The role of narratives in the Brazilian environmental arenas

O papel das narrativas nas arenas ambientais brasileiras

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ABSTRACT

Environmental issues rank among the most pressing challenges of the 21st century. This article explores the complementarity between the theoretical and methodological approaches of Political Arenas and Narratives in addressing conflicts and decision-making processes related to environmental issues. To this end, we conducted an extensive literature review and a qualitative analysis of research produced within the Postgraduate Programs in Social Sciences and Environment and Society at the University of Campinas (Unicamp). Our objective was to operationalise both concepts and assess how these approaches contribute to structuring academic inquiry. The findings suggest that identifying the functions of narratives within political arenas helps to uncover the complexity and contradictions

inherent in socio-environmental dynamics. We conclude that addressing environmental challenges requires acknowledging multiple perspectives and social tensions to foster transformative action. This study underscores the importance of interdisciplinary and qualitative methodologies for understanding the social dimensions of environmental issues.

Keywords: Sustainability. Conflict. Complexity. Environment.

RESUMO

A questão ambiental é um dos principais desafios do século XXI. Este artigo investiga a complementaridade entre as abordagens teórico-metodológicas de Arena Política e Narrativas para tratar de conflitos e processos decisórios acerca das questões ambientais. Para isso, realiza uma ampla revisão de literatura acerca dos temas e uma análise qualitativa de pesquisas publicadas nos programas de Pós-graduação em Ciências Sociais e Ambiente e Sociedade da Universidade Estadual de Campinas, com o objetivo de instrumentalizar ambos os conceitos, examinando como essas abordagens estruturam as pesquisas. Os resultados indicam que a identificação das funções das narrativas dentro das arenas políticas permite revelar a complexidade e as contradições das dinâmicas socioambientais. Conclui-se que soluções para problemas ambientais devem considerar múltiplas perspectivas e tensões sociais para viabilizar ações transformadoras. O estudo reforça a relevância de metodologias interdisciplinares e qualitativas na compreensão da dimensão social das questões ambientais.

Palavras-chave: *Sustentabilidade. Conflitos. Complexidade. Meio ambiente.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues, because of their inherent complexity, require robust approaches to account for their multidimensionality. Brondizio (2017) argues that different theories and analytical models can be combined to diagnose and explain a given issue, even when they are placed within disciplinary tensions. Environmental issues are one of the most significant dilemmas of the 21st century. Without approaches that integrate the social dimension into environmental issues, it is impossible to develop adequate proposals to address the complex problems arising from the relationship between society and nature (Lele *et al.*, 2018). Based on this premise, this article proposes to relate two theoretical and methodological approaches from the human sciences — the Political arena and the Narrative one — and demonstrate how these analytical tools have been applied to understand conflicts and decision-making processes surrounding environmental issues.

Arena is a term originating from political science, commonly used to designate a social space where different stakeholders seek to influence decisions (Costa, 2007; Lowi, 2009). Narrative is a polysemic concept that originated in literary and linguistic studies and was later appropriated by social sciences (Flottun; Gjerstad, 2017). Its focus emphasises and highlights the discursive dimension (Dryzek, 2022).

The general objective of this article is to understand how the instrumentalisation of these two concepts can contribute to highlighting the social complexity of environmental issues. To achieve this, a literature review was conducted, summarising the origins and evolution of the political arena and narrative approaches across various fields within the humanities. Subsequently, a critical analysis was conducted of publications, theses, and dissertations produced over the past two decades by the Research Laboratory on Environmental Conflicts and Arenas (ConArena) at the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences at the University of Campinas (IFCH-Unicamp), Brazil. This study aimed to use these concepts to address environmental issues in Brazil and Latin America. Finally, this paper discusses the contribution of the instrumentalisation of these approaches to environmental science literature.

2 ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE POLITICAL ARENA APPROACH

The political arena approach begins to take shape and gain prominence in the 1950s, with Robert Dahl's book *The Preface to Democratic Theory* (Lowi, 2009). The author discusses the structural importance of different social groups in the political decision-making process. It is a classic academic reference that recognises that power is not concentrated solely in the state, but also in citizens organised in defence of their interests (Costa, 2007). According to Dahl, the resources that contribute to power are distributed unequally among different groups. Power is shared between government groups and external interests that exert pressure on them. This approach provides a detailed description of decision-making processes and an analysis of the influences of individual groups and/or organisations on political processes (Costa, 2007, p. 220).

Dahl demonstrated that decisions are made through a combination of different political resources and that no single group can fully control a community (Costa, 2007). This relational structure, where power is contested, is called the political arena. Until then, political disputes were understood as a passive process, neutralised by a play of social forces, whose combinations would produce the system's decisions. Dahl's theoretical contributions, however, broadened this understanding by highlighting that the political arena itself functions as an active force within social dynamics. Therefore, the political system actively produces demands that combine with the pressures of the various social groups that interact within the social fabric (Costa, 2007; Lowi, 2009).

One of the major reflections and contributions to the approach of the political arena in the 1960s came from Nelson W. Polsby, who in 1963 published *Community Power and Political Theory*. In this work, the social forces of groups were recognised as a fundamental element for understanding relationships within the political arena.

Groups' expectations regarding a given political situation give rise to different patterns of cooperation and conflict within society. One of the main contributions of political science in the second half of the twentieth century was the abandonment of the view of the state as a neutral arbiter among competing interests, and its reconceptualisation as a complex institution capable of shaping both the nature and the outcomes of conflicts between social groups (Hall; Taylor, 1996).

In his book *Arenas of Power: Reflections on Politics and Policy*, Theodore Lowi argues that the political arena is a theoretical approach aimed at understanding and explaining disputes, processes, and structures of power. In this context, institutions and groups of interest form relationships that, in turn, shape social and political structures (Lowi, 2009).

In the field of environmental studies, the political arena has increasingly been adopted as an approach underpinning diverse research efforts. Hannigan (2006) argues that political arenas related to environmental issues share many similarities with traditional political arenas. However, when environmental topics are involved, these arenas more explicitly incorporate biophysical and ecological dimensions, distinguishing them from those that deal exclusively with social problems.

In the 1980s, with the rise of postmodernism and the growing recognition of discourse as a form of power, some sociologists began to study environmental issues through the lens of social constructionism. John A. Hannigan, following earlier work by authors such as Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) and Spector and Kitsuse (1977) became one of the leading proponents of this approach within Environmental Sociology (Spector; Kitsuse, 2017). According to Hannigan, although environmental problems have a material and factual basis (e.g., pollution, deforestation, global warming), they require interpretation to be socially recognised and validated. Viewing environmental issues through the lens of social constructionism thus provides a theoretical framework and analytical tools to better understand the social dimensions of environmental issues in a more nuanced and complex way.

In his book *Environmental Sociology*, Hannigan (2006) identifies and discusses the central arguments that characterise the social construction of environmental issues. He argues that such issues require a political arena to be legitimised and are inherently subject to societal disputes, highlighting the fact that environmental problems are open to diverse interpretations (Hannigan, 2006, p. 30).

The political arena approach has also gained prominence in environmental sociological studies, particularly through Renn's (1992) work on the social construction of risk. One of the key contributions in this area is *The Social Arena Concept of Risk*, in which the author presents an arena-based perspective applied to risky studies (Renn, 1992). Renn discusses the applications and limitations of various sociological approaches to understanding environmental issues. He notes that the Rational Choice approach fails to explain social situations in which incentives are not the primary drivers of action. Structuralist approaches, on the other hand, struggle to account for the diversity of individual behaviours within a given arena. At the same time, constructionist perspectives risk falling into relativism, overlooking the structural dimensions of the problem. In Renn's arena approach, environmental issues highlight the importance of political debate, focusing on how each actor mobilises resources to influence decision-making. In this respect, it bears some resemblance to Rational Choice Theory (Iwama *et al.*, 2014).

Another important school that engages with the concept of the political arena is the Commons School, founded in the late 1960s by Elinor Ostrom (Cornu; Orsi; Rochfeld, 2017). Ostrom dedicated her work to studying the commons, focusing on understanding how rules established by both formal and informal institutions influence the sustainable use of natural resources. Commons Theory sets one sight on collective action in the management of shared resources. Her research emphasises the importance of interactions between formal and informal institutions within arenas of action. Understanding these complex interactions and their feedback loops in the consolidation of social structures sheds light on the mechanisms that may either support or hinder environmental sustainability (Brondízio; Ostrom; Yung, 2009; Cole; Epistein; Mcguinnis, 2014; Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom, 2009; Ostrom, 2011; Ostrom; Gardner; James, 1994).

The Commons perspective focuses primarily on identifying institutions, the rules that define them, the *modus operandi* within these structures, the consequences of their actions on the environment, and the effects of environmental changes on their actions and decisions. From this standpoint, environmental and social inputs and outputs form part of the arena analysis, which is viewed as a set of complex feedback loops within an integrated system. Ostrom understands institutions as sets of rules applied according to context, such as which individuals are authorised to make decisions within an arena, which actions are permitted or restricted, and which rules of aggregation and segregation prevail.

For Ostrom (1990), the concept of arena cannot be represented by a fixed formal configuration, although it may include one in some instances. An arena is a situation in which a particular type of action takes place. According to the author, action situations are social spaces where individuals interact, exchange goods and services, solve problems, and engage in struggles for power and control, among other multiple circumstances called: action situations. In this context, the arena is understood as a social space of interaction where participants have diverse interests and engage in disputes and exchanges involving goods and services (Bennett, 2018; Ostrom, 2011; Poteete; Ostrom; Janssem, 2011).

Power relations are also a problem to be examined in studies on the Commons, although they are not treated as an explicit analytical variable in the model. Poteete, Ostrom, and Janssen (2011), as well as Ostrom (2011), argue that in some action situations, participants hold highly unequal statuses, allowing some to exert substantial power over others and gain greater relative benefits. According to Ostrom, it is essential first to understand the initial structure of the arena by identifying patterns of interaction and outcomes, and subsequently to examine the exogenous factors that influence this structure. From this perspective, any political arena is viewed as a set of dependent variables. The factors that shape its structure include the rules in use, the connections between participants that

organise their relationships, the biophysical attributes that influence practices, and the overall structure of the community (Bennett, 2018; Ostrom, 2011; Poteete; Ostrom; Janssem, 2011).

Unlike Hannigan and Renn, Ostrom's approach treats social facts as empirical evidence, emphasising the importance of biophysical, economic, and social variables, and their interactions within the arena, for understanding the dynamics of environmental issues. In this framework, the arena is conceptualised as a system of variables capable of generating a predictive model of social relations in the environment under study. The interaction process is understood as a game of gains and losses among actors, who may or may not be influenced to participate in the dispute and are regulated by institutional norms. Ostrom's work highlights the potential for cooperation among individuals, and her most significant contribution was to demonstrate empirically that they can collaborate to manage shared natural resources sustainably (Benett *et al.*, 2018; Brondízio; Ostrom; Yung, 2009).

Finally, the Ostrom's approach to understanding environmental issues, emphasising the collective management of common goods, is grounded in a theoretical framework based on three levels of analysis: i) the individual level (human behavior); ii) the micro-situational level (including the immediate variables that influence individuals in collective action); and iii) the broader socio-ecological context, encompassing natural, political, and economic dimensions (Poteete; Ostrom; Janssem, 2011).

3 ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE NARRATIVE APPROACH

Initially developed in the field of psychology, the Narrative approach was founded by Gregory Bateson, who questioned how interpretations of reality anchor meaning and guide individuals' interactions and actions (Mendonça; Simões, 2012). Although it originated in cognitive science, this approach seeks to understand patterns of interaction between individuals in a given situation based on their interpretations of reality (Entman, 1993; Mendonça; Simões, 2012). It is based on the assumption that social interaction shapes interpretations of reality, just as interpretations of reality shape forms of social interaction, through which social structures can be revealed and perceived (Entman, 1993; Chong; Druckman, 2007; Mendonça; Simões, 2012).

Van Gorp (2007) argues that although multiple interpretations of reality are possible, the situational expression of a specific interpretation reveals the discursive structures embedded in an entire social process. Therefore, it is essential to understand both the situation itself and the implicit rules that guide participants' actions and their interpretations of reality. Every way of thinking and speaking involves conscious and unconscious structures, conveys meaning, evokes emotion, and reveals stereotypes (Van Gorp, 2007).

In the Social Sciences, the Framing approach gained prominence through studies on social movements, which aimed to understand how individuals mobilise ideas in their discourse and demands, creating meanings capable of influencing social dynamics. In the 1980s, researchers began exploring how disputes over social dilemmas gave rise to new ideas and interpretations (Benford; Snow, 2000). In one of the most frequently cited articles on the framing approach, Entman (1993) argues that social groups select certain aspects of perceived reality and emphasise them to promote a specific definition of a problem. In general, by assigning meaning to situations, individuals engage in diagnosing issues, evaluating them, and offering solutions.

Mendonça and Simões (2012) emphasise that individuals' narratives are not merely perspectives or opinions, but rather intersubjective bonds that permeate and structure relationships. Although narratives can be strategically mobilised, they are symbolic discursive structures that actively bind them. Narratives both shape individuals and are shaped by them in a reciprocal process.

From this perspective, Lakoff (2010) highlights the importance and power of shared narratives. When these narratives mobilise collective emotions and sentiments, they more effectively bring individuals together around specific agendas, such as protests. In this sense, new narratives tend to have less permeability within the social fabric, as they evoke collective emotions and sentiments less intensely than older ones. For new narratives to become consolidated within a community, they must be widely discussed and shared. Even in new decision-making situations, there is a tendency to reproduce established narratives as a way of making sense of the emerging context (Lakoff, 2010).

Narrative studies seek to uncover individuals' perceptions and to understand how they legitimise their actions within a given reality (Chong; Druckman, 2007). A narrative can be understood as a communicative resource that interprets and frames the past, present, and/or future through language in order to assign social meaning to a specific situation. It can also support individuals' strategies within a negotiation arena or decision-making process. Within the framing approach, narratives are seen as structuring both strategies and decisions in political arenas involving public dilemmas (Ravazzani; Maier, 2017).

Thus, in the political arena, frames are shared through narratives that emerge and become embedded in the social fabric (Entman, 1993), guiding actions across various decision-making processes. Narrative studies seek to uncover individuals' perceptions and understand how they legitimise their actions within a given reality (Chong; Druckman, 2007). Within the framing approach, discursive and interpretative dimensions are understood as structuring both strategies and decisions in political arenas involving public dilemmas (Ravazzani; Maier, 2017). Narratives constitute the primary object of study, as they reveal patterns of interpretation. Accordingly, the framing approach elucidates the observable discursive dimension that precedes and structures the dilemmas experienced in political arenas. It suggests that frames of meaning—or fragments of narratives—can be perceived recurrently, assigning meaning to actions within social relations (Mendonça; Simões, 2012).

The framing approach demonstrates that choices are not entirely rational in the face of social plurality and asymmetries. Decisions involve value-based disputes among individuals who coalesce around shared dilemmas. In this sense, the narratives that guide their decisions and strategies within political arenas are not fully conscious. They carry a strong symbolic imprint of the social and historical realities experienced by all involved. Lakoff (2010) argues that political ideologies legitimise decision-making processes and are characterised by sets of linguistic frameworks (frames). When a particular set of frames is repeated consistently, political-ideological narratives become part of the common language, and their frames are quickly and unconsciously activated (Lakoff, 2010). He contends that, in order to understand political decisions, it is necessary to grasp the network of frames replicated in the narratives of different social groups. Therefore, in the political arena, they are not entirely autonomous in their choices, both because of the power structures embedded in their relationships and because their narratives are not entirely independent. Narratives always reflect the historical, social, and cultural contexts shared by the individuals (Lakoff, 2010).

4 CASE STUDIES

For the analysis of the case studies, we selected research developed within the Environmental Conflict and Arenas Research Laboratory (ConArena) at the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences at the University of Campinas (Unicamp), due to its application and advancement of the approaches discussed. The focus is on examining decision-making processes in diverse socio-environmental contexts. Priority was given to studies that empirically apply these approaches to understand territorial and environmental disputes in various settings. The selected research has been systematised in the table below to enable a comparative reading of the case studies.

Table 1 – Systematised Comparison of Selected Research Cases

Author(s)	*Title of Research*	*Political Context*	*Key Actors Involved*	*Central Narratives*	*Decision-making processes*
Campos, S. V. (2001)	Social changes and environmental conservation in the Juréia-Itatins Ecological Station: the case of the Despraiados. Dissertation (Master) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Creation of Conservation Units in the Atlantic Forest in the 1990s; national context of redemocratisation, advances in environmental policy post-Rio-92; and internationally, strengthening of the Convention on Biodiversity.	Traditional communities, managers, and NGOs.	Environmental conservation vs. permanence of local populations.	Recognition of territorial rights and disputes in councils.
Ferreira, L. C. (2004)	Human dimensions of biodiversity: social changes and conflicts around protected areas in the Ribeira Valley, SP, Brazil. Ambiente & Sociedade, v.7, n.1, 2004.	Expansion of protected areas in the Ribeira Valley in the 1990s and the 2000s; liberal administration, focus on institutional reforms, and technical environmentalism; globally, strengthening of multilateral environmental governance.	Local populations, environmental agencies, and universities.	Strict conservation vs. traditional management.	Inclusion of local knowledge in environmental management.
Junqueira, A. (2006)	Conflicts and alliances in the creation of the Jaú National Park (AM): transformations in "non-places. Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Jaú National Park (AM), 2000s; Lula administration; policies to expand protected areas and conflicts with traditional populations; and internationally, valorisation of protected areas and criticism of social exclusion.	Local communities, federal agencies, NGOs, and researchers.	Different views of conservation vs. local territorialities.	Management shaped by alliances and resistance.
Campos, S. V. (2006)	Jaú in play: social changes and environmental conservation in the Jaú National Park (AM). Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Expansion of protected areas in the Amazon in the early 2000s; Cardoso-Lula administration; intensification of the conservation agenda and emergence of new reserves; and the global growth of environmental NGOs.	Local communities, managers, and NGOs.	Protected areas as exclusion vs. lived territory.	Late participation of the population in management.

Author(s)	*Title of Research*	*Political Context*	*Key Actors Involved*	*Central Narratives*	*Decision-making processes*
Creado, E. S. J. (2006)	Between places and non-places: environmental constraints and super modernity in the Jaú National Park (AM). Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Federal conservation policy in the Amazon in the early 2000s; Lula administration, with incentives for the creation of protected areas and social participation; and the international context of nature valorisation.	ICMBio[1], NGOs, and local inhabitants.	Territory as natural heritage vs. living space.	Symbolic disputes and local resistance to exclusion.
Creado, E. S. J. *et al.* (2008)	Between "traditional" and "modern": rights negotiations in two conservation units in the Brazilian Amazon. Ambiente & Sociedade, São Paulo, v. 11, n. 2, p. 255–271, Dec. 2008.	Creation of legal frameworks that reinforced the rights of traditional populations (quilombola and Indigenous communities), challenging the classical and modernist logic of conservation.	Quilombola and Indigenous communities; Ibama[2], Jaú National Park; Mamirauá Civil Society; MMA[3].	"Traditional population" and the right to remain vs. restrictive identities and material conditions	Political struggles that influence the governance rules of protected areas
Mendes, A.B. V (2009)	Environmental conservation and multicultural rights: reflections on justice. 2009. Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Conservation Units in the Amazon during the Lula administration; context of expansion of participatory policies and appreciation of cultural diversity; global debate on environmental justice and indigenous rights.	Local populations, ICMBio, and NGOs.	State as the holder of rules vs. legitimacy of local rules.	Negotiation and legal pluralism in the use of natural resources.
Simões, E. (2010)	The dilemma of decisions about human populations in parks: a shared game between technicians and residents at the Picinguaba Centre. Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Participatory management in conservation units on the north coast of São Paulo (2001–2009), progressive state governments, beginning of the Lula administration, and internationally, the advancement of participatory democracy and socio-environmental rights.	Park residents and SMA-SP[4] technicians.	Institutional exclusion vs. inclusion through local pacts.	Pacts legitimised via advisory board and shared management.
Creado, E. S. J. (2011)	Places of life, spaces of memory: socio-environmental conflicts and restrictions in Jaú National Park (AM). São Paulo: Annablume – Fapesp	Expansion of environmental policies in Brazil, particularly from the 1990s onwards, marked by the intensification of conservation models based on human exclusion	Long-time residents; environmental managers; NGOs; researchers; MMA; Ibama.	historical and affective relationship with the territory vs exclusionary conservation narratives	Creation of the park with limited participation of the local populations.

Author(s)	Title of Research	Political Context	Key Actors Involved	Central Narratives	Decision-making processes
Viglio, J. E. (2012)	Social and political uses of science in defining environmental risks and impacts in the oil and gas sector. Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Licencing of the oil sector under the Lula-Rousseff administrations; economic euphoria with the pre-salt layer; and international criticism of dependence on fossil fuels and strengthening of climate COPs.	Scientists, the State, and companies.	Science as criticism vs. science as legitimisation of risk.	Expert disputes in the licensing process.
Calvimontes, J. (2013)	Bandits in Serra do Mar? Conflicts, strategies, and multiple uses of natural resources in the Atlantic Forest, São Paulo. Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Management of conservation units during the Lula-Rousseff administrations; historical repression and criminalisation of traditional populations; tensions between conservation and human rights.	Local communities, NGOs, researchers, and environmental agencies.	Land/resource access vs. strict protection.	Local community-State negotiation of rules and agreements.
Feital, M. S. (2014)	Conflicts and decision-making arenas of large infrastructure projects: a discussion of the Port of São Sebastião. Dissertation (Master) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Licencing of large projects during Rousseff administration; the *Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento* (PAC) and infrastructure-based economic growth; and international criticism of megaprojects and climate justice.	Coastal communities, entrepreneurs, and state governments.	Economic growth vs. environmental and territorial justice.	Contested licensing due to a lack of effective participation.
Araos, F. J. (2014)	Beyond biodiversity: human dimensions of marine conservation in two regions of South America. Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Creation of MPAs between 2000 and 2010; progressive governments in the Southern Cone; internationally, pressure to expand marine protected areas (Aichi Target).	Fishermen, NGOs, and environmental agencies.	Conservation as a scientific technique vs. conservation as a social pact.	Fragile agreements and disputes over usage rights.
El Saifi, S. (2015)	Actors and conflicts of interest in the Terra do Meio region of Pará. Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Creation of the Middle Earth Mosaic during the Lula administration; response to land violence in the Amazon; and the global valorisation of forest protection as a climate policy.	ICMBio, local communities, land grabbers, NGOs.	Participatory conservation vs. illegal exploitation and land speculation.	Institutional creation of the Mosaic and its governance limits.

Author(s)	*Title of Research*	*Political Context*	*Key Actors Involved*	*Central Narratives*	*Decision-making processes*
Feital, M. S. (2019)	Climate change and human displacement: A sociological contribution to understanding transitional societies. Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	COP-21 (2015), Rousseff government, political and economic crisis in Brazil, the Paris Agreement milestone, and the emergence of the climate refugee agenda.	UN, scientists, Alaskan communities, and governments.	Refugees as subjects of law vs. as geopolitical risks.	Inclusion of environmental displacement in global agendas.
Silvino, A. S. (2019)	SILVINO, A. S. Caatinga conservation among political arenas in the Brazilian semi-arid region. 2019. Doctoral Thesis – IFCH/Unicamp.	Policies for the Caatinga biome during the Rousseff-Temer administrations included low investment in the region and a focus on desertification and neglected biomes internationally.	Scientists, NGOs, State, MMA; Ibama, ICMBio, ASA[5].	Caatinga as a marginalised vs. strategic biome for conservation.	Lack of effective policies and low institutional mobilisation.
Viglio *et al.* (2019)	Scientific narratives on oil and climate change and their repercussions for Brazilian climate policy. Sociologias, v. 21, n. 51, 2019.	Brazilian participation in COP-15 and COP-21; Lula-Rousseff administrations; external climate leadership vs. internal contradictions; internationally, advancement of multilateral commitments.	Scientists, the federal government, and environmental diplomacy.	Oil as a climate villain, development engine, or bridge to transition.	Brazil's official positions at COPs and the formulation of the PNMC and INDCs.
Calvimontes *et al.* (2020)	Small-scale gold mining and the Covid-19 pandemic: conflict and cooperation in the Brazilian Amazon. The Extractive Industries and Society, v. 7, n. 4, 2020.	Small-scale gold mining during the COVID-19 pandemic under the Bolsonaro administration; environmental deregulation of the Amazon; the global health crisis; and the collapse of oversight chains.	*Garimpeiros* (miners), local inhabitants, and governmental agencies at different levels.	Mining as an economic necessity vs. environmental devastation.	Control and intensification of conflict in remote areas.
Massaro *et al.* (2022)	Balancing economic development and environmental responsibility: Perceptions from communities of *garimpeiros* in the Brazilian Amazon. Resources Policy, 79, 2022.	Small-scale gold mining under the Bolsonaro administration; Amazonian biodiversity Conservation and indigenous peoples' rights raise global concern.	*Garimpeiros* (miners), local inhabitants, and governmental agencies at different levels.	The activity to guarantee incomes vs. threats to Amazonian ecosystems.	Possible sustainability approach in small-scale gold mining operations in the Amazon.

Author(s)	Title of Research	Political Context	Key Actors Involved	Central Narratives	Decision-making processes
Moraes, R. R. (2024)	Mining arenas in indigenous lands in the region between the Upper Tapajós and Upper Xingu. Thesis (Doctorate) – IFCH/Unicamp.	Mining in Indigenous Territories under the Bolsonaro administration and tensions with Indigenous peoples; internationally, complaints of rights violations and record deforestation.	Munduruku, Kayapó, gold miners, NGOs, and the Federal Public Ministry.	Territory as ancestry vs. mining as a livelihood.	Polarised disputes and judicialisation.

Source: The authors.

Despite the diversity of topics, ranging from protected areas in the Amazon and Atlantic Forest to large infrastructure projects, climate policies, and mining on Indigenous lands, the research shares core elements in its arenas and narratives. All adopt the notion of the political arena as a relational space in which multiple actors (government, local communities, NGOs, the private sector, and academia) compete for legitimacy and authority over resources and territory. In this environment, decisions are not the product of a single technical or institutional agent but rather of dynamic interactions in which conflicting interests are continually reconfigured.

As for the narratives, it is recognised that they are not limited to representing specific cases or policies but instead structure broader worldviews. For example, conservation versus traditional ways of life, or economic development versus socio-environmental justice, mobilising values, emotions, and alliances. In short, while the common denominator across these studies is the conception of the arena as a space of multi-scalar dispute and of narrative as an instrument for constructing meaning (both fundamental to understanding socio-environmental decision-making processes), each set of studies is distinguished by its focus on the specific institutions and individuals involved in each context, the scales of action (local, national, international), and the narrative matrices that express recurring conflicts over conservation, development, and social justice.

5 DISCUSSION

Just as the social fabric shapes the environment, socio-environmental conflicts originate, are problematised, and are contested within that very fabric (Gluckman, 1987; Simmel, 1983). These conflicts are not merely ruptures or failures of management; instead, they are constitutive elements of political arenas, which are organised across multiple levels, from local to global, and mobilise both institutional mechanisms and symbolic narratives (Ferreira, 1999; Ostrom, 1990; Renn, 1992).

The environmental political arena, understood as a relational and situational space, incorporates biophysical, economic, and social variables, as well as formal and informal rules that govern collective action (Ostrom, 2011; Ostrom *et al.*, 1994). In this context, decisions about resource use and conservation depend not only on technical and scientific grounds but also on strategic alliances, local pacts, and struggles for legitimacy among them, as diverse as traditional communities, governments, NGOs, and businesses (Ferreira, 2004; Ferreira, 2005; Ferreira *et al.*, 2017).

Narratives, in turn, function as devices for constructing meanings and frames that shape how problems are perceived, define what is at stake, and mobilise collective emotions and values (Chong; Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993; Ravazzani; Maier, 2017). By envisioning future scenarios, whether through the advocacy of intense urbanisation and technological restoration or the reinforcement of rural ways of life and cultural diversity, narratives structure coalitions and foster either consensus or dissent within political arenas (Lakoff, 2010; Van Gorp, 2007).

Recognising conflict as a creative force (rather than merely a social anomaly) enables us to perceive its transformative potential, capable of reconfiguring the *status quo* through the ongoing production of tensions, convergences, and renegotiations (Hannigan, 2006; Van Velsen, 1987). The conceptual combination of political arena and narrative thus provides a robust analytical framework for simultaneously capturing the structural dynamics and symbolic clashes that underpin environmental decisions, pointing toward more democratic, inclusive, and sustainable pathways in socio-environmental policymaking.

In this sense, integrating these approaches sheds light on possible solutions to complex environmental problems. Acknowledging the importance of narratives within the dynamics of an arena, where conflict is understood as intrinsic to any social structure, emphasises the complexity inherent in environmental studies (Ferreira, 2004; Ferreira, 2005; Ferreira, 2012; Ferreira *et al.*, 2017). It is argued that concepts such as the political arena (comprising individuals, conflicts, and decision-making across multiple levels of social organisation) and the identification of competing narratives are valuable tools for revealing the diverse interests and interpretations surrounding socio-environmental issues. Conflict, therefore, lies at the heart of understanding the arena and serves as a key indicator of shifts in the social structure.

Thus, an interdisciplinary approach to the Political Arena and Narrative has the potential to deepen our understanding of environmental issues, as it captures both the structural dynamics and the symbolic disputes that shape socio-environmental conflicts. The approach of the political arena, when used as an analytical lens, allows us to identify the individuals involved, their power relations, and the strategies employed to defend their interests. The approach of Narrative highlights how the different social groups construct and communicate their perceptions of environmental problems, influencing policies, public engagement, and collective action.

The application of these concepts lends itself to qualitative and participatory methodologies. Interviews, focus groups, and discourse analysis can be employed to identify both dominant and marginal narratives within political arenas, thereby enhancing our understanding of which perspectives gain visibility and which are silenced in public debates.

Furthermore, applying these approaches to environmental studies enables a deeper examination of the historical and institutional processes that shape political disputes. Issues such as biodiversity conservation, climate change, and natural resource management cannot be analysed separately; instead, they must be understood as part of a dynamic system in which various individuals and organisations (local communities, businesses, governments, and international organisations) compete for influence and power of decision-making. Understanding environmental policy arenas, therefore, entails analysing the interactions between regulatory structures, public discourses, and social demands, while also highlighting how power and legitimacy are distributed within these arenas.

Another significant contribution of the interdisciplinary application of these concepts is the ability to construct more realistic future scenarios grounded in social and political dynamics. Narrative frames not only reflect perceptions of environmental problems but also guide the actions of the actors involved. By identifying how certain discourses serve to legitimise or challenge environmental policies, it becomes possible to anticipate future developments and devise more effective strategies to address emerging challenges (Aguiar *et al.*, 2022).

In this sense, the combination of the Political arena and Narrative approaches offers a robust analytical framework for understanding the complexity of environmental conflicts. In contexts where disputes are not only technical but also symbolic and political, understanding how different social groups construct and contest meanings around environmental issues becomes essential. Solutions to socio-environmental challenges do not arise from prior consensus but emerge from dynamic interactions among divergent interests, competing values, and political strategies (Vianna, 2008).

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The theoretical approaches and case studies that explore environmental policy arenas and their narratives underscore the importance of conceiving the policy arena as a dynamic analytical construct, one characterised by constant reconfigurations driven by tensions, conflicts, and alliances. Within this framework, narratives function as framing devices that shape how individuals perceive and act upon environmental issues, whether in the context of protected areas, large-scale infrastructure projects, or climate policies. Applied across multiple scales and biomes, this perspective enables the identification of governance impasses and opportunities, as well as methodological gaps, particularly the scarcity of studies that systematically integrate qualitative and quantitative analyses of competing narratives.

By recognising environmental arenas as spaces of ongoing negotiation, the interdisciplinary integration of the concepts of arena and narrative provides a theoretical and methodological framework capable of capturing the complexity of socio-environmental decision-making. Those combined approaches facilitate the identification of interacting individuals' interests and representations, thereby supporting the development of policies that are both context-sensitive and attuned to local specificities and transnational dynamics. Finally, the construction of participatory scenarios that articulate global and local narratives emerges as a promising strategy for decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, contributing to the formulation of adaptive responses grounded in diverse perspectives.

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