

[Lorek on Blanc, 'Before the Flood: The Itaipu Dam and the Visibility of Rural Brazil' \[x-posted from H-LatAm\]](#)

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Lorek on Blanc, 'Before the Flood: The Itaipu Dam and the Visibility of Rural Brazil'

Jacob Blanc. *Before the Flood: The Itaipu Dam and the Visibility of Rural Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. Illustrations. 308 pp. \$27.95 (paper), [ISBN 978-1-4780-0489-9](#); \$104.95

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On October 13, 1982, the Itaipu Binational hydroelectric dam closed its locks, prompting a two-week flood of the Paraná River on the Brazil-Paraguay border, which resulted in the creation of the world's largest reservoir. The Itaipu dam itself stood as the single greatest power producer in human history until China's Three Gorges dam overtook it in the first decade of this century. How many different ways might historians tell the story of such a colossal structure? An environmental history of the dam and its massive footprint might focus on ecological ruptures and the formation of a new aquatic landscape and new livelihoods. A science and technology study might examine concrete, turbines, and the circuit networks of the dam's electrical currency. A borderlands history might emphasize the political negotiations of the project between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay, as well as its place in international spheres of development. A sociopolitical history of those affected by the flood and the social movements they built might provide yet another approach.

Although it touches on all of these subjects, Jacob Blanc primarily situates his superb new monograph in the last approach. *Before the Flood: The Itaipu Dam and the Visibility of Rural Brazil* is a political history of a constellation of social movements that emerged from and converged on the Itaipu project as their primary point of contact with an authoritarian state. Relying on an impressive assortment of archives in three countries (including the author's unprecedented access to the collections of the Itaipu Binational Corporation), as well as personal papers and interviews, Blanc traces how title-holding farmers, landless peasants, and the Avá-Guaraní each experienced the Itaipu project as "an

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appendage of the dictatorship” and “a physical link between dictatorship and democracy” (p. 3). Blanc adopts a creative structure to tell the Itaipu story this way. Chapters 1-3 comprise the book’s first section and offer a chronological history of the Itaipu project leading up to the date of the flood. The second section, chapters 4-7, abandons chronological narrative and narrows the frame. Each of these chapters offers snapshots of specific experiences of Itaipu and the transition from dictatorship to democracy. These chapters center on the perspectives of the Avá-Guaraní, a journalist turned political prisoner, displaced migrants, and politically mobilized landless peasants, respectively.

Blanc constructs this telling of the Itaipu story to make three theoretical and historiographic interventions. First, he argues, Itaipu reveals the connections between land and legitimacy. Second, Itaipu shows how the transitional period from military dictatorship to democracy in Brazil, specifically the period known as *abertura*, or opening, could generate a wide divergence of experiences, depending on whether one lived in urban or rural settings. Third, the Itaipu project affected the visibility or invisibility of people and places within the Brazilian nation at a pivotal moment of democratization. Building on Rob Nixon’s conclusions in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Blanc argues that Itaipu rendered various human groups visible or invisible through the erasure—that is, the rendered invisibility—of a landscape.

To the first intervention, land and legitimacy, Blanc traces the experiences of titled farmers, landless peasants, and indigenous peoples. Each of these groups protested Itaipu based on their unique cultural conceptions of land as individual property, collective right, or a way of life, respectively. Critical to this analysis is the author’s dissection of a series of land encampments by the Justice and Land Movement, or MJT as abbreviated in Portuguese. As the MJT’s visibility as a social movement grew among Brazilians and the content of its message gathered support, the more powerful landed farmers with titles emerged as the leaders and primary beneficiaries of the movement’s negotiations with the regime. A dialectic, as Blanc terms it, thus coalesced: the Brazilian press and general public tended to see the lighter skinned, European-descended farmers with land deeds and deemed their grievances legitimate. As a result, these farmers grew strategically into leadership roles in the movement and pushed their culturally informed agenda in dealing with Itaipu. This process further delegitimized the demands of the Avá-Guaraní and landless among the ranks of the MJT, or living in the flood zone generally. The “active unimagining” of a place—the land flooded by the Itaipu dam in 1982—thus produced a series of social movements that reinforced the unimagining of particular peoples in the coming democratic nation (p. 10).

Blanc’s second intervention is to view *abertura* from the countryside. Instituted in 1979, the military regime’s policy of *abertura* ushered in the gradual democratization of the country, culminating in the return to civilian government in 1985. The Itaipu project thus largely inhabited this specific political moment. As a result, the dam served as both a monument to the soon-to-end military regime and a promise of democracy. In the Paraná backlands, Itaipu offered a further paradox: that rural people would experience the repression of dictatorship even as the military began to formally relinquish its grip on opposition elsewhere in Brazil. This “double reality of *abertura*,” the official policy of opening and the lived experience of oppression in the countryside, blurs the boundaries between dictatorship and democracy (p. 83). According to Blanc, this suggests a rethinking of the traditional periodization of Brazilian history. As he skillfully shows, movements from the MJT to the Avá-Guaraní built on longer histories of social mobilization in the countryside and pursued agrarian goals that went beyond the end to dictatorship. In pointing out how the continuities of struggle in Brazilian history

transcended the temporal boundaries of the military regime, Blanc channels recent trends in the historiography of Latin America's long Cold War. Valid as this may be, I wonder if the author overstates the view from the countryside: have historians not uncovered the deeper roots of urban social movements as well?

"The visibility of rural Brazil" stands as Blanc's third categorical intervention and the subtitle of the book. Building on the author's conceptualization of land and legitimacy and the double reality of *abertura*, the book underscores the visibility and the invisibility of particular peoples in relation to a place that ceases to exist. Accordingly, titled farmers could negotiate a settlement with authorities. An imprisoned journalist with light skin could generate national and international condemnation of the military regime. But the names of indigenous victims of the military regime remain absent and their collective suffering remain relegated to an appendix in the 2014 report of the National Truth Commission. And landless peasants who protested Itaipu within the MJT or as part of their own organizations were effectively disappeared anew to faraway resettlement zones or murdered by the thousands in the decades since the return to democracy. Despite this persistent invisibility, many of the Avá-Guaraní and the landless of Paraná survived the flood. The contributions they forged in the political classroom of Itaipu served vitally in the mobilizations that created contemporary Brazil.

Before the Flood is a thoughtful and intriguing chronicle of "the project of the century" (p. 53). It makes important contributions to studies of the Brazilian dictatorship, Latin American democratization, and the global "concrete revolution" of the twentieth century.[1] It holds its own in the growing ranks of important books in the historiography of modern Latin America that combine analyses of land and labor, merging environmental history with histories of grassroots social movements. The book's interventionist ambitions and organizational structure make it an excellent choice for advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars.

Note

[1]. Christopher Sneddon, *Concrete Revolution: Large Dams, Cold War Geopolitics, and the US Bureau of Reclamation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

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