propositions did not meet the validation criteria of scientific rationality. The goal was not to produce science, but to sound scientific and thus legitimize their claims (Bosco; Fetz; Souza, 2024).

Oil companies have realized that losing the battle over "climate truth" would not necessarily lead to the decommissioning of oil and gas production. They understood that it would be more advantageous to align with scientific consensus and present themselves to governments, investors, and the public opinion as being committed to the energy transition (Megura; Gunderson, 2022). This discursive shift repositioned former "climate villains" as its saviors, and their new institutional truth became "*we are part of the solution*" (Tilsted *et al.*, 2022).

For climate obstructers, invoking global warming proved more effective than denying it. As a result, major oil companies abandoned pseudoscientific denialism and adopted the role of popularizers of climate science, employing in their advertisements the very images and terms that had previously been wielded against them. Climate change ceased to be a taboo and instead became a platform for the self-promotion of fossil fuel corporations as champions of environmental responsibility.

However, research on fossil fuel communication has predominantly focused on the discursive strategies of Big Oil – ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, BP and TotalEnergies – while paying little to no attention to oil corporations from the Global South, despite their significant economic and environmental impact. Asmelash and Gorini (2021) note that national oil companies account for more than 85% of global oil production, including entities such as Saudi Aramco, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, China's Sinopec, Malaysia's Petronas, and Brazil's Petrobras. This article addresses that gap by analyzing Petrobras's institutional discourse on energy transition.

Petrobras ranks seventh among oil companies in emissions, with 47.6 million metric tons of CO₂ in 2022 – slightly below Shell, Saudi Aramco, and Chevron (Statista, 2024). The company has deve-

developed a unique discursive strategy that mimics some of Big Oil's argumentative tactics while embedding them within a distinct narrative. In this narrative, metonymic operations between Petrobras and Brazil create a symbolic conflation of the company with the nation. By doing so, Petrobras frames its technological innovation as national accomplishments and appropriates Brazilian energy policy and natural resources as corporate assets. These metonymies constitute the core and defining feature of its energy transition discourse – one that paradoxically seeks not to reduce, but to expand investments in oil and gas.

The institutional piece selected for analysis is *A Brazil of Energy*, a six-episode documentary series released by Petrobras amid growing resistance to the expansion of oil production in the Equatorial Margin – a northern offshore territory with reserves estimated at 10 billion barrels of oil (Couto, 2024). The Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA, 2023) initially denied Petrobras's request for offshore drilling in block FZA-M-59 at the mouth of the Amazon River, citing deficiencies in oil-spill dispersion modeling studies and inadequate contingency plans for an environmentally sensitive area that includes reefs, mangroves, and rich marine biodiversity.

In the next section, I present the methodological premises that guide the discourse analysis of *A Brazil of Energy*. The third section comprises six subsections, each devoted to the textual and visual analysis of one episode. In the conclusion, I summarize the findings to show how the series centers on the strengthening of communities, the role of science and technology, and the metonymic operations that merge the company's identity with that of the nation to weave and endorse Petrobras's discourse on the energy transition.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Diving into academic discussions and public debates on just energy transitions requires a hermeneutic effort to discern what each actor

considers just or unjust. Studies show that, beyond the consensus on new energy models, differing normative premises produce legitimate yet conflicting demands (Van Uffelen; Taebe; Pesch, 2024).

In the documentary series *A Brazil of Energy*, Petrobras invokes principles of distributive justice to counter advocates of climate urgency and to favor a "gradual" transition. The methodological considerations regarding the order of discourse are relevant to such investigation because the term "energy transition" has evolved from a disciplinary concept into a program potentially embraced by all, following a trajectory similar to that of "sustainable development" (Foucault, 1981).

This article addresses fossil communication by revealing the articulations between symbols and logical-discursive operators through which Petrobras constructs, negotiates, and contests truth within a system of institutions. From this analytical perspective, it is possible to invert and deconstruct Petrobras's discourse on energy transition, exposing its foundations and the effects it seeks to produce. The purpose is not to reduce what is said to mere corporate rhetoric, but to acknowledge that discourse is inherently interested, aiming to legitimize both what is said and its enunciating subject.

Foucault emphasized that discourse permeates materiality without being, in itself, either material or immaterial. Alternatively, Norman Fairclough, drawing on the work of Raymond Williams, defined critical discourse analysis as a theoretical perspective that conceives of language and semiosis as moments within the material social process. I refer to the notion of "material context of discourse" (Fairclough, 1995) to state that *A Brazil of Energy* cannot be abstracted from the productive activities and social relations involving Petrobras at the time of filming – particularly the conflict in the Equatorial Margin. This approach broadens the scope of analysis while preserving the relative autonomy of discourse.

In *A Brazil of Energy*, text and images are constitutive elements of the discourse through which Petrobras defines a just energy transition, represents the complex interactions between its activi-

ties and ecosystems, and promotes its corporate values. The company released the documentary series on its official YouTube channel and on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. The six episodes, each approximately twenty minutes long, were published between December 21, 2023, and April 18, 2024.

Although each episode functions as a distinct unit of meaning, together they form a semantic chain that frames the documentary series as a piece of institutional communication. The discussion of results deliberately avoids excessive reliance on external references that might dilute the discourse as it appears in the documentary. Nonetheless, institutional documents such as the *Climate Notebooks*, *Sustainability Reports*, and the 2024–2028+ *Strategic Plan* articulate Petrobras's long-term guidelines and sustainability discourse (Petrobras, 2023c, 2024a, 2024b). These documents served as supplementary material for data collection, providing information often subtly conveyed—or even omitted—in the documentary series.

3 A BRAZIL OF ENERGY: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the documentary series *A Brazil of Energy*, journalists Francisco José and Diógenes Dantas travel across Brazil to “show how the country is preparing for a just energy transition” through interviews, site visits, and expert testimonies. This presentation employs a discursive strategy that recurs throughout the series, producing semantic shifts that equate Brazil's energy policy with Petrobras's energy transition program. The title of each subsection below corresponds to the episode it analyzes.

3.1 Just Energy Transition

A chimney seen from above, and eight others in the distance, spewing smoke, are followed by scenes of hurricanes, cyclones, and melting ice. Flooded roads contrast with images of arid soil, dry crops, and migrating animals. These visuals accompany Francisco José's explanation of the causal relationship between carbon emissions

and the climate crisis, framing the series not only as an advertising piece but also as a work of science popularization (Petrobras, 2023b).

The Director of Energy Transition and Sustainability at Petrobras, Mauricio Tolmasquin, articulates the syllogism that underpins the company's discourse. The first premise is that Brazil's energy matrix—due to its high share of renewable sources—is among the cleanest in the world. The second is that global dependence on oil is expected to decline, although demand will persist in the coming decades. The implicit, though unspoken, conclusion is that the relative sustainability of energy production in Brazil serves to legitimize Petrobras's plans to increase oil exploration over the next decade (Petrobras, 2024a).

Throughout the documentary series, Petrobras symbolically appropriates the environmental attributes of Brazilian energy policy. At the same time, it reinforces a seven-decade-long association of Petrobras as the quintessential national company, framing its achievements and technological innovations as national successes. These metonymic operations allow the environmental risks and impacts of oil production and exploration to be reframed as part of the broader challenges in Brazil's energy transition. The assertion that Brazil's energy production is among the cleanest in the world thus leads to the implicit conclusion that there is room to further carbonize it.

As the corporate embodiment of *Brazilianness*, the company introduces in the first episode a definition of energy transition that intertwines environmental criteria with goals of poverty reduction and community development (Silva; Baldissera, 2017).

It's not just about shifting to cleaner and renewable energy sources, but doing so in a way that no one is left behind; new technologies and energy forms must be accessible to all and must take into account the needs and interests of the most vulnerable communities.

The notion of “leaving no one behind” refers to SDG 7 (universal access to electricity) and underscores the principles of equality and inclusion. This framing subtly suggests that the accelerated

decommissioning of oil and gas production would harm the most vulnerable groups, thereby reinforcing the political–semantic association between Petrobras and poverty alleviation.

Petrobras's emphasis on the distributive dimension of the energy transition underpins its climate delay rhetoric. While the company does not deny the reality of climate change, it legitimizes the expansion of oil investments on socioeconomic grounds, without aligning its corporate timeline with the temporalities of climate justice. The claim that oil revenues will finance the energy transition operates as a climate obstruction tactic, functioning as a discursive shield against critics who contend that the company's energy transition entails not a reduction but an intensification of oil production (Grassi; Broering, 2024).

The screenplay of *A Brazil of Energy* juxtaposes images and narratives of oil production with visits to renewable energy facilities. This interplay between fossil and renewable sources infuses the series with optimism about ecological modernization and offers ethical reassurance for a climate-themed documentary produced by a fossil fuel company. In the first episode, Francisco José and Diógenes Dantas visit the Lagoa dos Ventos Wind Farm in the state of Piauí—the largest in South America—with an installed capacity of 1 GW. Three discursive elements converge to form an argumentative core reiterated throughout the series: the aesthetic glorification of technology, the creation of skilled employment, and the strengthening of local communities.

The aesthetic glorification of technology is evident when the journalists and the plant coordinator walk alongside a 61-meter-long, 30-ton wind turbine blade. Their bodies appear diminutive, almost indistinguishable, as the camera pulls back to capture the full span of the structure. This exaltation of technological grandeur is further conveyed through the complexity of the equipment in the plant's control room. Technicians and engineers display their expertise and explain the operation of the machines in a manner that enables viewers to grasp the processes, even without any technical background. These pedagogical

devices function as persuasive tools, fostering trust in “our responsible experts” (Stengers, 2015), who not only master the technology but, reassuringly, are portrayed as capable of directing and controlling the energy transition itself.

Professional qualification and shared prosperity emerge as central themes during the visit to the Lagoa dos Ventos Wind Farm. “*A strong wind blows in Lagoa dos Ventos. A strong and productive wind.*” After leaving the plant, Francisco and Diógenes stop at Dona Fátima's restaurant, where she prepares *feijão de corda*, a traditional dish from Brazil's Northeast. Beaming with pride, she explains that, thanks to the job opportunities created by the wind farm, people no longer need to migrate in search of work. Her restaurant has flourished, and her testimony—that “*life has improved one hundred percent*”—reinforces the argument that, for the energy transition to be just, vulnerable communities must experience tangible benefits.

The trip to Piauí concludes in the backyard of a *sertanejo*, a small landowner who leased part of his property for the installation of three wind turbines. Considering the material context of wind energy projects in northeastern Brazil, the portrayal of the Lagoa dos Ventos project's social benefits contrasts sharply with the conflicts experienced by communities affected by the imposition of such projects. In the promotional video, Petrobras journalists drink coffee while locals chat, recite *cordel* poetry, and play the accordion. This idyllic scene obscures the reality of entire villages where residents have fallen seriously ill due to the constant noise of the wind turbines.

The representation that celebrates Lagoa dos Ventos erases and silences the multiple experiences of conflict associated with renewable energy development in northeastern Brazil. These projects often disregard local ways of life, the inhabitants' sense of identity with the landscape, and their deep attachment to the land. Energy research has extensively documented the adverse effects of poorly planned wind complexes, including cases in which small rural landowners with limited formal education were persuaded to sign undervalued contracts that imposed restrictive

conditions on land use (Gorayeb *et al.*, 2018).

3.2 Decarbonization

The second episode centers on decarbonization in the oil and gas industry (Petrobras, 2024c). Wearing personal protective equipment, Francisco José and Diógenes Dantas arrive at the heliport of P-68, a floating production platform located 230 kilometers off the coast of Rio de Janeiro. The unit is anchored at a depth of 2,280 meters and has the capacity to produce 150,000 barrels of oil and compress up to six million cubic meters of gas per day. The setting operates as part of the aesthetic-argumentative composition, in which the image of the 300-meter-long platform ship amid the vast ocean conveys the idea that, just as Petrobras has mastered the technology to extract oil from deep waters, it will likewise be capable of developing solutions to address climate change.

With the steel structures of the platform to her left and the ocean behind her, engineer Emanuele Silva (Manu) explains that it is possible to reduce intrinsic CO₂ emissions only up to a certain limit, beyond which carbon capture technologies become necessary (Otto; Gross, 2021). Accompanied by images of a forest, a large tree, and urban traffic scenes in time-lapse, Francisco José introduces Carbon Capture, Utilization, and Storage (CCUS) as a mature *technology* “already delivering results that are shaping our energy future.”

Mauricio Tolmasquin then elaborates on the functioning of CCUS technology in terms accessible to non-specialists. While the discursive intent appears to be the popularization of knowledge about the decarbonization process, the argument gains persuasive force by juxtaposing technical expertise with nationalist sentiment. He emphasizes the “greener” character of Brazilian oil, attributed to its relatively lower emissions, and appeals to national pride by asserting that Petrobras is the world leader in carbon capture within oil and gas production.

It is good to produce oil with low emissions content. Brazil looks good in this picture. Petrobras emits an average of 15 kilograms of CO₂ per

barrel, while the global average is around 18 to 20. In the pre-salt fields, there are areas where emissions reach 10 kilograms—half the world average. [...] Last year, Brazil captured 10.6 million tons of CO₂. Globally, 40 million tons were captured. This means that one quarter of all CO₂ captured worldwide was done by Brazil, by Petrobras.

In pre-salt exploration, Petrobras presents its low-emission oil as a competitive advantage for Brazil. The company's narrative assumes that global oil consumption will persist for decades and argues that, within this context, prioritizing low-emission oil—such as that produced by the Brazilian company—constitutes the most environmentally responsible course of action. Petrobras structures its discourse through symbolic appropriations of Brazil's geography and natural resources, while simultaneously employing metonymy as a rhetorical strategy to recast its positive performance indicators—such as its global leadership in carbon capture, utilization, and geological storage—as national achievements, thereby reinforcing the identification between Petrobras and *Brazilianness*.

In *A Brazil of Energy*, the rainforest and the country's mangroves are portrayed as natural complements to CCUS technologies. “Today, over 50% of Brazil's emissions come from wildfires and deforestation. [...] More than changing processes and products, we need to reforest.” In this framing, environmental preservation is presented as a compensatory mechanism to offset emissions from fuel combustion. However, according to the Climate Observatory, Brazil holds reserves estimated at between 10 and 30 billion barrels of oil in the Equatorial Margin, the exploitation of which would generate emissions ranging from 4 to 13 billion tons of CO₂—potentially nullifying the environmental gains of zero deforestation in the Amazon (IHU, 2023).

It would be unthinkable for a foreign oil company to justify its emissions by invoking the Brazilian rainforest, yet Petrobras does precisely that, appropriating the Amazon and the mangroves as if they were its own environmental assets. This is why the socio-environmental compensation programs featured in the series are central to

Petrobras's self-image. As oil exploration expands and struggles to align with the discourse of confronting the climate crisis, these compensatory measures play a crucial role in positioning Petrobras as an environmentally responsible corporation.

3.3 Biorefining and the Future of the Industry

The third episode delves deeper into the issue of decarbonization, presenting Petrobras's perspective on biofuels (Petrobras, 2024d). The series seeks to communicate the company's energy transition program throughout all stages of the value chain. During a tour of the Getúlio Vargas Refinery in Paraná, conversations between journalists and scientists focus on reducing the carbon footprint of petroleum refining processes while also promoting a new, lower-emission fuel: Diesel R5. Following the previous discussion on CCUS, the *well-to-wheel* cycle is completed at the end of this episode with a visit to a Swedish truck factory that operates using Petrobras's lower-emission diesel.

In *A Brazil of Energy*, the promotion of Diesel R occupies a central position, as it addresses emissions arising from the actual combustion of fuels (Scope 3). Between 2015 and 2022, Scope 3 emissions accounted for 88% of the company's total value-chain emissions (Scopes 1, 2, and 3), reaching 438 million tCO₂ in 2022 alone (Petrobras, 2023a). This indicates that, while the company has set an ambitious goal of achieving net-zero emissions in its production and refining stages by 2050, it still possesses limited technological capacity to decarbonize the sector responsible for more than four-fifths of its total emissions (Petrobras, 2024b).

In its official documents, Petrobras discloses Scope 3 emissions as part of its transparency policy. However, it employs semantic subtleties to render consumers co-responsible for the environmental impact of its products. Like other major oil companies, it resorts to euphemism by labeling this category as *indirect emissions*. Moreover, the series frames the issue of balancing

transportation demand with the urgent need to curb carbon emissions as "*a major challenge for the country*." This framing constitutes a discursive operation that shifts Petrobras's responsibility for indirect emissions, recasting the company as a provider of solutions to a national problem rather than as a primary contributor to it.

Petrobras constructs its corporate image around the notion that it stands at the forefront of technological innovation in the oil and gas industry. Scenes from the third episode—filmed at the Biotechnology Laboratory, the Energy Transition and Sustainability Laboratory (CENPES), and the control room of the Presidente Getúlio Vargas Refinery (REPAR)—showcase highly qualified professionals. As they describe the company's research processes and their relation to sustainability, they seek to persuade the audience that Petrobras's energy transition program is scientifically grounded. "*It started here in the laboratory; today, it is already at the refinery*," remarks the researcher responsible for R&D in biorefining.

She explains that the vegetable-based raw material added to mineral oil to produce Diesel R5 emits 75% less CO₂ than conventional diesel. However, since the product contains only one-twentieth vegetable oil, its actual emissions reduction amounts to just 3.75%—less than the 5% misleadingly suggested by its brand name. "*The idea is to gradually increase this proportion until we reach biorefineries capable of processing 100% vegetable-based raw material*," the researcher states. This narrative reinforces a teleological perspective in which restrictions on the expansion of the oil industry appear unreasonable, as it assumes that Petrobras will eventually process the remaining 96.25% that still requires decarbonization.

Unlike ExxonMobil—which in the past funded pseudoscientists to discredit climate science (Oreskes; Conway, 2011)—Petrobras not only legitimizes science but also actively mobilizes scientific development to enhance its public image and credibility. Within the company's narrative, Petrobras provides a fuel that emits less CO₂ and, barring external disruptions, will ultimately become 100% carbon-free. As Francisco Dantas

asserts, "*To reach the fuel station and your vehicle, a lot of research is required. This is science working in the service of Brazilians.*" Science thus constitutes the foundation of Petrobras's energy transition discourse—yet it is a **teleological and nationalistic science**, imbued with **extra-scientific meanings**.

The pervasive technoscientific bias in Petrobras's discourse operates as a mechanism for reconciling new oil investments with environmental protection. From liquid effluent treatment to the recovery of used cooking oils for biorefining, the power of science resides in its capacity to leave nothing outside the discourse. Renewable diesel, sustainable aviation fuel (SAF), and biodiesel-infused bunker fuel for maritime transport are presented as integral components of Petrobras's energy transition program, consistent with the principle of resource substitutability. This substitution is still marginal but discursively projected as the future already underway.

3.4 Blue Carbon

The belief that technology will provide complements the assumption that nature will absorb. The episode on mangroves reinforces the idea that coastal ecosystems are allies in the energy transition. While *green carbon* in the second episode referred to forests' ability to capture greenhouse gases, *blue carbon* signifies the parallel capacity of mangroves and marine ecosystems to sequester CO₂. In Petrobras's narrative, both forests and mangroves function as nature-based solutions for offsetting indirect emissions. Brazil has 15 million hectares of mangroves along its coastline. These ecosystems mitigate coastal erosion, filter pollutants, and foster biodiversity. In his interview, Petrobras employee Jorge Eduardo underscores the relevance of *blue carbon* within the company's energy transition discourse. He notes that coastal and oceanic environments sequester substantial amounts of atmospheric carbon through biochemical processes and implicitly suggests that this capacity could offset the company's climate impact. The rhetorical move rests on the assumption that nature-based

solutions alone can resolve the problem of emissions accounting, while conflating Petrobras with the nation by presenting Brazil's geography and ecosystems as corporate assets.

Approximately 90% of Petrobras's oil exploration takes place offshore, mainly in deep and ultra-deep waters such as the pre-salt layer (Petrobras, 2024f). Within the material context of *A Brazil of Energy*, the episode set in the mangroves implicitly addresses concerns about the environmental risks associated with offshore expansion near the mouth of the Amazon River. This highly sensitive region encompasses coral reefs and nearly 80% of Brazil's mangrove forests. According to IBAMA, oil exploration in this area poses significant threats to marine and coastal ecosystems. Drilling and transportation activities could endanger fishing and Indigenous communities, particularly in the event of an oil spill (IBAMA, 2023).

While environmental organizations and academics endorse IBAMA's caution based on risk analyses, Petrobras advances a narrative on mangroves centered on environmental conservation practices. The episode features two conservation projects supported by the company. On the coast of Paraná, Francisco José and Diógenes Dantas visit Rebimar, a project dedicated to the revitalization of marine biodiversity. They interview biologists who discuss the ecosystem's environmental services, as well as Josias Tavares, a boatman who guides them through the scenic waters surrounding the mangroves. Formerly a crab harvester, Tavares contributes his knowledge of local ecosystems and community life to the biologists' work.

The social dimension of mangroves as spaces of subsistence is also a defining feature of the Uçá Project, supported by Petrobras in the Guapimirim Environmental Protection Area in Guanabara Bay (RJ). The initiative involves more than 500 families of crustacean harvesters who, during the closed season, engage in ecological restoration and mangrove-cleaning activities. The video adopts an environmental education discourse as the journalists speak with the shellfish harvesters about waste collection and the damage caused by the

accumulation of trash—both to the preservation of the ecosystem and to the safety of those who depend on it. From this perspective, degradation is represented through the improper disposal of furniture, car parts, aluminum cans, and shards of glass. Petrobras thus frames the threat to the mangroves as a matter of environmental awareness, distancing it from the processes of oil exploration and extraction.

In *Blue Carbon*, text and images portray the mangroves as spaces of biodiversity and ecological sensitivity. Sarah Charlier, a biologist from Rebimar, notes that 70% of commercially fished species spend part of their life cycle in mangrove environments (Petrobras, 2024g). Scenes of various bird species—resting or fluttering against shifting shades of sky—alternate with shots of crabs retreating into holes in the mud. As the journalists converse among themselves or interview crustacean harvesters, their feet sink into the mud and water up to their calves. These images convey a purifying message that Petrobras's activities are integrated with and in harmony with the mangroves.

The images and dialogues themselves dispel the notion of risk, fostering the viewer's trust in the company's sustainability practices without requiring any detailed explanation of contingency measures in the event of a spill. In its institutional documents, Petrobras frames the issue as an extremely unlikely scenario, asserting that it adopts the best practices to prevent or mitigate such occurrences. In *A Brazil of Energy*, however, compensatory measures exist without anything to compensate for. Spills—whether as risks or as historical events in the company's trajectory—are rendered taboo and effectively erased from view.

In January 2000, a pipeline connecting the Duque de Caxias Refinery to the Ilha d'Água terminal spilled 1.3 million liters of fuel into Guanabara Bay. In July of the same year, another 4 million liters of oil leaked from a pipeline at the Presidente Getúlio Vargas Refinery, contaminating the waters of the Iguaçu River. Despite subsequent changes in safety and operational protocols, "operational incidents" remain an intrinsic feature

of Petrobras's offshore activities. In 2022 alone, the company reported 1,509 offshore incidents, encompassing both production platforms and drilling wells (ANP, 2023b).

This dissonance between Petrobras's favorable self-portrayal and its actual impacts led the National Advertising Self-Regulation Council (CONAR) to suspend a 2008 commercial for misleading claims about the company's environmental contributions. The advertisement, titled *Being in the Environment Without Being Noticed*, consisted of four consecutive scenes: in the first, a lizard camouflages itself on a tree; in the second, a butterfly blends into a leaf; in the third, a fish conceals itself on a stone underwater. As a corollary, the final caption reads, "*This is also Petrobras's challenge: to be in nature without being noticed.*" CONAR justified its decision on the grounds that the advertisement falsely suggested that the state-owned company had contributed to the country's environmental quality and sustainable development (Santos *et al.*, 2012).

Unlike the 2008 campaign, *A Brazil of Energy* does not seek to be "*in the environment without being noticed.*" Instead, it positions Petrobras as the protector of mangroves. This shift, however, does not alter the underlying structural similarity between the two narratives, for both aim to translate real and virtual impacts into a representation of symbiosis between the company and the environment.

3.5 New Energies

A scene from the fifth episode of *A Brazil of Energy* features the Alto do Rodrigues Photovoltaic Plant, a 1.1 MWp pilot project developed by Petrobras (Petrobras, 2024h). As they walk among the solar panels, Diógenes Dantas and Francisco José emphasize the importance of sunlight in diversifying Brazil's energy mix and report that between January and September 2023, the country experienced its largest increase in centralized solar generation—2.8 GW. The imagery conveys the prospect of an energy transition characterized by the coexistence of fossil fuels and renewable sources. The panels are filmed from above and

later serve as the backdrop for the journalists' dialogue, both dressed in orange coveralls and personal protective equipment, visually aligning them with the identity of Petrobras workers.

As an expert authority on energy policy, Maurício Tolmasquin underscores the abundance of solar radiation across Brazil throughout the year as a key advantage that enhances the efficiency of both large-scale solar farms and distributed generation, thereby reducing costs and enabling consumers to benefit from net-metering mechanisms. Hugo Tavares, a Petrobras employee, reinforces this argument by referring to the *solar belt*—a vast territorial strip extending from Minas Gerais to Rio Grande do Norte, where the Alto do Rodrigues plant is located.

The narrative construction of *A Brazil of Energy* strengthens Petrobras's public image by interweaving information about its own projects with data on Brazil's broader investments in renewable energy. This strategy blurs the boundary between Petrobras's achievements and those of other actors in the national energy sector. In conversation with Francisco José, company employee Luiz Fernando Fontenele asserts, "*Since 2012, the sector has invested more than 180 billion BRL, generated over 1.1 million jobs, and prevented the release of more than 44 million tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere.*" Yet these figures do not derive from Petrobras's investments. While the company seeks to capture 10% of Brazil's centralized wind and solar energy market by 2028, it currently operates only the pilot plant where the episode is filmed (Petrobras, 2024a).

The script emphasizes the importance of photovoltaic technology for remote communities and its strategic role in achieving universal access to electricity in Brazil. The discourse promotes a people-centered energy transition, with Fontenele describing how daily life in these communities can improve through access to lamps, refrigerators, and televisions—even though Petrobras's involvement in solar energy remains largely confined to research and development.

In practice, the company has few tangible results to present in the field of renewable in-

vestments. It capitalizes on its status as a mixed-economy enterprise with majority government ownership, effectively acting as a free rider that benefits from the overall sustainability of Brazil's energy matrix. Beyond these metonymic operations, Petrobras reinforces technological optimism, portraying itself as leader of the transition through advances like cheaper photovoltaic panels. In the episode devoted to solar energy, the journalists visit the Institute of Macromolecules at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, where Professor Fátima Marques conducts research on producing photovoltaic panels made from polymers.

Petrobras's interest in solar energy is not primarily directed toward expanding low-emission electricity generation but toward its use in producing the so-called "*fuels of the future.*" Early in the episode, the Alto do Rodrigues Plant is described as an "*open-air laboratory*" for generating "*bytes and knowledge,*" a statement later clarified when a representative from SENAI outlines the technological pathway for producing green hydrogen (H₂V). Within this framework of popularizing science and technology, a Petrobras partner explains that solar and wind energy provide a sustainable alternative for water electrolysis. Green hydrogen is presented as a strategic vector for enabling the energy transition in hard-to-abate sectors such as heavy industry and aviation (Kelman *et al.*, 2020).

Through its investment in green hydrogen (H₂V) research and development, Petrobras broadens the narrative of the energy transition, framing it as a pathway toward the gradual phasing out of fossil fuels. This scientific emphasis enables the company to reposition climate change from a taboo subject to a platform for technological solutions. Petrobras thus portrays itself not as an agent of environmental harm but as an innovator in sustainability. This reframing displaces the debate from merely identifying the problem to questioning who holds the authority and legitimacy to address these pressing challenges.

Following Foucault's terminology (1981), the central issue at stake is the reconfiguration of *regimes of truth*. While the series does not attempt

to obscure the climate crisis—indeed, it mobilizes the crisis to reinforce Petrobras's corporate image—it elides a crucial aspect of the *Strategic Plan 2024–2028*, which aims to increase daily oil production by 72%. Such an expansion raises questions about the implications for the company's climate policy and for the leadership role that the Brazilian government claims it can assume in international environmental negotiations. The contest over truth does not concern the scientific validity of climate change; rather, it centers on determining who the authorized subjects are to define the very meaning of energy transition.

No transition happens overnight. No transition has occurred this way in our society. We must enable a transition without depriving humanity of what it needs. Nothing can be done radically; we have to implement changes gradually to ensure that they are well-executed and genuinely beneficial for humanity (Cláudia Gonçalves).

This approach ignites a complex debate over the timeline of the energy transition, particularly given the threat of carbon lock-in posed by large-scale investments in the Equatorial Margin. Such projects risk extending dependence on fossil fuels and hindering progress toward global climate targets. Petrobras's strategy, however, elevates scientists leading innovation and sustainability initiatives as key allies, lending credibility to the company's narrative. This framing produces a divide in which advocates of a faster transition are labeled "radicals," dismissed as lacking the rational and practical considerations deemed necessary to meet humanity's energy needs.

3.6 Clean Energy and a Sustainable Future

In the final episode, journalists Francisco José and Diógenes Dantas visit the Itaipu Binational Hydroelectric Plant (Petrobras, 2024i). The cameras capture this monumental infrastructure from multiple angles, highlighting its vast reservoir and the immense power of the waters that drive its turbines. These images are interwoven with scenes of domestic electricity consumption, accompanied by narration emphasizing that the

plant supplies energy to millions of people in Brazil and Paraguay. Itaipu is, in fact, the world's third-largest hydroelectric facility (14 GW) and the highest cumulative energy producer since its inauguration, with a total generation of approximately 3 billion MWh. Standing on the bridge that links Brazil and Paraguay, the journalists speak with two executive directors about the plant's geopolitical and economic relevance and its role in ensuring energy reliability for both countries.

The interview is followed by a conversation with dam worker Antônio Silveira, who has been employed at Itaipu since construction began more than forty years ago. In his testimony, he reflects on the development the plant brought to the region and recounts how, despite lacking formal education at the time, he was able to gain professional qualifications through the training opportunities offered on site: *"There were technical courses everywhere."* The visuals foreground the plant's scale and technological sophistication, underscoring not only a narrative of engineering achievement but also symbolizing the broader investment in human capital that large-scale energy projects are said to foster.

The juxtaposition between interviews with dam workers and executive directors is a recurring discursive strategy throughout the series. Experts integrate their statements with testimonies from workers and citizens who have benefited from Petrobras's projects. In this way, the company combines technical expertise, lived experience, and local knowledge to reinforce its narrative of a just energy transition. This strategy unfolds organically, as the experts' script is crafted to make science and technology more accessible to the public.

It grants them the authority to articulate metonymies that frame Petrobras's contributions as national achievements or, alternatively, enable the company to morally shield itself by symbolically appropriating Brazil's energy policy and environmental assets as markers of sustainability. As Maurício Tolmasquin observes, *"Today, Brazil is the example in terms of renewable energy, precisely because its energy matrix is more renewable"*

than that of other countries. If we look at its electric matrix, Brazil is in an even better position than the rest of the world, precisely because of hydroelectric plants."

In the final episode of the series, the journalists return to Rio Grande do Norte to visit an R&D project developed in partnership with SENAI. BRAVO—an acronym in Portuguese for *Remote Offshore Wind Evaluation Buoy*—is an optical device that measures wind direction and speed using lasers, providing a more efficient solution than traditional anemometric towers. At a Petrobras research base located 20 kilometers off the coast, a SENAI representative explains that this technology is essential for assessing the potential and sizing of offshore wind farms, emphasizing its "genuinely Brazilian" character, "capable of making Brazil independent of [...] external technology."

This project underscores Petrobras's strategic focus on offshore wind energy, which—alongside CCUS technologies and green hydrogen—constitutes a central pillar of its energy transition program (Petrobras, 2024a). The company is conducting geotechnical seabed assessments and conceptual studies for floating wind turbines in ultra-deep waters, leveraging its long-standing expertise in offshore oil exploration as a competitive advantage. Although offshore wind has not yet attracted significant investment, it represents a vast market opportunity in Brazil. Petrobras also intends to use the electricity generated by these future wind farms to power its offshore oil platforms, reinforcing an energy transition model that prioritizes the coexistence of fossil fuels and renewables rather than the gradual phasing out of carbon-intensive sources (Megura; Gunderson, 2022; Tilsted *et al.*, 2022).

4 CONCLUSION

The conclusion of *A Brazil of Energy* weaves together three key elements of Petrobras's energy transition discourse. The notion of "*the strength of the community*" underscores a people-centered transition, emphasizing collective resilience in the face of crisis. In parallel, the expansive idea of individual responsibility deflects attention

from Petrobras's contribution to global warming, downplaying the structural inequalities that underpin climate injustice. Finally, symbolic appeals to science and its "*civilizing character*" culminate in a catalog of proposed solutions—renewable energy, biofuels, and carbon capture through geological storage and reforestation.

The discourse assumes a teleological view, suggesting that technology allows the coexistence of ecological modernization and fossil exploitation. The assertion that "*oil has been declining as the transition progresses*" is misleading and operates as a form of greenwashing, since Petrobras's technological advancements remain aligned with the expansion of oil production. The objective here, however, is not to measure the discourse against factual reality but to understand it as a practice that shapes both perception and outcomes. In this sense, Petrobras's energy transition narrative seeks to symbolically reconcile what remains materially irreconcilable in atmospheric chemistry.

The emphasis on Brazil's potential for clean energy production and the bioeconomy—alongside the themes of valuing communities and advancing scientific knowledge—constitutes the triad of Petrobras's discourse. As Mauricio Tolmasquin declares:

Brazil has everything it takes to become an environmental powerhouse in the twenty-first century. We have both renewable and non-renewable natural resources. We have the capacity to reduce deforestation and, therefore, we can be a reliable energy supplier with low environmental impact. We have a duty to seize this opportunity.

A key distinction between Petrobras's energy transition discourse and that of other major oil corporations lies in its effort to blur the boundary between the company and the nation. Brazil's strengths—its relatively sustainable energy mix, geographical advantages, and renewable resource potential—are symbolically appropriated through metonymic operations that enhance Petrobras's environmentally friendly corporate image. What other oil company could claim that its rising emissions will be offset by a national

policy to curb Amazon deforestation?

Petrobras's status as a mixed-capital company, with the Brazilian state as its majority shareholder, grants it a distinctive rhetorical advantage. A central element of this dynamic is Petrobras's deep-rooted association with *Brazilianness*—a politically constructed identity that has framed it as the quintessential national company since its founding in the 1940s. This connection enables Petrobras to deploy discursive strategies that shape public perceptions of its role in national climate action, positioning the company as a *national climate free rider* within Brazil's broader mitigation efforts. In doing so, Petrobras contributes to the construction of a distinct form of *climate delay* narrative.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The author declares no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced this paper.

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