SPECIAL ISSUE: 'POLY-PERIPHERY' AND
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YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS AND PERIPHERAL UTOPIAS IN THE SOUTH ZONE OF SÃO PAULO

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Abstract

Grounded in an ethnographic study tracing the trajectories of four young people from the southern periphery of the city of São Paulo, this article investigates how entrepreneurship has developed as the other face of peripheral culture. Conceptualized as a utopian cultural form of self-employment, this study argues that entrepreneurship redefines the horizons of expectation that were once central to the lives of residents living on the periphery – namely, the employment and social security record card and political engagement. The article concludes that, feeling increasingly unrepresented in both the labor market and in left-wing organizations, these young people turn to the utopian ideal of entrepreneurship to navigate their personal challenges and, collectively, advance their vision of peripheral autonomy.

Keywords

Actors, Agents and Subjects; Social Economy; Socio-Spatial Mobility; Urban Peripheries; Entrepreneurship; Labor and Income; Horizons of Expectation.

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Resumo

Baseado em uma etnografia que acompanha a trajetória de quatro jovens da periferia da zona sul de São Paulo, este artigo investiga a forma como o empreendedorismo se desenvolve como a outra face da cultura periférica. Entendido como forma cultural utópica do trabalho por conta própria, defendemos que o empreendedorismo desloca horizontes de expectativa que eram identificados anteriormente como preponderantes entre os moradores da periferia – um emprego com carteira assinada e a participação política. O artigo conclui que, ao não se verem mais representados no mercado de trabalho e nas organizações de esquerda, esses jovens se apoiam na utopia do empreendedorismo para dar respostas tanto aos seus dilemas individuais quanto, coletivamente, ao seu projeto de autonomia periférica.

Palavras-chave

Atores, agentes e sujeitos; Economia social; Mobilidade socioespacial; Periferias urbanas; Empreendedorismo; Trabalho e renda; Horizonte de expectativa.

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Introduction

In March 2024, a low-profile social media post caught the attention of supporters and observers of peripheral culture. It announced the indefinite suspension of the soirees organized by the Cooperativa Cultural da Periferia [The Peripheral Culture Cooperative] (Cooperifa) – founded by the poet Sérgio Vaz – which had been held on a weekly basis in Jardim Guarujá, in south zone of the city of São Paulo. This announcement, steeped in melancholy and introspection, reflected the challenges faced by its key figures and the movement they had nurtured over two decades. Simultaneously, it highlighted a broader context of shifting expectations among cultural collectives rooted in both the peripheries and other spaces.

Since the 1970s, urban peripheries have gained prominence in the literature, driven by the intense waves of immigration during previous decades, the precarious public services available to their residents, and the embryonic social movements that emerged alongside a working-class identity (Caldeira, 1984; Zaluar, 1985; Sader, 1988). This perspective also aligns with the "peripheral turn" in urban studies (Ren, 2021) and ethnographic research conducted from the "margins" (Das, 2004). Central to this trend was not only the quantitative analysis of the increasing heterogeneity within the peripheries (Marques, 2014) but also the qualitative observation of their ways of life. In Brazil, these dynamics have been shaped by economic and social transformations, along with the growing presence of Pentecostalism and the criminal underworld (Silva, 2004; Almeida, 2004; Feltran, 2011).

Between the 1990s and 2010s, the periphery assumed a new prominence, characterized by the incorporation of an identity deeply tied to territory, intertwining work and urban experiences (Telles, 2006). According to Tiarajú D'Andrea (2013, p. 45), this turn toward the periphery began in the 1990s, when "political action" entered a crisis in major cities due to the "decline of social movements and the advance of neoliberalism".[1] During this period, the term "periphery" acquired critical significance, symbolizing both a "shared subjectivity and mutual recognition of a condition", as well as a territory where "peripheral subjects" are shaped.

Peripheral culture has been the most frequent focus of studies on this emerging subjectivity (Corrochano; Laczynski, 2021; Fontes, 2020; Tommasi; Silva, 2020). According to Nascimento (2010, p. 118), "the formation of a cultural scene on the peripheries is directly linked to the literary and political interventions of writers associated with so-called marginal or peripheral literature." The soirees held on the peripheries, "gatherings in bars across various suburban neighborhoods of São Paulo, where residents would recite or read their own texts or those of others in front of a microphone" (Tennina, 2013, p. 12), transformed these venues into cultural hubs, compensating for the lack of public cultural facilities, as observed by Sérgio Vaz. Thus, under the umbrella of this cultural movement, activists, artists, and social entrepreneurs coalesced in the early 2000s, thereby asserting their connection to their territories. At that time, "the term 'periphery' came to signify not only 'poverty and violence' – as it had in official and academic discourse until then – but also 'culture and potency'" (Oliveira, 2018, p. 21).

This shift was fundamentally rooted in the preceding decade, which had already situated the periphery within the national cultural landscape, driven by the popularization of hip-hop and, most notably, the success of the São Paulo-based hip hop group Racionais MC's.[2] During this period, the peripheries began to replace factories in the progressive imaginary, which had been disrupted by geopolitical transformations, productive restructuring, and the decline of developmentalism (Harvey, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Feltran, 2007). The academic engagement with the periphery stemmed from the realization that it was no longer an exclusively working-class territory and that it should not be understood solely through the lens of its detachment from the labor market (Rizek, 2006).

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1. This and all other non-English citations have been translated by the authors.

2. As Fontes (2020, p. 6) noted, *soirees* in São Paulo were not confined to the peripheries; similar events were also organized in the city center, attracting middle-class audiences.

On the other hand, this new generation, committed to peripheral culture, needed to engage in activities that ensured their economic survival. Disillusioned with the job market, these young people increasingly turned to entrepreneurship as a means of achieving emancipation as subjects of the periphery (Silva, 2019).[3] In the current context, where emblematic experiences of peripheral culture are experiencing signs of exhaustion, the utopia of entrepreneurship has been reinvigorated, serving as the cultural framework through which self-employment manifests in the contemporary world (Costa, 2024a, 2024b; Prieto; Verdi, 2023). Popular entrepreneurship represents a dynamic interplay of continuities and changes, where residual practices rooted in popular experience intersect with processes of modernization and rationalization (Beck, 2011).

Based on interactions with four young individuals from the southern periphery of the city of São Paulo, this article examines how these recent processes have reshaped the peripheral experience and redefined the horizons of expectation for these subjects, while tracing connections to the politicization of these spaces over previous decades. The young people in this study, who self-identify as both anti-capitalist and entrepreneurial in different contexts, embody a tension between skepticism and utopian ideals. The four interlocutors, to a certain extent, were selected for their engagement with the world of peripheral culture, which embodies ideals of transformation ("potency") while also advancing the narratives and practices of social entrepreneurship. These cases are far from homogeneous, since each brings unique experiences of life in and from the periphery. Nor do they represent the majority of residents on São Paulo's periphery – it is plausible that their experiences with peripheral culture and social entrepreneurship are, in fact, somewhat on the fringe. Nonetheless, closely examining their perspectives provides valuable insights into how entrepreneurship, often viewed as an ideology of order (Lima; Oliveira, 2021), intersects with the broader project of peripheral emancipation.

The ethnographic research underpinning this article was conducted on the southern periphery of São Paulo between 2017 and 2021 as part of a broader investigation.[4] In addition to participant observation at social entrepreneurship

3. Silva (2019, p. 193) provides several accounts of these activities, highlighting how the creation of products such as clothing and accessories fosters the "deconstruction of paradigms and the continuous possibility of re-signifying identities and subjectivities." In one example, an entrepreneur describes her studio as a "dream factory."

4. This research mapped out various ways in which entrepreneurship intersects with life experiences in the São Paulo periphery, including some that are not necessarily characterized by peripheral culture or social entrepreneurship (Costa, 2024b).

events, the interlocutors were identified through snowball sampling and interactions on social media platforms connected to notable initiatives across the region. The study aims to integrate empirical findings with Reinhart Koselleck's (2006) conceptual framework of the space of experience and horizon of expectation, as introduced in the first section. Following this theoretical grounding, we present the accounts of our interlocutors, analyze the transformations in their horizons of expectation, and, in the final section, offer a synthesis between entrepreneurship and the utopia of peripheral autonomy.

1. Space of experience and horizon of expectation

In a renowned essay, Reinhart Koselleck underscored the importance of two concepts – space of experience and horizon of expectation – for investigating historical time, since they encompass both the past and future and "provide guidance to concrete agencies in the course of social or political movement"[5] (2006, p. 308). These concepts are applied herein in order to understand how the interlocutors of this study – young individuals from a São Paulo periphery in the early twenty-first century – interpret the accumulated experiences of preceding generations in the periphery and reframe their expectations through a critical examination of past utopias. This article seeks to capture a generational rupture within a periphery that has undergone historical transformations yet remains, as previously argued, a space for projecting ideals of emancipation.

For Koselleck, the "space of experience" is defined as the past made present, "whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered"[6] (ibid., p. 309). These events, however, are not limited to individual experience, as they also encompass the experiences of others. As Maurice Halbwachs (1992) contended, even the most personal memory is shaped by "social frameworks" that determine and enable its identification and expression. In the context of this research, the space of experience is rooted in the lived realities both of the periphery and through the periphery, both in the life trajectories of the young individuals depicted herein and in how they comprehend the experiences of the generations that have preceded them within this space.

The concept of the "horizon of expectation," in turn, translates into a "present future," shaping how contemporary actors envision what lies ahead. While this projection may draw on past experiences, it is not confined to them, always

5. N.B. For direct citations the English version was used of KOSELLECK, R. *Futures Past*. New York, Columbia University Press (2004, p. 258). Translated by Keith Tribe.

6. N.B. For direct citations the English version was used of KOSELLECK, R. (2004, p. 259).

carrying an element of the unforeseen. The metaphor of the horizon is particularly apt, since it denotes the line from which new expectations unfold, even though it remains perpetually out of sight. Unlike experience, which may be grasped in its entirety, expectation retains an elusive quality, tied to a temporality that slips away and unfolds into an "infinity of temporal extensions"[7] (Koselleck, 2006, p. 310). In this study, horizons of expectation take the form of life projects and utopian visions upheld by peripheral actors across successive generations. These may engage with the State, materializing as ideals of citizenship or political-party initiatives, or they may bypass it altogether, manifesting as community solidarities or lifestyles.

2. Four trajectories

2.1. Anti-capitalist

Elisângela[8], a young resident from Jardim São Luís, makes a point of emphasizing that her feet are very firmly on the ground, describing her actions as being measured by prudence and marked by a surprising willingness to wait for the right moment to take bigger leaps. At 24, Elis, an Indigenous woman born in São Paulo, combines an ability for management, evident in her speech, laden with corporate jargon, with a keen awareness of the realities of the periphery and the strategies best suited to reach its residents.

Elis has a stable job at a philanthropic institution in Capão Redondo, where she works on securing private funding and agreements with the local government. At this present moment, it is precisely a lack of money that forces her to have a formal job, registered on her employment and social security record card (hereafter referred to as "work card")[9]. "I don't like fixed hours, I just want to be an entrepreneur [...], but I like the steady income. Living without certainty, at this moment, I can't handle," she declares, aware of the insecurities that come with venturing on entrepreneurship. She acknowledges that it is the security of a "steady job" that curiously enables her to pursue entrepreneurship.

Together with a business partner, Elis runs an audiovisual production company that also functions as a sustainable fashion thrift store. They acquired the equipment for the production company through a grant from the Programa VAI – Valorização de Iniciativas Culturais [Valorization Of Cultural Incentives],

7. N.B. For direct citations the English version was used of KOSELLECK, R. (2004, p. 260).

8. The names of the interlocutors have been changed.

9. An employment register card in Brazil, known as the Carteira de Trabalho e Previdência Social (CTPS), is an official document issued by the government to formalize employment relationships and guarantee labor rights. It serves as a record of a worker's employment history and ensures access to social benefits, such as unemployment benefits, severance pay, and retirement.

with the aim of creating a community television network.[10] From there, they began producing small local projects and photo shoots celebrating a peripheral aesthetic. The idea for the thrift store emerged from the need to "raise" additional funds, as the collectives they work with often operate on a tightrope. In the second year, the production company still relied primarily on bartering with local businesses, a practice Elis values, as for now it allows them to bypass the lack of funding from clients and diversify the audience they work with. The revenue would follow with the professionalization of the business.

> So, we're talking a bit about the thrift store. We're trying to do editorials, put together a whole kit... Our idea is: 'Look, if the *playboys* [rich people living in more central areas of the city] can do it, we can do it too,' but with our own style, with our own identity. We're studying their world, which is actually a world for us; [...] Fashion Week launches, the Bolivians sew, Brás[11] sells, and we consume. So how do we [...] create our pieces and have people buy them for a fair price, without exploiting anyone? That's kind of the idea [...]. Has it been profitable? Not really, but it has brought in some income, and we're thinking of it as an investment now for future profitability. (Elisângela, 24, producer, Jardim São Luís)

Elis's trajectory exemplifies the transformations experienced by young people from the periphery over the past decade, extending beyond urbanization and increased access to goods and services to reflect the emergence of a generation shaped for the practice of social entrepreneurship (Catini, 2020). As a teenager, she attended a social organization in Jardim São Luís and received a scholarship for a college preparatory course, where she began building her first networking connections. At 15, she took an entrepreneurship course at another social organization, where she learned about CNPJs (taxpayer identification numbers for businesses), municipal registrations, and tax exemptions. At 18, she began studying Public Relations at the Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado (Faap), funded by the company she was working for at the time. "But I never really got along with hierarchy, and at the same time, I [started] thinking about the value of capital. So, when you understand the value of the time you give and the money that doesn't

10. The VAI TEC program is a business acceleration initiative promoted by the São Paulo Development Agency (ADE Sampa) in collaboration with the Municipal Secretariat of Economic Development and Labor.

11. The Brás neighborhood is located in the central region of São Paulo and is known for its wholesale clothing and fabric trade.

come to you, you start [thinking]: 'I'll give all this time to myself.'" This realization led her to drop out after just four months of college.

Back in the neighborhood, Elis began working as a social educator at the Center for Children and Adolescents (CCA) and became active in an anti-capitalist collective from the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), experiences that, counterintuitively, encouraged her to pursue entrepreneurship. Through left-wing activism, she explains, she started "thinking about organizational strategies" and "understanding how to manage people." However, Elis eventually distanced herself from party activism, as her collective, made up mostly of upper-middle-class university students, failed to grasp the basic needs of those from the "*quebrada*"[12]. She also noticed inconsistencies within the left-wing party, particularly its abrupt shift in stance after years of opposing the Workers' Party (PT) when Lula was imprisoned. Following Bolsonaro's victory in the 2018 elections, Elis decided to step away. "Like, is it worth spending my energy ridiculing the jokes he makes, or is it better for me to do something that creates change in this particular world of mine, where I live and have an impact?" she asks, already certain of the answer.

For Elis, it matters little whether a job is formal or not, if it remains precarious – a reality that is all too common for young people on the periphery. Reflecting on the "potency" squandered in jobs that serve merely to make ends meet, she connects this loss to what she terms "consumer awareness" and its solution through entrepreneurship. "The guy who makes burgers for McDonald's knows how to make burgers, but he's making them for McDonald's. So how can we think of ways to encourage people to start their own businesses?" Elis says her wake-up call came from her lived experience on the periphery - witnessing people who were "ready to shine but going hungry," including friends who left their cultural or activist collectives to flip burgers at fast-food chains.

With these experiences under her belt, combined with her management skills, Elis has positioned herself between activism and business, devising strategies that remain true to her societal concerns - despite a few "struggles" along the way - but while also fostering market-creation potential. For her, the connection between her place of residence and the representation of gender, race, and sexual orientation in her productions is not only a commitment to upholding principles of social justice, but also an *asset*. It serves as a mark of authenticity, offering a progressive seal that distinguishes her enterprise in the market.

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12. A slang term commonly used in São Paulo, particularly among young people, to refer to a poor neighborhood, area, or community.

These tensions cause her some discomfort. The marks of her activist past are still palpable for Elis, who has ultimately gravitated more toward "the business crowd," with whom she has no personal issues to debate. "I'm more focused on the outcome of the product, how many people are being impacted, what kind of income is being generated..." Elis considers her lifestyle to be sustainable, allowing her to support causes she cares about while distancing herself from responsibilities imposed by others, such as those from activist and cultural collectives. Similarly, she wishes to shed the constraints of salaried work: "People should be able not to work, right? In this idea of work, profit, remuneration—if it were another way of life..." Thus, she defines her current situation and her perspective on society as a whole: entrepreneurship, for her, is an exercise in utopian affirmation of freedom, which incorporates values of collectivity but is primarily realized in the realm of individual agency.

2.2. Peripheral subject

Born and raised in Grajaú, Júlio, aged 32, earned a degree in Social Communication from the Universidade Santo Amaro (Unisa). His work trajectory began at 14 as a grocery bagger and later a store clerk at a supermarket. While in college, he secured an internship at a consumer protection NGO based in the city's west zone. Later, he interned in a newsroom, covering technology and finance for a real estate classifieds website. He also worked as a reporter for a technology and business magazine and a news website focused on Latin America. Around a decade ago, dissatisfied with the lack of representation in the journalism job market, Júlio and two fellow graduates decided to start a production company. Since then, he has worked as a content manager for the company and taken on various freelance jobs, none of which were recorded on the work card.

He attended college on a scholarship from the São Paulo Commercial Workers' Union (SECSP), an experience that prompted him and his colleagues to question the representation of the periphery in the traditional media: "What kind of media am I working for? What kind of imagery am I exactly helping to build?" This discomfort extended to his university experience, which he credits with "expanding his repertoire" to better analyze his reality, while also acknowledging that it distanced him from his initial activism in the Catholic Church. Familiar with the south zone's cultural circuit, he draws on the poet Sérgio Vaz in advocating for "de-elitized", democratic communication, akin to the poetry that resonates in the Cooperifa soirees. "What we're doing isn't new. I think what's new is access to university, which has allowed us to engage with theory and other forms of knowledge," he says, highlighting the transformative impact of new technologies like the internet, which "have enabled us to connect, for instance, with other communication collectives".

Júlio describes himself as a peripheral subject. When prompted on this, he refers to D'Andrea's doctoral thesis, *A formação do sujeito periférico: cultura e política na periferia de São Paulo* [*The Formation of the Peripheral Subject: Culture and Politics in São Paulo's Periphery*], defended in 2013 at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP). In his own words, a peripheral subject is someone "from the peripheries who, by understanding the place they occupy, [...] begins to act politically to transform their reality." Through this thesis, D'Andrea seems to have created a framework in which political actors like Júlio can find their identity. Júlio reflects on the role of his production company in driving this transformation:

> We know exactly where we want to get to [...]. We believe in our emancipation as individuals from the periphery, but we recognize that it's unlikely to happen within this system, which is capitalist, racist, sexist, LGBTphobic, with so many divisions. So, we're striving to overcome that. But, on the other hand, it's also the system we're part of, so it's very contradictory, so we keep trying to find some middle ground [...]. Right now, we also don't anticipate a major rupture. And, well, the bills keep rolling in, right?"
> (Júlio, 32, communicator, Grajaú)

Júlio embodies two characteristics that, while not necessarily contradictory, emerge from two universes often in tension: the periphery and the university. Within his community (*quebrada*), he acknowledges that his production company still has a 'long way to go' to reach a broader audience. Financial and technical difficulties, coupled with limited infrastructure and resources, are compounded by a linguistic barrier: "We speak to a very specific audience, one that is also involved in movements, collectives, or that already has political engagement, or has had access to higher education".

Unlike Elis, Júlio sees greater advantages in formal employment recordeded on the work card and adopts a more critical stance toward entrepreneurship. He mentions that he was fortunate: in a labor market dominated by *pejotização* - a labor practice where workers are hired as legal entities (or companies), rather than employees, to circumvent labor regulations and social security contributions – particularly in the field of communication, in the past he once managed to secure a formal job. Now, running his own business, he laments that he will likely not have access to retirement benefits. Júlio finds the label "entrepreneur" misleading: "I don't see myself as an entrepreneur, even though we... in our case, we started a business from scratch, that's why we say we created our own work, we created our own job". Thus, despite his criticisms of entrepreneurial rhetoric and his support for the formalization of labor, Júlio felt compelled to leave a labor market that

dehumanized him and failed to recognize his worth (despite offering formal rights) to start his own business. This decision, however, plunged him into uncertainties and mirrored the trajectory of other young "entrepreneurs" from the periphery.

Júlio shows signs of fatigue, which is also unsurprising given the growing hostility toward activism in peripheral areas (Rocha, 2018). However, his spirits lift when he talks about one of his production company's projects, which recounts the life stories of women involved in rights movements in the Grajaú region:

> Because we realize that, among our audience – and it's also one of our major concerns – that it feels like everything's finished, you know? Like there's no way out. [...] People are tired of this fight. They're fighting their battles at home, just trying to stay alive, to survive. So, how do we move beyond this issue of the here and now to expand this sense of time? Bringing the stories of these women, for example, means going back 30, 40 years, showing what they did back then, when everything here was literally just wilderness.
> (Júlio, 32, communicator, Grajaú)

2.3. Potency

On her light brown business card, adorned with African motifs, Vitória lists her roles as "cultural producer", "sustainability designer", "facilitator", and "astrologer". A 27-year-old resident of Grajaú, she takes on many occupations and refuses to be confined to a "label", though she reluctantly accepts the term *producer* as a simplification.[13] At the time of the interview, she was working and studying remotely, while undertaking occasional freelance photography work - a role, incidentally, not mentioned on her card.

> I hate labels. I really don't like them, I can't stand them. Today, I see myself as a facilitator, someone who facilitates meetings, relationships, access; I think that's what it is. So, it's hard for me to fit myself into a box because I keep stepping out of it. [...] I think I encourage people to believe in their own dreams, to believe in themselves, because I believe that the moment you believe in yourself, you can be whatever you want. [...] This is very much the new age that brings me, I'm very much in the future, looking at what the future wishes to bring. And the future doesn't want little boxes, you know? [...] I'll use your example. Sociologist, sociologist, sociologist... Everyone sees me as that, and if I want to change, I can't, because everyone's saying that that is what I am. So I end up convincing myself that that's what I am. Just that.
> (Vitória, 27, producer, Grajaú)

13. Livia de Tommasi and Gabriel Silva (2020) in fact noted that many individuals involved in peripheral culture ultimately take on the role of producer, despite the heterogeneity of their functions.

At a 2013 entrepreneurship festival she organized in Grajaú, Vitória and a partner shared a small booth selling handicrafts and vegetarian food and discovered that they had "the greatest potency together". They have been partners ever since. Vitória always refers to her fellow entrepreneurs as "potencies". Her goal at that festival was to bring them together and make some money. With the goal accomplished, she and the others became highly motivated: in 2017, they held a new edition of the event. With support from Red Bull, the fairs grew from about ten entrepreneurs to double that number. Her initial motivation? "Seeing that the periphery has money", she says. Talking about money, for Vitória, is an issue she claims to have overcome. Previously, she felt that she "couldn't aspire to money" and gradually found ways to break this "taboo".

Regardless of her youth, Vitória has some unusual stories to tell. Her first job was working with her father at his real estate agency in the neighborhood of Pinheiros. She spent a few months in telemarketing while studying for a degree in psychology at the Faculdades Metropolitanas Unidas (FMU), which she ultimately did not complete. After a series of internships, aged 22, she discovered agroecology through a permaculture collective and moved to a settlement of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in São José dos Campos. Shortly afterward, back in Grajaú, she decided to pursue entrepreneurship, encouraged by her father.

Despite her urgency to make things happen, which drives her to mobilize a network of connections, her perception sometimes gives her a feeling of isolation, with expectations that do not align with the reality of life in the *quebrada*, or as she calls it - the "modern-day quilombo". She responds to this by stating that the challenge at this moment is to raise awareness, "because the plan has been so well architected that we end up killing our dreams". What plan? The "genocide", she responds, a reality many of her peers in the periphery, numbed by television, fail to recognize. Vitória defines genocide in her own terms, not necessarily as the State's violent actions against subordinated groups, but as the extermination of "dreams" through the media. This dream, for her, is one of autonomy, which she ultimately pursues through entrepreneurship.

Vitória's opposition to salaried work is central to understanding the emancipatory dimension of her approach to entrepreneurship – the desire to escape having a boss. Pointing toward the street, she observes that "People build extensions onto their homes to start a business, to turn it into a business, so they don't have to work for others. Who likes working for others, for God's sake?" The entrepreneurship Vitória envisions is tied to the construction of a utopian future. It is this vision that drives her to give lectures across the city, where she invites audiences to engage in a thought experiment: 'When you think about the future,

what comes to mind? You think of many things. In this future you've imagined, do you see trans people? If you thought about it and didn't think of trans people, then you're not really in the future - the one that's truly inclusive and participatory."

While her father may have been her first entrepreneurial inspiration, he would not have "fitted into the future" envisioned by Vitória. In 2018, she severed ties with him after he voted for Jair Bolsonaro in the presidential election. This marked quite a stark contrast to the father she remembered from her childhood, a former member of the Workers' Party (PT), often seen in photos, where he appears carrying her on his shoulders, dressed in red, during previous elections. "Man, it's hard to talk about, because my dad didn't finish high school, but he's one of the smartest people I know. He reads a lot. Self-taught." Although Vitória rejects Bolsonaro as an exclusionary and authoritarian figure, she also distances herself from a more conventional view of political participation. She admits to never having voted for any candidate, no matter what their platform. In her first elections, she either voted null or blank, and in the 2018 election, which featured Bolsonaro, she didn't even leave the house, feeling "unmotivated". "People's heads are too full of television... So, there's no way you can compete with that. No way at all. You can just do little things, stimulating one person at a time, in whatever way you can." To some extent she does appreciate Lula – who also "isn't a saint" – and acknowledges his contributions to the disadvantaged. However, in essence, her opinion on politics is that "the system has already gone into collapse... because they're so attached to the place where they are, which has been crumbling into ruins for ages. Are they going to keep protecting this circus? Because that's exactly what it is".

Thus, Vitória pins both her individual and collective hopes onto her business, through which she intends to definitively escape salaried work, "modern slavery". Entrepreneurship, for her, represents "new packaging for old interests", echoing a phrase by the singer called Criolo, which she often likes to repeat. Although entrepreneurship has lost its "magic" by becoming a trend, it remains at the heart of her dream: by succeeding, she aims to "provide healthier environments for less privileged people". From the future, Vitória expects "peace of mind, prosperity, abundance, and wealth", hoping to secure her "place in the sun", and become an "entrepreneur feeling no guilt, just for the money". She does not rule out leaving the periphery for good and refuses to feel guilty about it, believing that she will take the *quebrada* with her to other places. Her victory, she justifies, 'is already an impact, because they don't want me to win."

2.4. Starry sky

A regular at the Cooperifa soirees, with sharp opinions and quick thinking, Maria Rita, 27, juggles fixed jobs and freelance work, runs her own newspaper, and

engages in activism. The Afro-Indigenous journalist completed her undergraduate studies at the private FMU university, focusing specifically on peripheral entrepreneurship. Maria Rita began her career at 14 as a young apprentice in administrative support at USP. She graduated in Social Communication with funding from the Student Financing Fund (Fies) and went on to work as a reporter and press officer for a state deputy at the São Paulo State Assembly (Alesp). In addition, she has contributed collaborative articles on the daily life of the periphery for Midia Ninja.[14]

Recently, she concluded, "today, I wouldn't go out to work as early as I did because it's something that stops you from doing many other things". The "something", in this case, is the job market. About three years ago, Maria launched her own online newspaper, which opened doors for her in the world of media activism. Reflecting on her decision, she says that "all things considered", investing in her own work was really worth it: "without having to get het up, or having to deal with an annoying boss". Her involvement in political reporting at one of the newspapers where she interned also led to opportunities, such as the press office at Alesp, which helped pay her bills. Maria absolutely rejects the idea of having a conventional career - climbing the corporate ladder and waiting for long-term recognition. In fact, she believes that "we have to end this culture of 'you have to enter the job market'". She sees no sense in having a job recognized on the work card and confidently defines herself as an "entrepreneur", which, for her, is associated with a higher quality of life."

> *What does entrepreneurship mean for you?*
> It's about going beyond what's been imposed, beyond what they've shown you, right? The standard that they've shown you is that you have to enter a company and build a career. But the entrepreneur is able to break through that, going beyond the norm and often making a difference. Just by not fitting into the usual format, we're already making a difference. So, for me, entrepreneurship is that: learning how to survive in your own way and being, theoretically, outside the system.
> (Maria Rita, 27, communicator, Taboão da Serra)

Maria articulates with great precision the emancipatory drive that she and others of her generation from the periphery see in entrepreneurship. In fact, it represents a political appropriation of a set of principles that might – at first

14. An independent communication network with progressive leanings based on a collaborative work dynamic.

glance – appear exotic. The entrepreneurial mindset emerges not solely from the precariousness of the labor market, but from an acute awareness of that precariousness, from the reinforcement of individualism. Although her trajectory in the world of work has been relatively brief, she perceives it as a prison - more accurately, it is the very "system." Therefore, it becomes logical for her to view the act of entrepreneurship as a way to step outside that system, as a means of "going beyond what has been imposed." By embracing entrepreneurship, Maria also sees herself as anti-capitalist: "Capitalism is good for nothing. Oh, there's conscious capitalism... capitalism always oppresses someone. And I feel guilty for oppressing someone," laments Maria.

Maria Rita is the heir to generations engaged in political participation within Brazilian peripheries. Today, she practices *umbanda*[15] but grew up in a Base Ecclesial Community (CEB) in Taboão da Serra. Her father ran for city council as a PT candidate and still follows politics, as does her mother. Maria herself was once a member of PSOL, a fervent supporter of Lula, and viewed the social programs of his early presidential terms, especially those focused on education, as "revolutionary," such as the University for All Program (*Prouni*): "When have you ever seen a Black person at Mackenzie?"[16] she asks rhetorically.

However, much like Júlio, she often finds herself speaking to a select few, realizing that the diversity present in the periphery does not necessarily align with her side, that of peripheral culture, which itself reflects a new stratification within the periphery. "Because culture in the periphery, despite being on the periphery, is elitist. Not everyone has access to it, and even when they do, people don't see it as culture, they don't see it as entertainment, they think it's boring to come to the soirees... The soiree is in the *quebrada,* but people from the *quebrada* don't come to the soiree," she notes.

Maria's political stance, much like Vitória's, led her to sever ties with relatives and friends during Bolsonaro's 2018 election. "Because they voted against my life. I'm Black, I'm bisexual, and like, everything I am... I'm a journalist; everything I am, is an affront to them," she says. Her activist trajectory within left-wing collectives, however, has also been fraught with discomfort. "Most of them are white, bourgeois. It's so easy..." she observes, pointing to the dissonance she feels in those spaces. Yet, despite challenges from both within and outside the political sphere,

15. A cult that emerged in Rio de Janeiro in the 1930s and combines African religions with Catholicism, occultism, and Allan Kardec spiritualism; it has many regional manifestations.

16. The Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie [Mackenzie Presbyterian University] is a traditional private university in São Paulo, Brazil.

Maria remains steadfast. Her resilience is drawn primarily from her community of recognition: peripheral entrepreneurs who gather in the square in front of the Cooperifa soiree, spreading dreams. In their most inspiring moments, they make her believe that it is possible to seize the starry sky. “Peripheral culture, I think, is what will still save this country,” Maria concludes.

3. Shifting horizons

As initially outlined, by examining these four trajectories, we have sought to investigate changes within a specific group of young people on the periphery: those engaged in socially transformative projects, with progressive profiles, who in earlier historical moments might have swelled the ranks of left-wing parties, social movements, or NGOs in São Paulo’s peripheries but who now channel their utopian energies into entrepreneurship. Broadly speaking, and albeit in different ways and to varying degrees, the four young individuals portrayed herein have moved away from two central expectations that were pivotal to their grandparents’ and parents’ generations: securing a job recognized on the work card and engaging in political participation.

Introduced by President Getúlio Vargas’s policies of the 1930s and 1940s, which extended social rights to formal urban workers, the expectation of a job recognized on the work card shaped successive generations in Brazil’s urban peripheries throughout the twentieth century. However, most were employed in the informal sector and therefore, in practice, could not access these rights. As Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos (1979, p. 75-76) explained: “Thus, all those whose occupations are unrecognized by the law become pre-citizens [...]. The legal instrument that formalizes the contract between the State and regulated citizenship is the work card, which becomes, in effect, more than a mere proof of employment—it is a civic birth certificate.”

Thus, access to the “regulated citizenship” described by Santos (1979), which typified the vertical, authoritarian relationship between the State and society marked by corporatism, was long regarded as the ultimate utopia for Brazil’s popular classes. In Vargas’ developmentalist model, Adalberto Cardoso (2019) identified the seed of a social and political identity inspired by this utopia, nurtured by tangible trajectories of social mobility that fostered aspirations for inclusion in the realm of rights among the excluded. “Vargas framed, through both physical and symbolic violence, the workers’ horizon of expectations and daily lives, confining them within the narrow boundaries of capitalist sociability, while promising access to the world of consumption and the benefits of liberal civilization” (ibid., p. 226), symbolized by the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT). In Brazilian urban

peripheries, however, the work card not only opened the door to social rights but also to civil rights, as the documented status of a worker often shielded individuals from arbitrary arrests for vagrancy (Silva, 1971, p. 17).

It is crucial to emphasize that the horizon of expectation tied to the work card primarily referred to the realm of recognition that it provided, which often conflicted with individual expectations. Studies from the 1960s and 1970s already indicated that many peripheral residents preferred self-employment, which granted workers more autonomy, over formal employment (Durham, 1978; Silva, 1971; Cardoso; Camargo; Kowarick, 1975). However, a closer examination reveals that this preference was expressed through personal choices, shaped by direct experiences in the labor market, rather than by generational projections or even the individual career plans of young workers. In these cases, "non-manual salaried occupations," such as office work, prevailed (Durham, 1978, p. 171; Cardoso; Camargo; Kowarick, 1975, p. 16).

It is precisely this "office work" that our interlocutors reject: parliamentary and NGO advisory roles, editorial work, real estate, and telemarketing. For some of the young people portrayed here, like Elis and Maria Rita, while formal employment "pays the bills", it is regarded as secondary to entrepreneurship. While they acknowledge the benefits of having a formal job recognized on the work card, Júlio chose to leave it behind after feeling subordinated by work relationships in which he did not see himself represented. However, it is Vitória who best encapsulates the perspective of these young people regarding this outdated horizon of expectation: the work card is merely a label, trapping individuals into professional categories and, in doing so, limiting their potential. In contrast, these young people view entrepreneurship as an opportunity to "create their own work," either as a means to escape oppressive, hierarchical labor relations or to break free from monotonous routines, fully realizing what they believe to be their individual potential.

The horizon of political participation, on the other hand, first emerged in Brazilian history during the period of redemocratization. Eder Sader (1988) best captured this drive for participation by depicting the new characters – metalworkers, Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), mothers' clubs, etc. – who, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, populated the metropolitan area of São Paulo and confronted the authoritarian State, demanding their rights. For Sader, these social movements represented a new alignment of Brazil's working classes, breaking with the subordinate corporatism of the past and permanently altering the relationship between the State and society in their quest for rights. In a similar vein, James Holston (2013) identified the struggle for land regularization in São Paulo's peripheral areas as an "insurgent citizenship," in which the right to

housing would pave the way for other rights. Thus, the conquest of rights through political participation became a major horizon of expectation in the first decades of redemocratization, with many periphery residents placing their hopes on political-party projects, especially the Workers' Party.

The relationship with this utopian horizon of political participation is somewhat ambiguous among the four young people we followed. While Maria Rita remains a committed left-wing party militant and Júlio takes pride in producing audiovisual material that celebrates past struggles, Vitória and Elis are more skeptical of traditional party and social militancy. Despite positioning themselves as progressive, supporting liberal causes and opposing former president Bolsonaro's government, both reported not having voted in the 2018 elections when he was elected. These peripheral activists have increasingly turned their attention to "micro-things," a form of engagement typical of social impact initiatives celebrated in the circuits of global philanthropic capitalism (Sklair; Glucksberg, 2020; Sales, 2022).

However, this position also reflects a deep frustration with the traditional left's detachment from the realities of the periphery. Elis, for instance, cites this disconnect as the reason for her departure from militancy. She views contemporary disputes, often reduced to "ridiculing jokes" typical of social media politics, as a waste of time and irrelevant to her lived experiences. Even those who remain in traditional militancy, like Maria Rita, a lack of representation within left-wing organizations, which in her view, fail to prioritize a peripheral perspective: "The majority is white, bourgeois". Thus, once again, entrepreneurship emerges as a compelling alternative, carrying the promise of fulfilling the utopias embedded in their progressivism - a world free of homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, etc. - while also meeting the expectations of economic emancipation for their peripheral community.

4. Final considerations

As we have argued throughout this article, entrepreneurship emerges as a consequence of these young people's life choices, representing another facet of the peripheral culture they promote. It appears as a solution to dilemmas encountered in their individual and collective experiences. Work and political participation, although present at different moments in their narratives, belong to a shared symbolic universe that has been discarded, as it no longer aligns with their lifestyles and political aspirations.

If the "dispute over the State" and the "victory of gaining the work card" once represented central horizons of expectation, they are now perceived as integral

parts of the "system," a "project" of "dream genocide," that stifles rather than fosters, emancipation. In contrast, emancipation is now understood as achievable through individual agency within the market, impacting "this personal universe of mine." Yet, this new horizon of expectations retains a distinctly utopian quality, where everything is framed in terms of "potency". It maintains a political dimension, rooted in the vision of a more egalitarian society in which they wish to live.

On the one hand, entrepreneurship upholds the expectation of individual autonomy, constrained by the labor market. It embodies the utopia of a world free from bosses, hierarchies, fixed working hours and labels, where individuals can dedicate themselves to activities that foster personal fulfillment. On the other hand, it serves as a vehicle for social transformation in a society increasingly disengaged from militancy and party organization. Through entrepreneurship, our interlocutors argue it is possible to reshape the reality of the q*uebrada* by ensuring the internal circulation of money, eliminating intermediaries, charging fair prices, and avoiding exploitative practices. Hence, entrepreneurship encapsulates a utopia of peripheral autonomy, wherein economic changes in the periphery drive a broader transformation, conceived by and for local residents, guaranteeing them a more dignified life amid the adversities imposed by external forces. This collective autonomy project is succinctly captured by the expression *nóis por nóis* ("us by ourselves"), which, while rooted in its discourse of cooperativism and heavily influenced by the solidarity economy (Corrochano; Laczynski, 2021), also reflects skepticism toward traditional politics and the possibilities of integration.

To bring this horizon into existence, however, these young individuals leave certain casualties along the way. The discourse of rights fades from their vocabulary, as the State is replaced by the market as the stage for emancipatory struggles. Casualties also occur on an individual level, since in order to commit to entrepreneurship, they often have to juggle dual roles, needing a stable job in order to "pay the bills". This equation works only because entrepreneurship is not considered work but rather a way of life. It is these casualties that have led to the interpretation of entrepreneurship as an expression of neoliberal subjectivity, emphasizing the erosion of rights and self-management while perpetuating class domination (Iamamoto; Mano; Summa, 2021; Amorim; Moda; Mevis, 2021; Laval; Dardot, 2013). In this article, we interpret the relationship between the peripheral, anti-capitalist utopia and the entrepreneurial ideology promoted by neoliberalism as a constitutive tension within the political actions of our interlocutors. This tension manifests in various shades and nuances across the different cases but does not necessarily reduce their practices to class subordination.

The entrepreneurship emerging from peripheral culture also "inherits" contradictions from earlier movements in the periphery, such as NGOs, social movements, and left-wing political parties. Paradoxically, the incorporation of academic concepts and progressive discourse, even when these were crafted to represent the periphery, can create a sense of alienation among other peripheral residents. Furthermore, as initially highlighted, the vast heterogeneity of Brazilian peripheries poses challenges for the widespread adoption of autonomy and peripheral emancipation projects. In contrast, entrepreneurship easily takes root among peripheral actors of diverse profiles.[17] While peripheral culture claims to champion a "de-elitized" ethos, Maria Rita, for instance, perceives it as a culture of the peripheral elite, noting that "the people from the *quebrada* don't come to the soirees". These paradoxes also extend to their interpreters in academia, who often look to the periphery in search of a new political subject, sometimes overlooking the heterogeneity and tensions that the young people from these communities themselves readily acknowledge.

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17. Several studies have already highlighted the connection between entrepreneurship and Pentecostalism, as well as a more deeply rooted popular *ethos* based on the desire for work autonomy, a defining characteristic of Brazilian peripheries (see Costa, 2024b; Almeida, 2017; Durham, 1978).

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