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Cross-border integration and social representation: the binational bridge and the boatman on the Franco-Brazilian border

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Cross-border integration and social representation: the binational bridge and the boatman on the Franco-Brazilian border

Abstract: This paper discusses cross-border projects and their respective social representations to local groups. We present as a case study the boatmen who pilot their boats between Brazil and France on the construction of the Binational Bridge. Catraieiros are currently responsible for much of the logistics between Amapá and French Guiana. Our theoretical framework is based on the literature on Regional Integration and Social Representation. We applied interviews to one third of the catraieiros. We concluded that in the Subject-Representation-Object relationship, the group that understood itself as responsible for the dialogue between two cities built a negative and threatening representation on the Bridge.

Key words: Border Integration; boatman; Oiapoque; French Guiana.

Integração transfronteiriça e representação social: a ponte binacional e os catraieiros na fronteira Franco-Brasileira
Resumo: O presente trabalho discute os projetos transfronteiriços e suas respectivas representações sociais aos grupos locais. Apresentamos como estudo de caso os barqueiros que pilotam suas catraias entre Brasil e França sobre construção da Ponte Binacional. Os catraieiros são os atuais responsáveis pela grande parte da logística entre o Amapá e a Guiana Francesa. Nosso arcabouço teórico está alicerçado na literatura sobre Integração Regional e Representação Social. Aplicamos entrevistas em um terço dos catraieiros. Concluímos que na relação Sujeito- Representação- Objeto, o grupo que se compreendeu como responsável pela interlocução entre duas cidades construiu uma representação negativa e de ameaça sobre a Ponte.

Palavras-chave: Integração Fronteiriça; catraieiros; Oiapoque; Guiana Francesa.

Integración transfronteriza y representación social: el puente binacional y los barqueros en la frontera franco-brasileña

Resumen: Este texto discute proyectos transfronterizos y sus respectivas representaciones sociales ante grupos locales. Presentamos como caso de estudio los barqueros que pilotan sus barcos entre Brasil y Francia en la construcción del Puente Binacional. Los catraieiros son actualmente responsables de gran parte de la logística entre Amapá y la Guayana Francesa. Nuestro marco teórico se basa en la literatura sobre integración regional y representación social. Aplicamos entrevistas a un tercio de los catraieiros. Concluimos que en la relación Sujeto-Representación-Objeto, el grupo que se entendía a sí mismo como responsable del diálogo entre dos ciudades construyó una representación negativa y amenazante en el Puente.

Palabras clave: integración fronteriza; barqueros; Oiapoque; Guiana Francesa.

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Introduction

This study¹ aims to discuss the cross-border integrating projects and their respective social representations to local groups. As a case study, we present the social representation of boatmen who drive their *catraias* between Brazil and France on the construction of the Binational Bridge. The *catraieiros* are currently responsible for much of the logistics between Amapá and the French Overseas Department of French Guiana. The bridge is between the cities of Oiapoque (Brazil) and Saint-George de l'Oyapock (French Guiana) in the Amazon region of the Guiana Plateau. We present the following guiding questions: how is the representation of local actors placed as a variable in the construction of cross-border projects? What does the Binational Bridge represent for *catraieiros*? What are the possible consequences in the existence of representation conflicts over the same object? Our theoretical framework is based on literature about regional integration (International Relations) and social representation (Social Sciences). In our field work, we used as a methodology semi-structured interviews applied to fifty *catraieiros* in the city of Oiapoque and Saint-George, which is approximately one third of the community in the researched group².

Brief theoretical debate on Regional Integration

Since the 1980s, the regionalization of States' foreign policy has become a stronger tendency, especially with the end of the Cold War. These processes are associated with economic issues based on free trade agreements, such as NAFTA or MERCOSUR. In the past three decades, they have become more comprehensive, transcending the economy and comprising political, cultural, historical and international security elements. The integration between different States from a region may show great diversity in its conformation process. The idea of region itself, usually linked to geographic limits, will present variations with what we are trying to understand (SARAIVA, 2013). We can define a region based on economic, social, political, historical, religious, cultural dimensions. The degree of interdependence of these dimensions, taken individually or as a whole, can serve as a basis for a definition of a region and regionalism. The determinant way in which political actors perceive and interpret the concept of region is also decisive for its construction. When referring to political actors, States form the fundamental but not

¹ This work had the collaboration of Ana Patricia de Souza Teixeira as an Undergraduate student. This study was funded by Capes (Pró Defesa, Chamada 031-2013) and l'OHM Oyapock via Labex DRIIHM (CNRS).

² According to a statement in the interviews with representatives of the *catraieiros*' cooperatives, the community in this category has approximately 150 workers.

unique units in regional integration processes. Andrew Hurrell describes five categories of regionalism that, in a way, show themselves as steps to deepen the process:

Regionalization: refers to the growth of social integration within a region and, by an indirect process, a growth of social and economic integration (*soft regionalism*);

Regional Awareness and Identity: these are diffuse notions. Regional awareness is built from the discourse and it is an understanding and meaning given to a political activity of the actors involved. They can be defined by endogenous elements such as the sharing of culture, history, and religion, or even by exogenous elements such as the approach against an “other” that threatens their security;

Regional Interstate Cooperation: negotiation and construction of intergovernmental agreements or international regimes with strong participation of states;

Regional integration through the promotion of the State: presents direct involvement of the State in the reduction and removal of barriers in the search for greater commercial exchange (goods, services and capital) and people;

Regional Cohesion: the combination of the four categories described above. It can lead to the emergence of a cohesive regional unit (HURRELL, 2000, p. 39-45).

The theoretical analysis of regionalism is inserted within the debates between different theoretical perspectives of International Relations. Systemic elements and domestic factors are considered with different intensities in the different theories that analyze contemporary regionalism. Between the 1970s and 1980s, three theories stand out in the theoretical debate on International Relations: Neorealism, Neoliberalism and Constructivism (MARIANO, 2007). Other theoretical perspectives were present in the debate on regionalism, however these three predominated and considerably influenced studies and decision-making in international politics.

When starting the theoretical debate, we need to pay attention to the meaning of the concepts (terms) used in this discussion, that is, region, regionalism, and finally, regional integration. To the layperson, the first two appear as relatively close, but they are relatively ambiguous and therefore the consensus on the concept is still lacking in the area of international relations (HURRELL, 2000). One of the starting points for analyzing the concept is to start from the geographical definition of the concept to refine it. We need to consider disputes around the issue of deterritorialization within geography (AGNEW, 1996; TAYLOR, 1996).

Nevertheless, we realize that we are still “hostages” to the limits guided by geographical premises, making the concept more abstract and therefore, more difficult to interpret. As mentioned before, we need the etymological tool to understand the concept. The word “region” finds its origin in the Latin *regio*, used to determine a distinct administrative or geographical area. Another source indicates that the word *regere* has the meaning of commanding or governing, thus having similarities in the definition (TAVARES, 2004). Therefore, we observe that a geographical definition can assume a political content (SODERBAUM & SHAW, 2003), which does not exclude the fact that there are semantic disputes and disputes based on the fact that natural rules exist.

According to the constructivist view, the regions are elements marked by the social construct before being considered, geographically, as delimited and natural territories (KATZENSTEIN, 1996). This view gained recognition in the mid-1990s, when States began to lose recognition in the face of international organizations. We can also consider another view of the role of the regions, taking the degree of internal cohesion as the main criterion.

Thus, constructivist literature emphasizes the role of social interactions, such as language, culture, ethnicity, or a common cultural heritage. There are also political elements, such as institutions, ideology, or even regimes, and finally economic components (options in international trade and formal arrangements in the integration process). In short, we can say that both constructivists, institutionalists and realists recognize the importance of the State as a driving force in the regions. The initial studies by K. Deutsche *et al.* (1957), J. Nye (1968), followed by P. Katzenstein or Buzan & Waever (2003) clarify that their definitions do not relinquish the State to determine the criteria of the region. Therefore, we consider that the regions are not diminished representations of the international system.

The importance of the Brazil-French Guiana (France) relationship

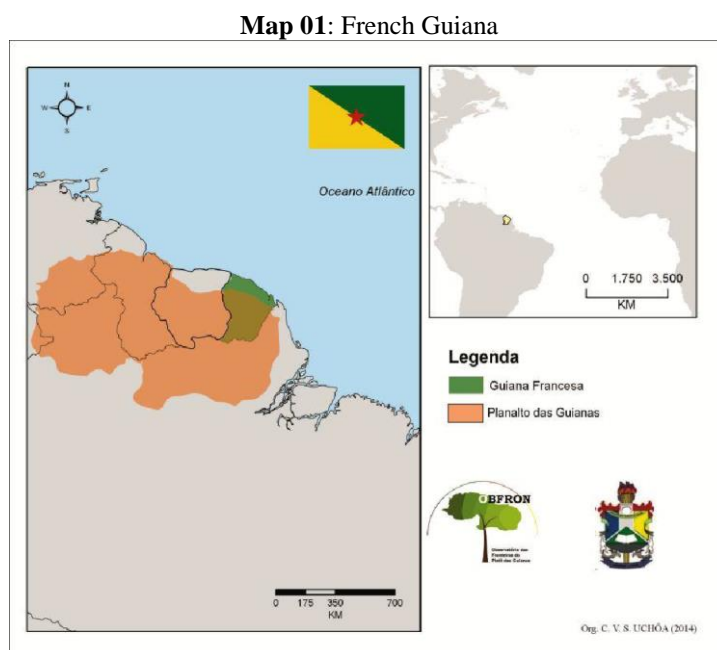
French Guiana (FG) is one of the French Overseas Departments (*France d'Outre-Mer*). Its area is approximately 84,000 km² and is inserted within the Transnational Amazon and has a low population density (3.2 people per km² in 2016). Its *department-region status* means that the political administration of French Guiana has a Regional Council (*Conseil Régional de la Guyane - Région*) and a General Council (*Conseil Général de la Guyane - département*) that grant it limited autonomy in the Department's relationship with countries in the region.

POP T0 - Population par grandes tranches d'âges

	2016	%	2011	%
Ensemble	269 352	100,0	237 549	100,0
0 à 14 ans	89 028	33,1	83 022	34,9
15 à 29 ans	63 241	23,5	56 141	23,6
30 à 44 ans	57 074	21,2	49 086	20,7
45 à 59 ans	38 589	14,3	33 072	13,9
60 à 74 ans	16 879	6,3	12 353	5,2
75 ans ou plus	4 541	1,7	3 876	1,6

Sources : Insee, RP2011 et RP2016, exploitations principales, géographie au 01/01/2019.

French Guiana shows a peculiar situation in multiple aspects. As a French Department, it is part of the European Union. However, as we can see on the map below, with all its territory within the Amazon region and with a population concentrated on its Atlantic coast, the Department is very close to a Caribbean territory, as well as its neighbors Guyana and Suriname.



Source: CORREA (2014, p.96)

Another characteristic of French Guiana is its condition as an outermost region (PORTO, 2010) which, in general, has lower development rates than its metropolis and it is a low-density territory such as Azores and Madeira, that belong to Portugal, and the Canary Islands to Spain. This condition and its distance from the political decision center (Paris) does not mean less presence of the State. The metropolitan France has an influence in the Department, stimulating an economic and political dependence on the central power and the European Union. The relationship processes between Brazil and French Guiana are far from being in intermediate or advanced stages of the integration steps mentioned above (SILVA *et al.*, 2016).

Among the reasons for this situation, we can highlight the struggle of the South American subcontinent in relating to an European country in regional integration processes. We can see this in regional initiatives such as the Union of South American Nations (USAN), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), and the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO), French Guiana is excluded as a permanent member³. However, this did not mean the absence of relations between Brazil and French Guiana through the State of Amapá and the Guyanese neighbor. In the last two

³ France and French Guiana are members as an observer or guest member.

decades, cooperation initiatives have sought to bring these territories closer together. Silva (2013) highlights that:

It is noticeable, however, that this variation remained much more on cooperation *intents*. In such a context, it is clear that we live in a *moment of expectations*. These are expectations for a new page in Brazil-France cross-border relations. The current moment, in fact, is characterized by *tests* of this cross-border cooperation. This brings us to a moment that is being structured to what we *call* Proto-Cooperation, a type of cooperation prototype with clear and substantial results, which has structures aimed eminently for its evolution. (SILVA, 2013, p. 240)

In this proto-cooperation, we want to draw attention to the project of strong logistical value as we are talking about a region with low accessibility, and of great symbolic value: the Binational Bridge. From the etymological point of view, the word bridge is associated with connection, communication, union, intermediation. As such, the construction of a bridge between two countries has its logistical value, but its symbolic value is emphasized (SILVA *et al.*, 2019). Some bridges are named precisely referring to this etymology, such as the Friendship Bridge, between Brazil and Paraguay, the International Fraternity Bridge, between Brazil and Argentina and the Brazil-Peru Integration Bridge (ARAÚJO, 2017). We emphasize this symbolic value, because in a border region, where the national and international (where we and others) meet, the bridge will exercise influence by the various social actors in its surroundings, whether by the States that designed it to be, but especially, by social groups directly linked to the project or region where the bridge is built (NEWMAN, 2016).

However, the practice of central governments of States in development of regional integration projects does not usually operate by analyzing local impacts, which is a latent reality in Brazil. The development of the projects is conducted in a *top-down* manner. Local assemblies, and even international agreements (such as the Convention No. 169 of the International Labor Organization, which provides for consultation with native peoples on projects that impact them) are lacking studies of necessary impacts (BRASIL, 2011). The construction of the Binational Bridge between Oiapoque and Saint-Georges-de-l'Oyapock did not escape the *top-down* model decided between Brasilia and Paris without working with local populations, at least on the Brazilian side. Thus, we consider important to understand the social representations of a project with strong symbolic appeal on the part of a group that will be directly affected by the Bridge operation, which is the case of the boat (*catraias*) drivers currently responsible for logistics between Brazil and French Guiana. From now on, we will call them only *catraieiros*.

Social representation and its use as a research method

The predominant approaches of the International Relations did not heavily use the social psychology framework in their analyses. The States, actors and central objects of the traditional analyses, were targets of the instruments from other theoretical currents. For Durkheim: “What collective representations translate is the way in which the group conceive its relations with the objects that affect it” (DURKHEIM, 1987, p. 17) However, the strengthening of constructivist theories in International Relations from the 1990s allowed that the views on groups other than the States composed an important *corpus* and their representations, visions, and speeches became an important material for understanding the processes prompted in international relations. Moscovici's work is composed of dozens of studies that developed the theory of social representations and the book *La psychanalyse, son image et son public* (1961) was a milestone in the French constructivist psychosocial school. We affirm that the concepts and research methodology are important in this text.

According to Moscovici, social representations make the world what we think it is or should be. Social groups are established based on their own ideas, history, social role, and rules. These are the elements that construct the identity that distinguish them from other groups of the societies they are inserted. Among the catalysts in the formation of a social group, or local actors as we often use in this text, the work developed by a group can be its forming element. The developed work or craft places a group in a role in its society, in a social class that establishes access and limits on consumption, ascension, or importance in its place. Araújo (2008) highlights that:

When the elements of collective identity are questioned or underestimated, a new process begins: the emergence of social representations. For Moscovici (1961), social representations are the group's response to external interventions that endanger its collective identity, that is, the way the group sees itself and wants to be seen by others. (ARAÚJO, 2008, p.100, free translation)

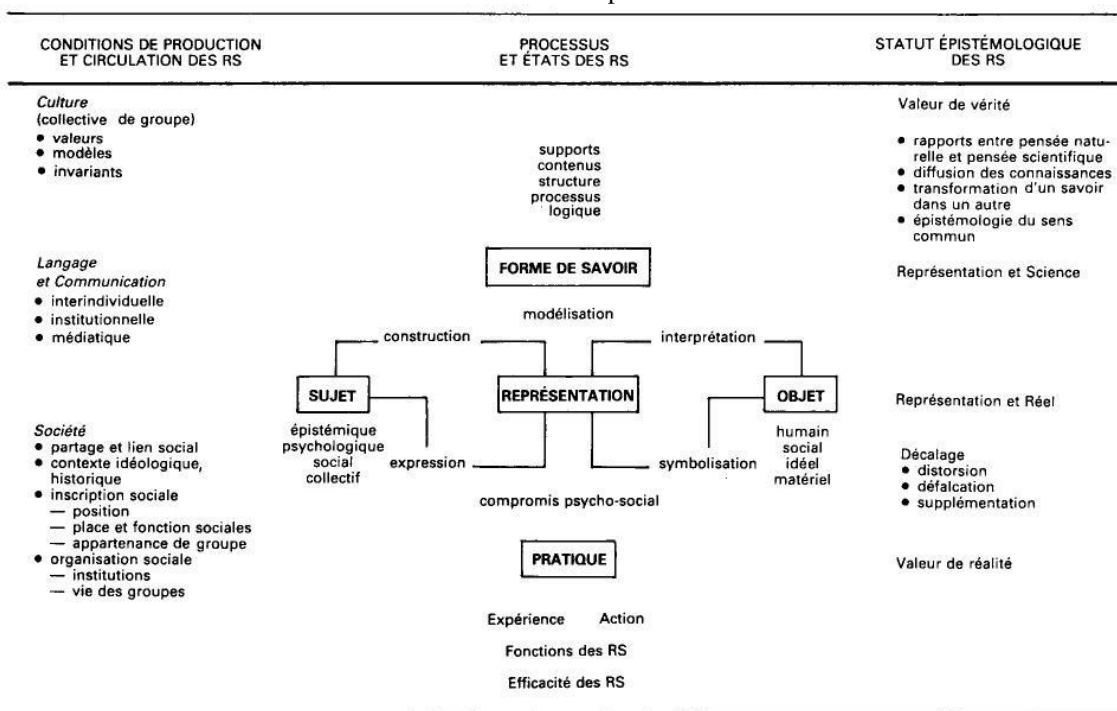
This means that social groups conform a set of information about the reality they are inserted. To Moscovici:

Social representation is an organized corpus of knowledge and one of the psychical activities that allow human beings to make physical and social reality intelligible, to insert themselves into groups or day-to-day relations of exchange and to free the powers of their imagination. (MOSCOVICI, 1961, p. 28)

Other authors also used social representations as a theoretical and methodological basis for their study. According to Denise Jodelet, social representation, “is a form of knowledge, socially

elaborated and shared, with a practical objective, and that contributes to the construction of a common reality to a social group” (JODELET, 1993, p. 53, *free translation*). Therefore, we need to understand the relationships between, on the one hand, the conditions of production and circulation of social representations (such as culture, language, and society) and, on the other hand, the epistemological status of social representations (value of truth, representations and real, and value of reality). To illustrate this concept, we can observe the detailed analysis performed in the chart “Study spaces in social representations” that summarizes the process of building representations between the subject and the object. It is important to note that an ideal model is accepted, in the Weberian sense understood in social sciences.

Chart 01: Social Representations



Source: JODELET, 1993, p. 60

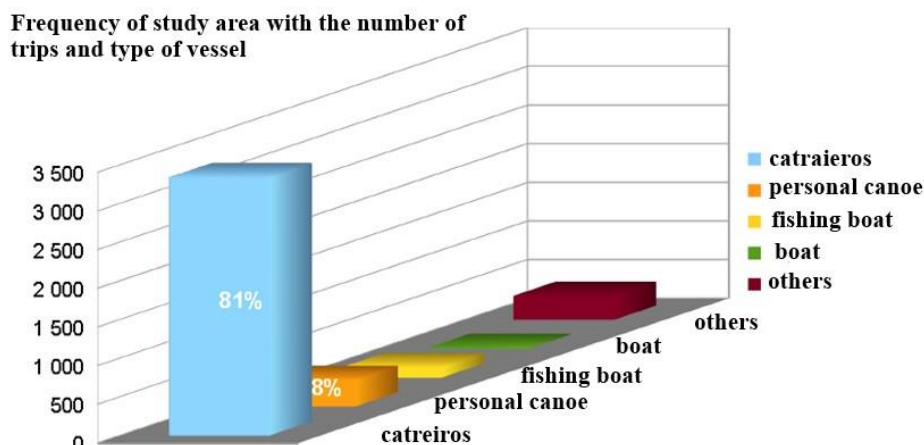
In this same line of thought, Wachelke and Camargo indicate that: “a representation is not a reliable copy of some object existing in the objective reality, but a collective construction in which the group's knowledge structures re-create the object based on already existing representations, replacing it” (WACHELKE & CAMARGO, 2007, p. 380, *free translation*). Since it is not a reliable copy, it means that a noise happens between perceptions of reality. A difference between scientific knowledge and common sense, hegemonic knowledge and common sense. The decision to build a bridge between two territories as a project for regional approximation by two States, a project that can strengthen economy and interactions in general between territories, is a hegemonic perception.

Such perception is not necessarily shared by other groups that are affected by the given project. A common sense that can be constructed in the perspective of a group about this object (the bridge). Therefore, it is important to realize that the process of capturing this common sense is done through the theory of social representation, in which qualitative interviews are considered to be something fundamental. It was from this theoretical basis that part of the field research study was conducted with the *catraeiros*.

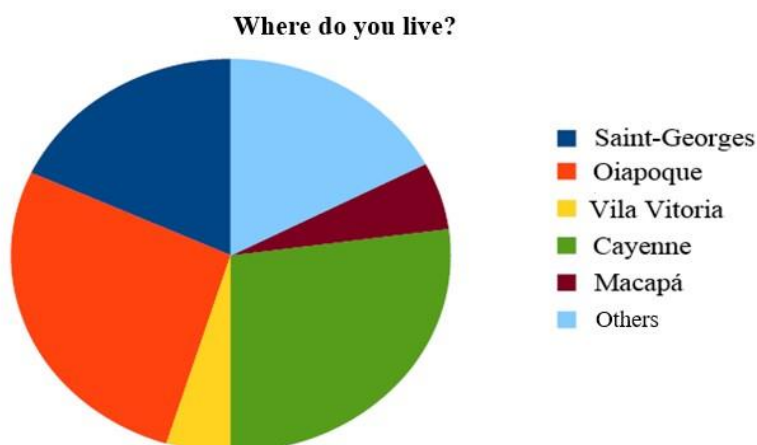
Social representations of *catraeiros* on the Binational Bridge

Céline Crété in “Piroguiers, Flux et Structuration de l'espace: les piroguiers de l'Oyapock et le pont Binational” (2015), made a study on the dynamics of the *catraeiros*. As we can see in the images below, the data collected show that the crossing between Oiapoque and Saint George is mostly performed by *catraeiros*, representing the main transport, 80% of the total logistics. Most passengers travel between Oiapoque, Saint George and Vila Vitória. A predominant local dynamic.

Graph 01: Type of boat and number of routes



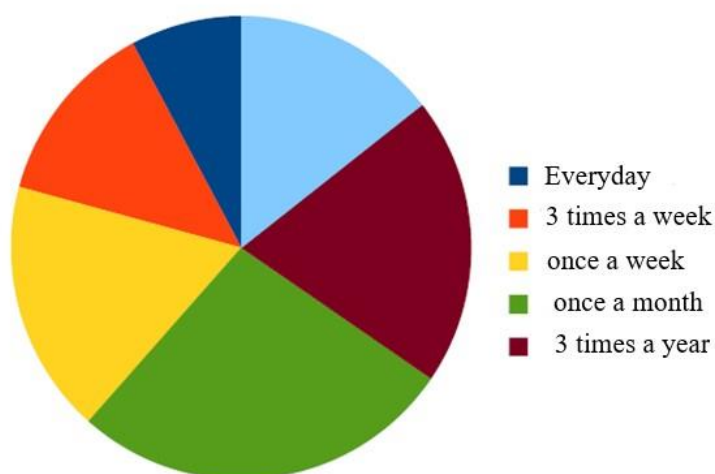
Graph 02: place of residence of *catraia* users



The data collected by Crété (2015) shows that the majority of users frequently use the *catraia*. In the dynamics of the three cities (Oiapoque, Saint George and Vila Vitória) more than six thousand trips are made. An expressive number when comparing with the population density of these cities. As we can see in the image below, another important piece of information is about the change of the traveling habits after the opening of the bridge. Most users will use the *catraias* more often and the reasons are linked to cost, agility, and comfort.

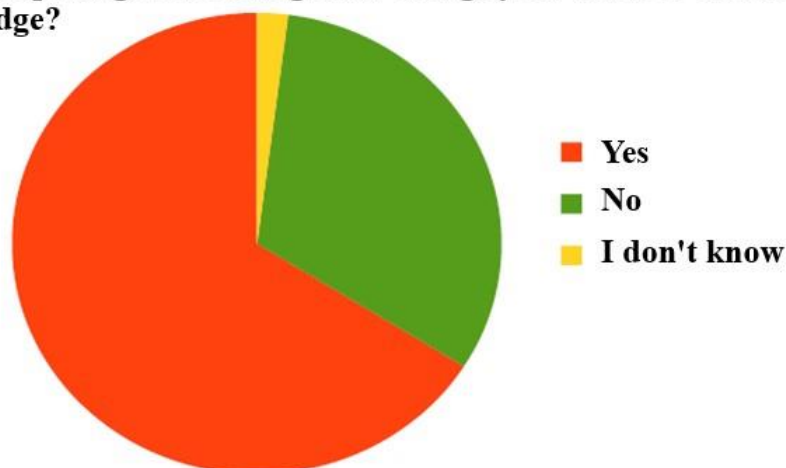
Graph 03: User frequency of use

How many times do you cross the river?



Graph 04: User habit change after the opening of the bridge

The opening of the bridge will change your habit of crossing the bridge?



Our research consisted of a few fieldwork missions. The first ones were focused on getting closer to the *catraieiros* and the last ones on the application of the semi-structured questionnaire. The number of *catraieiros* is not exactly accurate as the profession is highly informal. According to one of the presidents of one of the *catraieiros* associations, there are approximately 140 *catraieiros* divided into eight associations. Fifty interviews were conducted with workers from all associations, without the concern for an equitable distribution of interviews by cooperative associations. An expressive number in relation to the amount of the total *catraieiros* population. The questionnaire sought the following information⁴:

- Time of activity as a *catraieiro*;
- Number of people in the household who depend on the income from that work;
- The meaning of the bridge for the *catraieiro*;
- The meaning of the profession;
- The relationship of the bridge with the development of the city of Oiapoque;
- The popular consultation process;
- The bridge's impact on the development of Oiapoque;
- The relationship of the bridge in the interactions between French Guiana and Brazil;
- Changes in local dynamics after the construction of the bridge;
- Future perspectives after the opening of the bridge.

⁴ Specify the circumstances in which the questionnaire was conducted. Struggle obtaining data.

The profession of *catraieiro* is very old and important in the region as it represents the great part of the transport between the two countries. 48% of respondents have worked for more than 10 years and 28% of them between 7-10 years. The number of people who depend on the income of each *catraieiro* is also expressive. Families composed of 6-8 people are 64% of respondents and families composed of 3-4 people represent 26% as we can see in the tables below.

Table 01: Working time in the profession

Working Time: Number of catraieiros in months and years						
	1 to 2	3 to 4	5 to 6	7 to 8	9 to 10	More than 10 years
MONTHS	1	1	2	0	0	0
YEARS	5	1	3	6	8	24

Source: Own elaboration

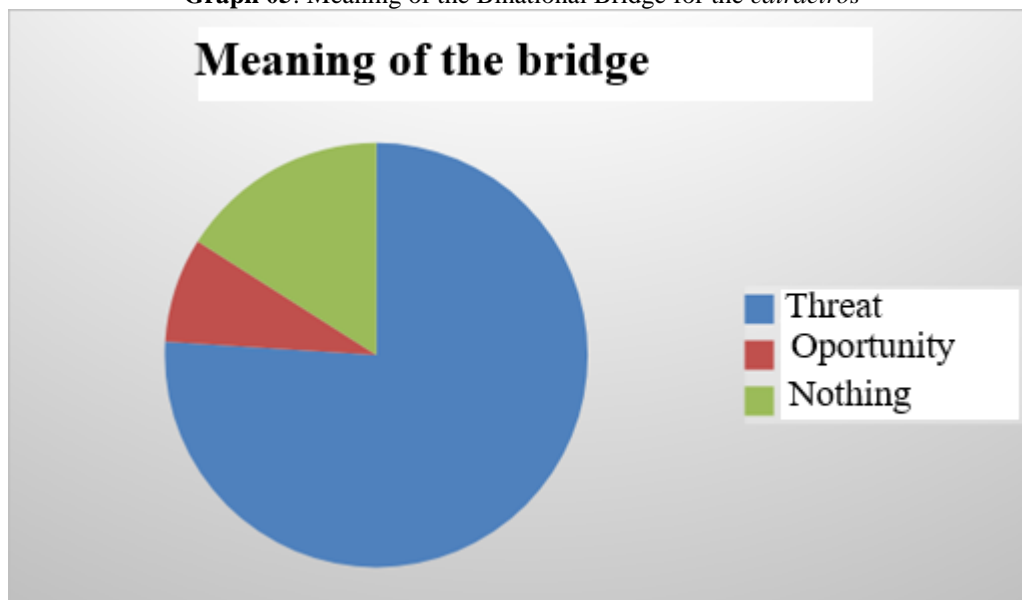
Table 2: Number of people who depend on the *catraieiro*'s income

People who depend on the catraieiro's income						
AVERAGE	1 to 2	3 to 4	5 to 6	7 to 8	9 to 10	More than 10
Number of PEOPLE (50)	1	13	23	9	3	1

Source: Own elaboration

One of the most expressive data is the meaning of the bridge. At that moment, the representation of the project prepared by the national authorities show an inversion of representation. The responses that connected the meaning of the bridge to negative elements, threats to the existence of their professions meant 76% of respondents and only 8% saw the bridge as an opportunity. In the responses that connected the bridge to the idea of opportunity, the *catraieira* population clearly formulated the connection of opportunity for the development of the city of Oiapoque.

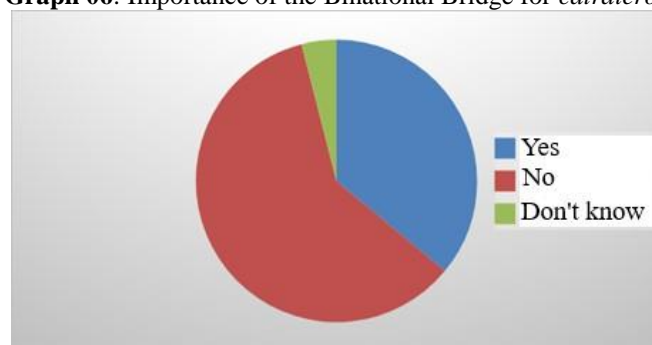
Graph 05: Meaning of the Binational Bridge for the *catraeiros*



Source: Own elaboration

In the question: “Is the Binational Bridge important for Oiapoque?”, about 60% of the interviewed *catraeiros* consider that it is not important and 26% that it is important. A part of those who answered negatively to this question justified their answer by saying the location of the bridge that allows the exit and entry of the flow of cars to happen without passing through the city center. Thus, little movement in local trade may exist. Another data from the answers to this question is the affirmation of the unilateral nature of the advantages in favor of the French. The perception of the bridge as a one-way benefit had the speech concentrated on the idea of the struggle of Brazilian people and vehicles transit because of the laws and necessary visas (SILVA *et al.*, 2019). In addition to the struggles of entry for Brazilians, another frequently mentioned element was precisely the idea of unequal treatment, as the French do not need a visa. Therefore, the representation of unilateralism was frequently reinforced.

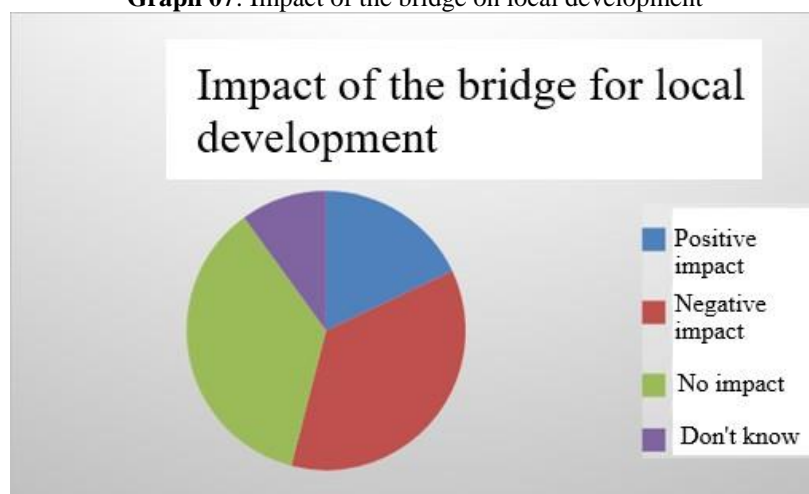
Graph 06: Importance of the Binational Bridge for *catraieiros*



Source: Own elaboration

Regarding the impact of the Binational Bridge on local development, we divided the responses between positive impacts, negative impacts, no impact and do not know. 10% of the respondents did not know how to answer and 36% answered that they did not comprehend any impact of the bridge for the development of Oiapoque. Another 36% believed that the bridge would have a negative impact. The following relations of the bridge are extracted in this last extract: to destroy the *catraieiros*; impediment of work; impaired *catraieiros*; end of their work; death of Oiapoque; relatives of *catraieiros* without income; end of Oiapoque; decrease of passenger demand; unprepared city; Oiapoque has no structure; people will go to Macapá. The positive impacts of the Bridge for the municipality of Oiapoque, in turn, accounted for 18% of the responses. These impacts linked the bridge to the following ideas: improvements for some sectors (except for the *catraieiro*); benefits; improve tourism; good for trade; development.

Graph 07: Impact of the bridge on local development



Source: Own elaboration

The interview with Mr. Luiz Antônio Lobato da Silva, former president of the Cooperative for Tourism (COPTUR) and current president of ACMO, was conducted following the same script

of questions. Luiz, known as “Ratinho”, was an important figure in the construction of associations and cooperatives and a protagonist in protest actions. To Ratinho, “we (the *catraieiros*) represented Brazil on the other side (Saint George)”. The *catraieiro* also states that “we bring the strength of Guyana to Oiapoque” in reference to the trade that they enable due to the transport. Their perception of changes from the bridge also reveals the daily impact. According to Ratinho, “before the construction of the bridge we walked (in Saint George) as if we were here (Oiapoque)”. After the construction, according to the *catraieiro*, policing became overt. The most conflicting moment of this policing that prevented the circulation of Brazilians without visas and, consequently, compromised the work of the *catraieiros* happened in January 2012. During this period, a series of protests resulted in arrests and even the death of a *catraieiro* in an accident on the movements. A direct representation of the bridge with the French control of a peaceful relationship.

Final considerations

The meaning of a bridge shows the possibility of positive representations when it comes to a project between States. However, the design and development formats of the integrating projects can impact the representations of other affected actors. This occurs mainly when there is an absence of popular consultation, impact studies, and the construction of policies to minimize them. The history of the Binational Bridge is filled with these absences. In the relationship between Subject (*Catraieiros*) - Representation - Object (Binational Bridge), the group that understood itself as responsible for the interlocution between two cities separated by a river shows, according to our data, a negative and threatening representation of Bridge. As we mentioned, a representation is not a reliable copy of an existing object in objective reality, but a collective construction in which the group's knowledge structures re-create the object.

The bridge is recreated with negative meanings and inequality. This last element, connected to the lack of reciprocity in visas and circulation of cars and in the possibility of the dynamics of the bridge “skipping” Oiapoque. The percentage of perceptions that we raised in our interviews with *catraieiros* about the bridge indicates a construction of collective representation of an object that affects them. This object is the result of a policy between States in a region where the national and the international meet, where the “we” and the “others” are established by the principles of international relations. The negative, threat or unilateral representation of the benefits of this object, an integrating project, can compromise the construction of positive relationships in the dynamics between the different actors that constitute the situation, local groups and States.

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