THE ONGOING RELEVANCE OF THE CENTER–PERIPHERY PATTERN IN THE METROPOLIS OF SÃO PAULO

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Abstract

Grounded in the political and theoretical contributions of peripheral intellectuals, this article offers a critical examination of a contemporary trend in urban studies that seeks to invalidate the concept of periphery as an analytical category for understanding metropolitan urbanisation processes. Focusing on the city of São Paulo and drawing on a range of examples, the text outlines nine arguments that underpin this attempt at invalidation, while exposing its limitations and weaknesses. The analysis is guided by three main methodological premises: the relationship between different zones of the city; the historical vocation and transformations of each zone; and the role of social conflict in the social production of urban space. The article concludes that despite the increasing internal complexity of peripheral areas over recent decades, they continue to occupy a subordinate and dependent relationship with high-income districts and the traditional center of the city of São Paulo. Thus, the center–periphery pattern remains a persistent feature.

Keywords

Social Movements; Socio-spatial Segregation; Socio-spatial Inequalities; Peripheral Pattern of Growth; Periphery; Peripheral Subjects; São Paulo.

A PERSISTENTE ATUALIDADE DO PADRÃO CENTRO-PERIFERIA NA METRÓPOLE PAULISTANA

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Resumo

Baseando-se na construção política e teórica de intelectuais periféricos, o artigo discute criticamente certa tendência contemporânea, presente nos estudos urbanos, de invalidação do conceito periferia como explicativo dos processos de urbanização das metrópoles. Discorrendo sobre a cidade de São Paulo e permeado de exemplos, o texto elenca nove argumentos que embasam a referida tentativa de invalidação, pontuando seus limites e fragilidades. O artigo parte de três premissas metodológicas principais: a relação entre as distintas zonas da cidade; a vocação histórica de cada uma das zonas e suas transformações; e o conflito entre as classes sociais na produção social do espaço urbano. Conclui-se que as periferias se complexicaram internamente nas últimas décadas, mas não puderam modificar a relação de dominação e dependência das zonas de alta renda e do centro tradicional da cidade de São Paulo. Desse modo, o padrão centro-periferia segue vigente.

Palavras-chave

Movimentos Sociais; Segregação Socioespacial; Desigualdades Socioespaciais; Padrão Periférico de Crescimento; Periferia; Sujeitos Periféricos; São Paulo.

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"Your eyes see me, but never truely reach me"
From a song by the singer/songwriter Caetano Veloso

Introduction[1]

Over the past three decades, an array of social agents residing in urban peripheries have significantly enhanced their ability to publicly articulate both the challenges and the potentialities of these territories. These actors have increasingly engaged in politics, driven by their peripheral condition, asserting their territorial belonging, assigning meaning to the term/concept, and broadening public debate. Since the 1990s, one expression of the political assertion of *periphery*[2] has been an effort to underscore the existence of urban territories with geographic and social specificities stemming from the unequal manner in which wealth is produced and concentrated within Brazilian society. This phenomenon has direct implications for the production and organisation of intra-urban space.

Given the historical barriers that have thwarted the participation of the poorest populations in universities and political representation, the cultural sphere has emerged as the most fertile ground for rendering this ongoing political process visible. It is no coincidence that many prominent organic intellectuals from the peripheries are cultural agents.

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1. I am extremely grateful for the generous reading and comments offered by the sisters and brothers from the Centro de Estudos Periféricos [Center for Peripheral Studies].

2. *"Periphery"*, when italicised, denotes a concept. "Periphey", in the singular and without italics, refers to a specific geographic space, although it may occasionally refer more generally to distinct geographic spaces with similar characteristics. "Peripheries", in the plural and without italics, refers to distinct territories, yet with similar characteristics.

Over the course of the 2000s, the implementation of racial and social quota policies, along with the expansion of higher education in Brazil, has led to the growing presence of students from urban peripheries within universities. Over time, many of these students have gone on to become researchers, producing academic work that seeks to portray the political process of affirmation, recognition, organization, and knowledge production from the perspective of the peripheries – a dynamic already well established in other spheres of society. In this context, the academic literature highlights the contributions of Renato Almeida (2009), Érica Peçanha (2011), Silvia Raimundo (2017), Dennis de Oliveira (2021), Tiaraju D'Andrea (2022), Joselicio Santos Junior (2023), among others.

Throughout recent years, social agents from the peripheries have made efforts to define the concept of *periphery*. This process has been framed by at least three key debates:

1. The need to construct both a *quantitative*[3] (D'Andrea, 2020) and territorial definition of the *periphery* within the municipality of São Paulo, while also considering the metropolitan dimension of the phenomenon;
2. The need to clarify and broaden the meanings of the term/concept, due to its widespread use by various agents, particularly in relation to an urban condition – a point that deserves emphasis;
3. The need to establish a critical dialogue with fields of knowledge such as academia, the media, and institutional politics, all of which have historically classified these territories and their populations according to their own parameters, fundamentally from an external perspective.

The collective process undertaken by peripheral communities has required numerous debates, characterized by careful deliberation and spanning over many years. This process culminated in the drafting of the *Lei de Fomento à Cultura* [Law for the Promotion of Peripheral Culture] in the municipality of São Paulo, a development reflected in the academic research of Marcello de Jesus (2017), Silvia Raimundo (2017), Fórum de Cultura da Zona Leste (2019), Tiaraju D'Andrea (2020), Gisele Brito (2021), among others.

Paradoxically, at the historical moment when social movements, cultural collectives, and peripheral intellectuals were working to refine the definition of the concept, a hegemonic sector of intellectuals engaged in urban studies attempted to invalidate it.

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3. A *quantitative* definition refers to delineation of the periphery based on geographical boundaries and socio-economic data (D'Andrea, 2020).

Claiming that the term *periphery* had lost its explanatory potential in relation to the urban context began to be widely circulated, and was justified through various arguments. This article compiles these arguments, drawn from academic research, political stances, debates, and common-sense observations. The primary objective is to problematize the premises of these arguments, asserting that *periphery* remains a vital urban and sociological concept with significant explanatory potential for understanding the realities of contemporary Brazilian metropolises[4]. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the ongoing debate regarding urban issues in Brazil.

The problematization of nine arguments that seek to invalidate periphery as an explanatory concept of the urban

Argument 1 – "Periphery is an imprecise concept"
Counterargument

One of the greatest intellectual challenges lies in shaping and bringing analytical precision to phenomena that, in lived experience, are more elusive. It is a fact that the *periphery* encompasses territories marked by geographical, social, racial, economic, political, and subjective characteristics, all of which resist easy definition. However, the difficulty in defining a phenomenon does not invalidate its existence. *Poverty*, for example, is a phenomenon that is difficult to define. It depends on a range of indicators and perspectives. But its existence is undeniable. Similarly, there is ongoing debate in Brazil concerning who is considered *Black*. However, the existence of *Black people* in Brazil is not contingent on the resolution fo this debate (Costa, 2020). *Social class*, too, eludes a single definition. Different theoretical perspectives address the topic with varying emphases. However, the difficulty to define it does not eliminate the existence of *social class* (Mattos, 2019). The same holds true for the *periphery*. Rather than obscuring its existence, as previously mentioned, current efforts by social agents from the periphery have aimed to refine and clarify the concept by establishing more precise criteria,. This article seeks to contribute to that ongoing endeavour.

Argument 2 – "The periphery does not exist because the center is also poor"
### Counterargument

This is one of the most frequently invoked arguments in attempts to deconstruct the existence of peripheries in the city of São Paulo. However, it

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4. Authors from French urban sociology contend that representations of urban peripheries are integral to a political struggle encompassing the university, the State, the media, culture, common sense, and the residents themselves, whether organized or not. In this regard, *Refaire la Cité* by Michel Kokoreff and Didier Lapeyronnie (Paris: Editions du Seuil et République des Idées, 2013) is highly recommended.

is a weak argument. From this point forward, the article will problematize the relationships and distinctions between the *traditional center*, the *southwest centrality*, and the *periphery*, in order to demonstrate why these evidently distinct urban contexts cannot be treated as equivalent.

First, it is important to recall that this triadic dynamic – comprising a centrality located in the high-income concentration region (Villaça, 2012), referred to here as *high-income area*, a *traditional center*, and a vast *periphery* – is also reproduced in other Brazilian cities. In other words, it is a model for the forms of capitalist urbanization throughout Brazil.
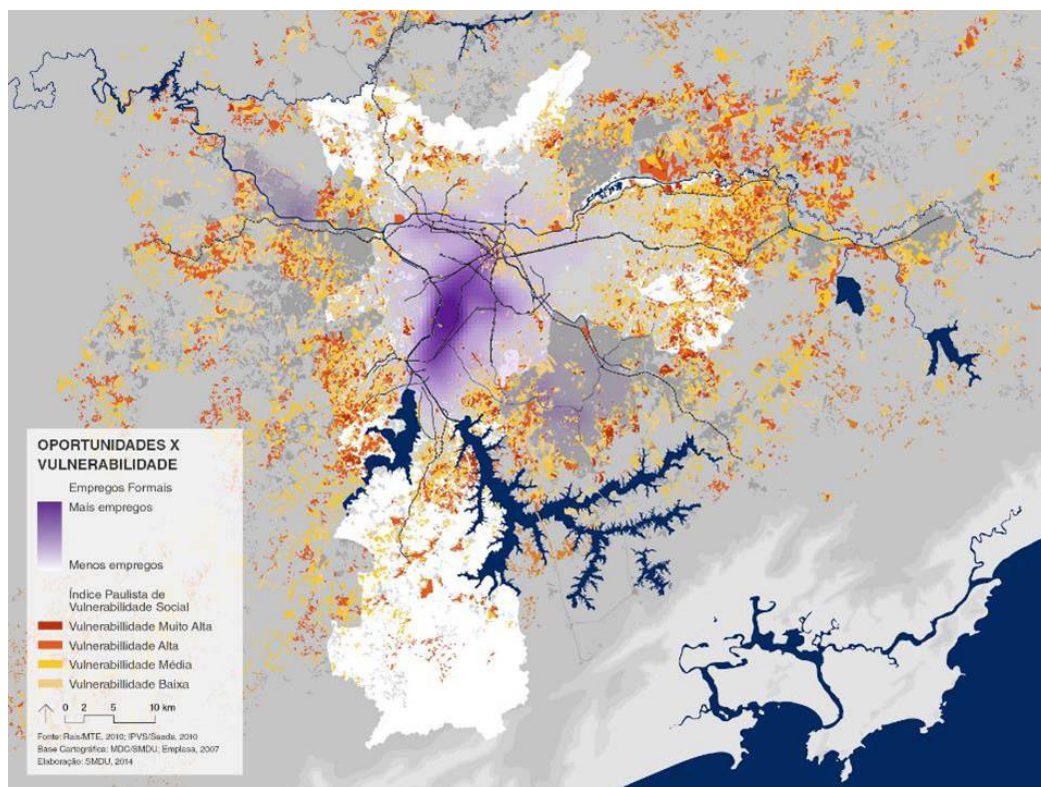
Map 1. Metropolitan Area of São Paulo (MASP): Opportunities x Vulnerability[5],[6]
KEY: Opportunities x Vulnerabilities / Formal employment: More Jobs – Less jobs / São Paulo Social Vulnerability Index: Very High Vulnerability – High Vulnerability – Medium Vulnerability – Low Vulnerability.

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5. Map 1 highlights the areas of greatest vulnerability in the Metroolitan Area of São Paulo (MASP), although the peripheries also include other vulnerable regions; the *traditional center* (located at the center of the map); and the *southwest centrality* (where employment and income levels are most heavily concentrated).

6. The two maps presented in this article were created by Carina Serra and Ermínia Maricato, based on data from The Municipal Secretary of Urban Development (SMDU) and the Department of Planning, Budget, and Management (SEMPLA). I am grateful for their generous permission to use them.

In São Paulo, the opposite of the *periphery* is not the *traditional center*, but rather the *southwest centrality*. This zone concentrates the city's wealth, and it is from this area that a concentric, radial process of increasing poverty originates. In general terms, areas become poorer the farther they are from the *southwest centrality*.

The relationship between the *traditional center* and the *southwest centrality* has been extensively explored in the literature. Flávio Villaça (1998) argued that the shifts in centralities result from the ability of the bourgeoisie to reposition the center closer to their residential areas through political, economic, and ideological mechanisms. According to Villaça, the bourgeoisie has historically relocated its residences and workplaces along defined *expansion vectors* – in the case of São Paulo, the *southwest vector*. Heitor Frúgoli Jr. (2006) examined the disputes among various agents operating within these centralities, who have replaced one another across time and space from the *southwest vector*, as noted by Villaça (1998). Mariana Fix (2001; 2007) studied the interventions of the bourgeoisie in the valorization of the *southwest centrality*, including through the removal of favelas.

The establishment of a new centrality in the *southwest-central area* resulted in a shift in the locus of power, which had previously been located in the *traditional center*. This change led to the *traditional center* and the *periphery* of São Paulo acquiring a dual condition: the *traditional center* is segregated by the *southwest centrality* and segregates the *periphery*, while the *periphery* is segregated by both the *southwest centrality* and the *traditional center*. This dual condition of the *traditional center* and the *periphery* has been instrumentalized in the argument attempting to equate the *periphery* and the *traditional center*, thereby obscuring the differences between the two and, in doing so, rendering the existence of the *periphery* invisible.

It is widely acknowledged that the *traditional center* of São Paulo includes poverty, with a significant portion of its population belonging to the most impoverished segments of the working class. However, the urban dynamics that drove the *peripheral growth pattern* (Bolaffi, 1982) led to the working class being divided into sectors. Some opted (or were able) to own homes in areas lacking infrastructure, distant from the *traditional center*, while others chose (or were able) to live in the *traditional center* with urban infrastructure, albeit in precarious housing conditions. This issue was addressed by Lúcio Kowarick (1993; 2009). Even among the poor, residents of the center almost always prefer to remain there rather than relocate to the periphery. Housing movements, in their struggle to occupy vacant buildings in the *traditional center*, are also acutely aware of the strategic advantages offered by a central location. The fundamental distinction between the

traditional center and the *periphery* lies in infrastructure[7], which in the *traditional center* is vastly superior than in any neighborhood center in the periphery.

Another major difference between the *traditional center* and the *periphery* is demographic. The combined population of the various peripheral zones of the municipality of São Paulo is just over 5.7 million, whereas the population of the four districts that make up the *traditional center* totals 104,000[8]. This stark disparity highlights the vastly different scales of the issues involved. However, due to the geographic proximity of the *traditional center* to the areas typically inhabited by the bourgeoisie and the hegemonic intelligentsia, its poverty tends to be more visible.

As further evidence of these disparities, the following should be noted: mobility flows move from the *periphery* toward the *traditional center* (and to the *southwest centrality*), not the other way around. It is also important to emphasize that evictions have historically occurred from the *traditional center* to the *periphery*, not the reverse.

The perceptions of *peripheral* residents themselves further reinforces these differences. Elaine Mineiro, for example, a Black activist featured in Raimundo (2017), moved to the eastern zone after her family was displaced. Reflecting on her experience, she stated: "There is poverty, but you can't compare Bixiga, where I lived as a child, with Cidade Tiradentes, where I live today" (ibid., p. 223)[9]. Similarly, poet Sergio Vaz, a resident of the southern zone, developed his urban and class consciousness through his encounters with both realities. Recalling his childhood, he once remarked that he had initially been unaware that he was poor because everyone around him shared the same living conditions, noting that, "Only when I visited Bixiga, with its buildings, did I begin to understand things better" (Brasil de Fato, 2013).

The process of drafting the Law for the Promotion of Peripheral Culture brought together several collectives and social movements to define the concept of *periphery*. Coordinated by the Movimento Cultural das Periferias [Cultural Movement of the Peripheries] (MCP), this collective effort unfolded over several

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7. This urban infrastructure is reflected in the widespread presence of public transportation (buses, metro lines, and trains), employment opportunities, commercial activity, public service provision, among other elements that, from an urbanistic perspective, distinguish the *traditional center* from the *periphery*, rendering the latter dependent on the former.

8. These districts are: Brás, Pari, Sé, and Bom Retiro. If all adjacent districts are included (Bela Vista, Cambuci, Consolação, Liberdade, República, Santa Cecília, and Sé) the population rises to a considerable 477,660, yet still twelve times smaller than the population living in the peripheral areas (https://censo2010.ibge.gov.br).

9. This and all other direct citations hereafter have been translated by the author.

years (from 2010 to 2016), ultimately concluding that: "There is no periphery in the center *[...]* what exists are pockets of poverty" (Raimundo, 2017, p. 223).

As an illustrative case of the disputes and interests surrounding definitions of the *periphery*, the following episode – experienced by the author of this text – is transcribed below:

> *Scene 1 – The debate*[10]
> I was once invited to take part in a debate on the center of São Paulo. I gave a talk highlighting the historical significance of the center and its importance as a point of convergence for the peripheral areas. I also emphasized the poverty experienced by segments of the population living in the traditional center. However, I reminded the audience: '*The periphery and the traditional center are not the same and cannot be equated*'. I further stressed: '*The debate should not insist on an opposition between periphery and traditional center, but rather between the periphery and the southwest-central area*'. An architect on the panel expressed discomfort with my remarks and responded: '*The peripheries are constantly present in the center. I find it deeply problematic when public authorities withdraw investment from the center in order to allocate resources across the peripheries*'.

Much has been written about the poverty found in São Paulo's *traditional center*, comprising working class sisters and brothers who reside in the periphery. In contrast, considerably less attention has been given to the power wielded by segments of the middle class residing in the *traditional center* and its surroundings, and their capacity to exert pressure on public authorities in defence of their own interests. One rhetorical strategy employed by this social group is the claim to "live in the periphery". In the queue for public resources, "my periphery" takes precedence, and interventions – such as the creation of public parks – tend to be prioritized in and around the *traditional center*, despite the pressing need for such investments across many neighbourhoods in the periphery.

Lastly, it is important to reaffirm the validity of problematizing the dual condition of the *traditional center* – as both segregating and segregated. However, this perspective must not obscure the central issue in understanding São Paulo's structural dynamics: the opposition between a concentrated pole of wealth located in the *southwest centrality* and the multiple poles of poverty that define the *peripheries*.

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10. The scenes presented herein serve as methodological tools. Drawn from the social world, they recount events that help to illustrate the arguments and theoretical construction. A methodological grounding for the use of scenes as a sociological approach can be found in the author's doctoral thesis (D'ANDREA, 2013, p. 33). D'ANDREA, T. P. *A formação dos sujeitos periféricos: cultura e política na periferia de São Paulo* [The Formation of Peripheral Subjects: Culture and Politics in the Periphery of São Paulo]. 2013. Thesis (Doutorate in Sociology) – Department of Sociology, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2013.

Argument 3 – "The periphery has become the center, and the center has become the periphery"
Counterargument

From the perspective of symbolic struggle, this argument holds some validity. The *periphery* can become the center when its cultural productions or political mobilizations take center stage in public debate. However, the phrase "the periphery has become the center" can also carry a triumphalist tone, similar to the slogan "the favela has won". Triumphalist narratives are problematic, since they tend to obscure concrete inequalities by replacing them with metaphorical valorization.

According to Raimundo (2017, p. 223): "The MCP (Movimento Cultural das Periferias) is well aware that these interpretations, which seek to blur the notions of center and periphery, claiming that the center is in the periphery and the periphery is in the center, are part of a postmodern reading of the world".

In reality, the historical horizon of the *peripheral* population should not be defined by a struggle to become a center. Rather, the struggle must be for the elimination of territorial inequalities and for a city marked by a diversity of centers, centralities, and subcenters, so that the symbolic weight of these reference points may be reduced.

Argument 4 – "Peripheries have centers, and therefore there are no peripheries"
Counterargument

Flávio Villaça has written extensively about the *nature of the main center* of large metropolises (1998; 2012). He has argued that the very idea of a city presupposes the need for centers. Accordingly, in a city as vast as São Paulo, it would be logical to assume that there would be subcenters. Since the emergence of peripheral areas, neighborhood centers have existed. There, various services cater to local needs. However, there is a clear homology between the services offered in subcenters and the socioeconomic profile of the neighborhoods. For example, the subcenter of São Miguel, which is full of commercial establishments, serves the surrounding population. Nevertheless, depending on their needs, the local population must travel either to the *traditional center* or to the *southwest centrality*. The reverse however, does not occur. A resident of Cerqueira César does not travel to the center of São Miguel to access services. This inequality, marked by dependency and domination, defines the relationship between the *periphery*, on one end, and the *southwest centrality* and, to some extent, the *traditional center*, on the other.

In another regard, it is impossible to compare the amount of public and private resources available in subcenters (such as São Miguel, Vila Nova Cachoeirinha, or Campo Limpo) with the quantity of public and private resources, services,

infrastructure, and urban flows present in the *traditional center* or the *southwest centrality*. They are incomparable. Subcenters are a necessity of the peripheries; they serve them and are part of them. In fact, the very existence of these subcenters is due to the distance between peripheral neighborhoods and the *traditional center* and the *southwest centrality*. Subcenters, or neighborhood centers, do not negate peripheral status; they are proof of it.

Argument 5 – "Periphery doesn't exist because the State, infrastructure, and commerce have arrived."
Counterargument

This argument is used in such a way as to end the discussion: "Let's not talk any more about the periphery because the State has arrived". The fact that the periphery has improved its infrastructure over recent decades does not change its relationship of domination and dependence with high-income neighborhoods. The starting point of this issue is not from a binary of "places that have" and "places have not". Starting from this binary leads to the belief that areas that were once "places that have not" have now also become "places that have", and everything has become equal. Therefore, it would no longer make sense to talk about the periphery. However, this argument is flawed. Understanding the difference between the *southwest centrality* and the *periphery* requires understanding the difference in the amount of public and private resources each of these territories handles, the political power of their inhabitants, and the dependence and domination of one territory in relation to the other, which can be measured by the obligation to travel across the city, among other factors.

Indeed, recent decades have seen an increase in public investment in the peripheries. However, this State presence in these areas is often characterized by *discontinuity*, *incompleteness*, and *improvisation* (D'Andrea, 2022).

Concurrently, public authorities operate unevenly across different territories: they are more effective where the bourgeoisie and middle class reside, and far less so in the peripheries. This disparity is evident in the stark contrast between the precarious urban maintenance services in Perus and the swift responses observed in Moema, or between the quality of public hospitals in Vila Mariana and those in Cidade Tiradentes. Policing also differs – while in the *periphery* it is *governed by a logic of invasion*, in the *southwest centrality* it operates under a logic of protection[11].

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11. This brings to mind the comment made by the then-police colonel, which reflects the corporation's practice of distinguishing the periphery as *there* and the Jardins neighborhood as *here*. On this subject, see: https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2017/08/24/abordagem-no-jardins-e-na-periferia-tem-de-ser-diferente-diz-novo-comandante-da-rota.htm.

The presence of the State in peripheral areas has been widely explored in French urban sociology. On this subject, the work of Denis Merklen (2013) is of particular note. He argues that even with a significant State presence in the French peripheries (unlike the case of São Paulo), it has not succeeded in reversing the stigmas and prejudices against these populations.

Argument 6 – "The periphery is heterogeneous"
Counterargument

Ana Cristina Morais, an architect and urban planner residing in Jardim Macedônia in the southern periphery, argues in her work for the use of the term *periphery* in the singular, as the plural form would introduce redundant information. According to the author:

> This study acknowledges the heterogeneity of peripheral areas as one of the main characteristics of the current São Paulo metropolis. Moreover, it understands that such heterogeneity has always existed. Nonetheless, the choice was made to use the term predominantly in the singular. Without any purist intent, this decision stems simply from the understanding that the diversity of the periphery is so evident that there is no need to reinforce it semantically. (Morais, 2023, p. 20)

Morais's line of argument unfolds into a series of questions: considering that the heterogeneity of the periphery has always been evident, why is it only in recently that hegemonic urban studies have begun to emphasize this heterogeneity? Would it be accurate to claim that the peripheries have moved along a historical continuum from homogeneity to heterogeneity, as some studies seem to suggest?

For the purposes of this article, heterogeneity has always existed. However, classical urban studies have tended to adopt a bird's-eye perspective. On the one hand, they have reinforced shared characteristics, while on the other, they have lacked specificity. In seeking to critique classical studies, contemporary urban research has tended to radicalize microscale analyses by highlighting internal differences. This emphasis has several implications.

By foregrounding microrealities, it becomes more difficult to identify commonalities between peripheral areas that underpin *periphery* as an explanatory concept. Another implication is the challenge posed to political organization among these territories, given that, rather than encouraging solidarity based on shared challenges, these studies often underscore particularities. Lastly, emphasising the heterogeneity of the periphery tends to divert attention away from the class and racial homogeneity of *high-income areas.*

In this regard, Flávio Villaça (1998) indicates how the bourgeoisie self-segregates, a dynamic further explored by Danilo França (2015), who noted a marked segregation in São Paulo between the southwestern zone, inhabited by a white bourgeoisie, and the peripheries, impoverished and racially heterogeneous. Eduardo Marques observed that the areas occupied by higher-income populations have become increasingly homogeneous (2015, p. 198), a factor that directly contributes to increased segregation.

For the bourgeoisie, the heterogeneity of the peripheries is not a primary concern. Their project is to maintain the homogeneity of its spaces of residence, work, circulation, and leisure. From a political standpoint, the heterogeneity of the peripheries remains subordinated to and dependent on the internal homogeneity of the territories inhabited by the bourgeoisie.

For residents of the periphery, however, heterogeneity is not something new but a constitutive part of popular territories. Nevertheless, this diversity has impeded these populations from sharing a range of common experiences, which have fostered political organization in defense of shared interests and the construction of unifying identities.

Argument 7 – "With urban fragmentation, the periphery no longer exists" Counterargument

In his discussion on urban fragmentation, the geographer Milton Santos (2019) necessarily linked this concept to the difficulties faced by the poor in moving around the city, since they are confined to peripheral areas. The author employs the concept of *fragmentation* to reinforce the argument of a spatially expressed social abyss.

However, some contemporary uses of the concept of *fragmentation* seem to suggest the contrary: that spaces of poverty and wealth have become increasingly intermixed, thereby rendering the center-periphery pattern obsolete. This argument appears to have gained the status of absolute truth. As previously emphasized, peripheral areas indeed exhibit internal socioeconomic disparities. Nevertheless, these disparities imply neither randomness nor an internal *mixité*[12] within urban territories. If in Paris, despite stringent urban planning regulations, the State was unable to curb the power of the real estate sector, it is illusory to assume that in São Paulo, where the real estate sector holds even greater sway, this

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12. *Mixité* is a Parisian public policy aimed at mixing different income levels across the city's various districts. This policy has achieved limited progress but has not altered the structural patterns of socio-spatial segregation among different social groups within the city and in its relationship with neighboring municipalities. On this topic, *Sociologie de Paris* by Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot (Paris: La Découverte, 2014) is recommended.

same sector would operate in favor of spatial *fragmentation.* Such a trend would run counter to the logic of generating income through land ownership, speculation, and the production of space.

When the city is analyzed in its entirety, broad spatial patterns persist, and each region retains its own specific vocation. Pushed to its logical extreme, the argument of urban fragmentation could imply scenarios such as the establishment of transnational corporate headquarters in Grajaú – a peripheral and economically disadvantaged neighborhood – and the proliferation of favelas in Jardim Europa – a high-income neighborhood. Yet that is not what happens. The near-total removal of favelas from the southwestern zone has made this area more homogeneous. While various peripheral areas have undeniably grown more complex and have maintained their tendency toward internal heterogeneity, it is inaccurate to claim that they have become fragmented. A brief historical reflection is illustrative of this: fifty years ago, the morphology of the peripheral urban spaces consisted of isolated settlements (*vilas*), separated from one another by forests and urban voids, and connected by rudimentary roads or railway lines. Would this not serve as a more concrete example of urban fragmentation?

In recent years, the real estate sector has undertaken the construction of numerous residential high-rise buildings in peripheral areas. These new developments have often been cited as evidence to support the argument of fragmentation. However, it is crucial to underscore that these projects are typically targeted at prospective buyers from *these very same* areas, revealing a clear homology between the nature of the development, its symbolic attributes, and the pre-existing urban infrastructure. The argument advanced here is that it is insufficient to simply note an increase in real estate developments in a given location; but rather, to consider the population for whom these developments have been designed to serve. The real estate sector is acutely aware that a mismatch between the type of project and the characteristics of the location is not viable. Established patterns persist. The market operates with a pragmatic logic that aligns investment with the potential for valorization inherent to each territory. Ultimately, while the launch of apartment buildings or small attached houses (*sobradinhos geminados*) may contribute to the internal complexity of peripheral areas, this does not necessarily signify a transformation in the city's overarching spatial pattern.

With regard to land prices, two parallel processes have unfolded over recent decades. On one hand, there has been a general increase in land prices (across all areas of the city) outpacing the growth of workers' incomes. On the other, a wave-like escalation in the price per square meter has radiated outward from centralities, transforming traditional *suburbs* into expanded central areas (as in the case of

Tatuapé), and peripheral zones into suburbs. This dynamic has progressively led to the displacement of poorer populations, who are now having to reconstitute new peripheries along the outer edges of the municipality of São Paulo or in neighboring municipalities within the MASP. Within this broader trend, exceptional cases may be observed, such as favelas or mid-range residential buildings. However, these instances add to the internal complexity of the urban fabric, they do not supplant the endurng center-periphery pattern – understood herein as the *southwest-centrality*.

It is important to note that private developments are tailored to the valorization potential of the areas in which they are located. Among current developments, there is a clear distinction in price and quality between buildings in Vila Matilde, a suburban neighborhood, and those in Guaianases, a peripheral neighborhood, for example.

For the purposes of this article, the argument advanced by Yvonne Mautner (1999) remains relevant: the growth of the periphery occurred in tandem with the expansion of wage labor and through the incorporation of peripheral spaces into the logic of capital, this process unfolded in a radial-concentric process, extending the legal and consolidated urban fabric.

The following scene, drawn from the social world, serves as an illustration of the rearticulation of the radial-concentric pattern, often faciliated, and at times even driven, by the advent of real estate developments in peripheral areas:

> *Scene 2 – Wherever it was possible to buy*
> *The plots of land on the street where my maternal grandfather's house is located, he originally came from* [the state of] *Alagoas, were marked out in the late 1940s, in what was then a typical peripheral neighborhood of São Paulo. Little by little, families from* [the states of] *Minas Gerais, Ceará, Bahia, the interior of São Paulo, and other regions started buying up the lots. Over time, urban conditions improved, and the houses became more consolidated. In this corner of the eastern periphery, over the years, some families moved away. Others rented out their homes. But even with this population turnover, the neighborhood's socioeconomic profile didn't really change. The poor moved out, and the poor moved in. The families who had stayed on witnessed a growth in the number of family members: the births of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the first generation. Today, those extended families are much larger than the original nuclear households. With homeownership becoming harder and harder, the houses started to build extensions: an extra room here, an annex there, something up on the roof... backyards giving way to small dwellings. Where one single family used to live, now there are four. The periphery has grown denser.*
> *Roger and Ramiro are the exception in this family. Brought up with great effort, they fought hard and managed to buy their own homes. One bought a small apartment in Mogi das Cruzes. The other, in*

Guarulhos. They're following a path that's been around for decades, when residents from this neighborhood, looking for land to buy, could only afford to do so in Itaquaquecetuba or Suzano. As the years go by, the process of reconfiguring the peripheries continues in increasingly more distant areas.

In this same neighborhood, take Wanny for example. She got into university through the quota system, landed a steady job, and managed to save money. In 2023, she made a down payment on an off-plan apartment near the Line 3–Red of the São Paulo Metro, close to Artur Alvim Station.

Real estate developments near metro and train stations in the eastern periphery of São Paulo are, for the most part, purchased by residents of that same region, typically through long-term installment plans that often lead to chronic indebtedness. When residents from other areas acquire these properties, it is generally for rental purposes. Over the past decades, cases of people relocating from the traditional center or the central-southwest zones to the eastern zone have been rare. It is also important to emphasize that the housing demand among peripheral residents far surpasses the supply provided by these new real estate ventures. It is also worth noting that the demand for housing among peripheral residents far exceeds the supply offered by these new real estate developments. More frequently, properties, or land, are purchased in neighboring municipalities such as Poá, Suzano, Guarulhos, and Mogi das Cruzes, thereby reproducing and updating historical socio-spatial segregation patterns. Nevertheless, the prevailing pattern remains the densification of existing family homes, given the widespread inability of contemporary youth to purchase property of their own.

Another clear indication that the peripheries are internally heterogeneous yet still operate within a radial-concentric logic, rather than one of fragmentation, may be observed in the recurrent flooding in Jardim Pantanal, located on the far eastern edge of São Paulo[13]. The social complacency toward a tragedy of such magnitiude, ongoing for over thirty years, is closely tied to the neighborhood's position on the borders of the city. A further illustrative case is the decision by the São Paulo Municipal Government to install a waste incinerator in the São Mateus district, also situated in the eastern zone. This project is poised to bring significant environmental, social, and human harm[14].

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13. https://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2025/02/03/jardim-pantanal-bairro-de-sao-paulo-completa-3-dias-debaixo-dagua.ghtml.

14. In 2024, the Mayor of São Paulo, Ricardo Nunes (MDB), introduced Bill 799/2024, which amends the city's Master Plan by converting an environmental preservation area into a landfill site. The project includes the construction of an incinerator and the removal of 10,000 trees. Available at: https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2024/12/19/projeto-arvores-aterro-sp-votos.ghtml.

Both cases underscore a perverse logic in the treatment of peripheral territories and their inhabitants. This logic is executed by the public authorities in service of private interests and with the tacit approval of hegemonic sectors of knowledge production – particularly the media. Floods would never be allowed to persist for thirty years, nor would a waste incinerator ever be built in the center of São Paulo nor in the southwestern zone. The center-periphery logic remains unmistakably operative.

Argument 8 – "Gated communities and favelas exist side by side. The center-periphery pattern no longer applies."
Counterargument

Closely tied to the argument of urban fragmentation is the increasingly widespread claim that gated communities and low-income neighborhoods now coexist side by side. This argument holds that the center-periphery pattern no longer reflects the new urbanization patterns of the city of São Paulo. The work that most prominently propagated this perspective was *Cidade de Muros* [City of Walls] by Teresa Caldeira (2000). The book rightly points out how walls have come to be mobilized across all social classes. However, the central thesis derived from the book is that of "fortified enclaves", in which the proliferation of gated communities – often adjacent to poor areas – have supplanted the center-periphery pattern.

Yet, in order to validate or refute the claim that gated communities and favelas coexist side by side, it is crucial to consider where most gated communities and most favelas are located within the municipality. It is also important to recall that in São Paulo, the opposite of the *periphery* is the *southwest centrality*, not the *traditional center*.

Based on patterns of macrosegregation, it is evident that most[15] high-end buildings are located in the southwest zone of São Paulo, reflecting the *vector expansion* of wealth in the southwest. This region also hosts gated communities, although larger developments are located in municipalities such as Cotia and Barueri, to the west of the MASP. The choice of these locations is not incidental. By offering green spaces, spacious homes, and security, the gated communities along the Raposo Tavares and Castelo Branco highways cater to the desires of their residents, while providing swift access to the *southwest zone* of São Paulo, where the most qualified job positions are located. These developments are strategically

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15. The neighborhoods of Tatuapé and Santana constitute exceptions that confirm the rule. These are areas with high-end residential buildings that are not located in the southwest zone, but rather within the broader *central-southwestern* area. Real estate investment in these neighborhoods only occurred because both already possessed significant potential for valorization.

designed to serve a specific clientele. As Flávio Villaça (1998) argues, the real estate sector creates regions, but it is the bourgeoisie that determines where they wish to settle. The success of the Alphaville gated community can be attributed to the logic of occupation in that region. In contrast, areas like Cidade Patriarca and neighborhoods around Parque do Carmo, both in the eastern zone, did not achieve similar success, even though real estate companies invested in those areas. Gated communities near the Ayrton Senna and Presidente Dutra highways, in municipalities to the east of the MASP, tend to be smaller and cater to a less affluent demographic compared to their counterparts in the western municipalities of the MASP.
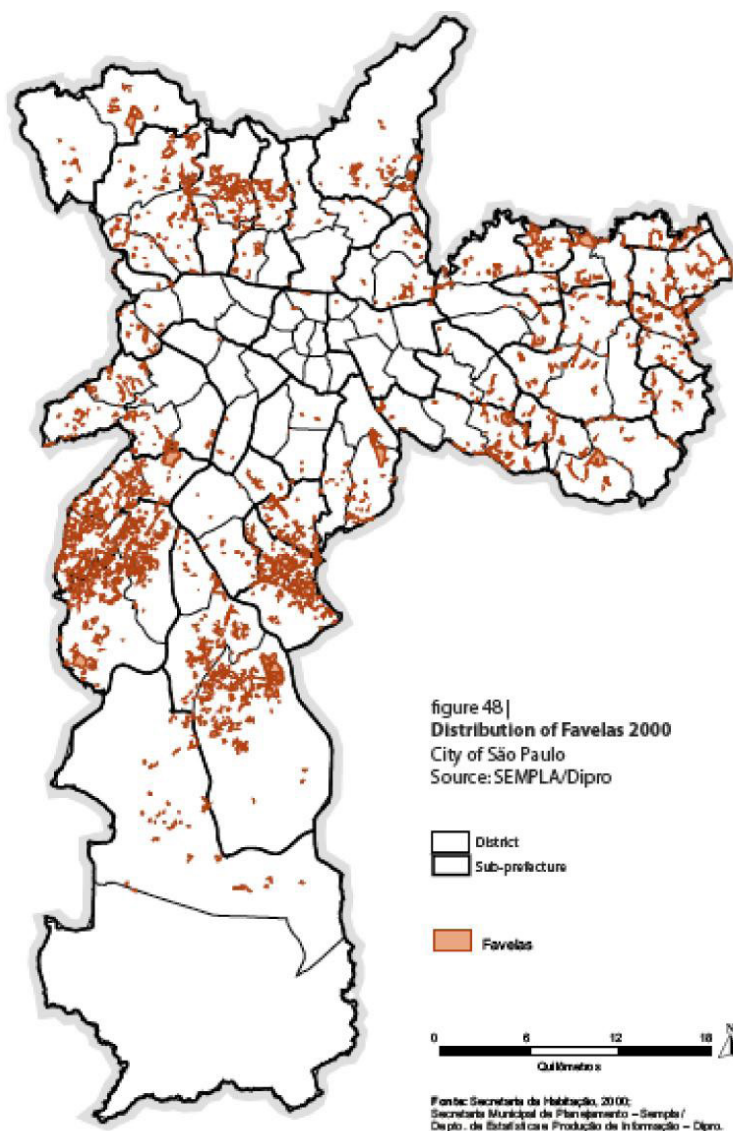
Just as the location of gated communities follows a historical pattern of the spatial distribution of social classes in the city of São Paulo, so too does the location of favelas. As shown in Map 2, the majority of favelas are located in the peripheral areas.

While favelas were once numerous in the central region, over time they have been removed one by one: the Vergueiro, Várzea do Penteado, and Canindé favelas, among others. The same process has occurred in the southwest zone. Over the past thirty years, there has been a well-documented removal process of several favelas from the region (Fix, 2001; 2007; D'Andrea, 2012): Coliseu, Vietnã, Jardim Edite, Água Espraiada, and Real Parque. The historical trend is that all favelas in the southwest zone are disappearing, in line with the project of homogenizing the area inhabited by high-income groups. This process reinforces the center-periphery pattern.

The exception is the case of the Paraisópolis favela, which has not been removed due to its sheer size and high degree of organization. Nevertheless, it remains under constant threat[16]. This case is the most emblematic example of the argument that "wealth and poverty coexist side by side". The widely circulated photograph of a high-end building adjacent to the favela has become iconic in exposing inequality. However, the problem lies in the flawed argument that emerged from it, which claims that favelas exist in the center and, therefore, there is no distinction between a poor center and the peripheries.

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16. Given the impossibility of removing the favela, numerous strategies have historically been employed to politically immobilize its population: threats of eviction; "Operation Saturation"; the presence of NGOs; arson attacks; charges for water and electricity; the killing of young people; urbanization plans; among other tactics.

figure 48 |
Distribution of Favelas 2000
City of São Paulo
Source: SEMPLA/Dipro

☐ District
☐ Sub-prefecture

🟧 Favelas

0   6   12   18
Quilômetros

Fonte: Secretaria da Habitação, 2000;
Secretaria Municipal de Planejamento – Sempla /
Depto. de Estatística e Produção de Informação – Dipro.

Map 2. Distribution of favelas in the municipality of São Paulo

When it first emerged, between the 1930s and 1940s, Paraisópolis was located on the semi-rural periphery of São Paulo[17], far from the center. Beginning in the 1960s, construction companies began to dictate the logic of urban development in the Morumbi region. The growth of employment opportunities in the construction sector led to population growth within the favela. It is crucial to emphasize:

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17. When I lived in Paraisópolis in 2005 and 2006, I used the 6412-10 bus line to commute to the area. The journey from the Paulista region to Paraisópolis took over an hour. From the *traditional center*, travel time was even longer. These accessibility conditions clearly demonstrate that Paraisópolis is not located in a central area.

Paraisópolis came first. The mansions came later. The encounter between wealth and poverty in Morumbi is the result of the expansion of affluence along the *southwest* vector, which eventually collided with the pre-existing areas of poverty. The concentration of wealth in the neighborhood reflects the prefences of a population seeking to escape both the *traditional center* and the southwest zone, retreating instead to the bucolic landscapes located along the left bank of the Pinheiros River. The effort to *bring* centrality closer to home, materialized in the development of the Avenida Faria Lima and its surroundings, and brought the workplace closer to the residences of the more affluent. However, this urban transformation did render Morumbi a central area. The *southwest centrality* remains firmly located along the right bank of the Pinheiros River.

Nonetheless, the Paraisópolis/Morumbi case was discursively generalized. The argument concerning the proximity between gated communities and favelas inflated the narratives of microsegregation. The exception became the rule. As a result, once again, the peripheries – products of a historically rooted and structurally determined pattern of urbanization – were rendered invisible, precisely the reality that fragmentation arguments tend to obscure. The most enduring, pervasive and effective mechanism of segregation in the city of São Paulo is not the wall. São Paulo is, above all, a city of distances.

It should be recalled that, during the same historical period in which gated communities were being launched and gaining hyper-visibility, there was a significant demographic increase in the outer districts along the municipal borders of São Paulo (Torres, 2005). Despite representing a more substantial demographic weight, this growth, revealing patterns of macrosegregation, received considerably less attention in academic analyses.

Argument 9 – "The multiplicity of peripheries"
Counterargument

Another argument that has contributed to attempts to relativize the *periphery* is that which advocates for the existence of multiple peripheries. In this case, dilution occurs through an excess of examples rather than through the lack of specificity of urban peripheries, as seen in some of the previous cases. Among other works, perhaps the one that best illustrates this argument is *Periferias no Plural* [Peripheries in the Pural] (Ramos et al., 2023). While the breadth and quality of the research are commendable, the theoretical framework underpinning the concept requires further development and refinement.

At this point, it is important to recall that the concept of *periphery*, when used to define an urban condition, is derived from the notion of *periphery in capitalism*.

In the 1960s, for example, to engage in urban debates necessarily entailed discussing issues of imperialism and dependency (Kowarick, 1993; Oliveira, 2003). These two understandings of periphery are intertwined. They carry theoretical depth and historicity. The argument advanced in this article is not that alternative uses of the term *periphery* are invalid; rather it calls for caution to ensure such uses do not become metaphorical invocations curiously detached from spatial and territorial realities. Moreover, the unchecked multiplication of meanings attributed to *periphery* can result in a complete dilution of its significance – whatever that may be. When everything is periphery, nothing is periphery.

Lastly, it is essential to consider that the concept of *periphery* is inherently urban. *Female and male peripheral subjects* are the product of specific social and urban dynamics shaped within a particular historical period (D'Andrea, 2022). If the *peripheral subject* were to be transformed into that which self-identifies as peripheral, there is the risk of an infinite broadening of meanings, ultimately resulting in the opposite of what the concept originally intended.

Concluding remarks

In recent decades, there has been a shift in the modes of knowledge production, thereby affecting various fields of study. One defining feature of this shift has been the prioritization of studies that emphasize microscales, often at the expense of analyses aimed at understanding the relationships among parts of a whole. Urban studies have not been immune to this trend, increasingly focusing on cases of microsegregation.

On the one hand, it is true that these studies have been instrumental in revealing local conflicts that are not easily perceived through macrostructural perspectives, and they are indeed essential. However, over time, there has been a gradual erosion in the capacity to perfom relational analyses across different areas of the same metropolis and the spatial relationships among them that are tied to conflicts between social classes. It has become more common to examine internal differences within neighborhoods inhabited by the same social class than to explore the interactions and tensions between zones occupied by distinct social groups. While it is undeniable that cities have changed, the way in which they are studied has changed even more rapidly.

One of the expressions of this shift is the methodological emphasis on fieldwork anchored in specific locations, which often overlooks a fundamental experience for the vast majority of peripheral workers: the long commutes across the city. These daily journeys are a direct expression of pronounced sociospatial segregation, (evident in the physical distance between rich and poor, and between

housing and workplace), converted into time spent commuting, which in turn structures both social and urban relations. The time lost in commuting is the ultimate expression of defeat in the urban game. It should be recalled that one of the primary goals of the bourgeoisie in concentrating their residences and workplaces in close proximity is to minimize commuting time as much as possible. Thus the struggle for space is also a struggle for time. This argument is grounded in the work of the geographer David Harvey (2002; 2005) and, in the Brazilian context, exemplified by Flávio Villaça (1998).

It is no coincidence that a number of peripheral intellectuals, experts in urban studies, have made this issue a central concern. For those living in the periphery, this is a fundamental question, based on the methodological principle that it is essential to understand the local context, but, even more importantly, to view the whole from the local perspective, or to see the city through the lens of the periphery.

Ricardo Silva (2024) has indicated that the commute time between home and work is a key factor in social, spatial, temporal, and racial segregation. In the same vein, Sandro Oliveira (2021) demonstrated how the *traditional center* and the southwestern zone have remained the primary destinations for residents from the eastern and southern peripheries during their daily commutes to work. Carolina Freitas (2021) illustrated how young women from Itaquera now traverse the city far more than their mothers' generation. This phenomenon is linked to a reduction in the availability of public sector jobs.

It is certain that microsegregations exist in São Paulo. However, the primary structural and historical pattern continues to be the disparity between a cohesive area inhabited by the bourgeoisie and the middle class, and impoverished peripheries, separated by intermediate suburban zones. The existence of large, impoverished urban areas – conceptualized here as *peripheries* – is a logical outcome of the way cities are structured in capitalist societies. If society concentrates wealth, then the city will likewise concentrate wealth in a specific area. The city is a reflection of society. To break away from this logic, it would be necessary to ensure the equitable production and distribution of wealth across all spaces.

With regard to the internal dynamics of the periphery, the period between 2000 and 2015 saw notable improvements in infrastructure, social indicators, and levels of employment and income. These advancements, occurring within a specific historical context, have been used to support arguments denying the existence of the periphery. However, it is essential to stress that structural problems remained unresolved. Moreover, it is also difficult to affirm that inequalities have diminished, as the gains achieved by the poorest segments of the population occurred alongside gains made by the bourgeoisie.

It is also important to remember that, beginning in 2016, right-wing administrations at all three levels of government intensified neoliberal policies which, when compounded with the effects of the pandemic, reversed many of the gains that had been achieved during the preceding period. All the studies cited, conducted by intellectuals from the peripheries, have indicated a marked deterioration in the quality of life for the residents of these territories over the past decade.

Two cases are particularly illustrative in this regard. The district of Itaquera, often cited as being emblematic of the "disappearance" of the peripheral condition, in 2023, ranked 91st out of 96 districts in São Paulo in terms of health indicators. Other indicators likewise pointed to the persistent precariousness of life in Itaquera (Rede Nossa São Paulo, 2024). During the same period, a series of reports drew attention to the decline of the Morumbi neighborhood, which has gradually been abandoned by its former high-income residents. In Brazil, microssegregation is unable to hold over the long term. When the wealthy are unable to evict the poor, it is they who eventually relocate.

Lastly, it is worth reflecting on how urban science is currently being produced. The pursuit of novelty has obscured structural processes. It is also necessary to distinguish between fundamental and secondary dynamics.

In recent decades, a significant social process involving numerous agents has shaped the political organization of peripheral areas and favelas throughout Brazil. It is striking that, at the very historical moment in which residents of peripheral areas are able to publicly address specific issues affecting these territories, a series of urban studies has emerged that seeks to invalidate the peripheral condition and, by extension, the very existence of the periphery. This process reveals more about how knowledge is being produced than about the realities of the city[18]. As urban studies temper contradictions, they move further away from reality. This dynamic, in turn, contributes to society's growing distrust of the knowledge being produced. It is no coincidence that the growing awareness of belonging to the periphery has emerged primarily outside the institutional boundaries of the university. It has been through artistic production and popular movements that *female and male peripheral subjects* have asserted themselves. Among the peripheral youth, the number who have managed to gain access to higher education remains low. Likewise, the presence of peripheral residents in public universities is still disproportionately low in comparison to the overall

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18. On the relationship between *periphey* and knowledge production within the university, Brenda da Silva's (2019) master's dissertation offers valuable insights. The author argues that in order to understand how the university perceives the periphery, it is first necessary to understand its internal modes of operation

student population. While some knowledge produced in these contexts has circulated more widely, hegemonic explanations of the urban remain largely concentrated among members of the intellectualized middle class, who maintain control over the mechanisms of producing legitimate knowledge. This is expressed in the concentration of power within academic structures, access to funding sources, the consolidation of research groups, and an entire apparatus that facilitates a broader dissemination of their work. This sector, closely interconnected both socially and spatially, and occupying dominant positions within the academic field, effectively restricts the visibility and dissemination of research conducted by scholars with different urban experiences.

One of the most profound consequences of this process is the ideological nature of hegemonic knowledge, insofar as it entails a partial viewpoint attempting to represent the whole, grounded solely in its own perspective. This distortion will only cease when the entire periphery is truly present within the university. Achieving this demands a structural change in access to higher education. Until that moment arrives, residents of the periphery will continue to expose the duality of their condition, expressed both in their denunciation of territorial inequalities and in the power of their political mobilizations. The periphery exists. It is a sad mark of the times that it is necessary to defend what should be self-evident.

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