

DOSSIER: REFOUNDING URBAN-REGIONAL LATIN AMERICAN THINKING: NAVIGATING VARIEGATION, NEGATION, AND CONSTITUTION

CATEGORIES AND IDEAS INFORMING CRITICAL THOUGHT IN BRAZILIAN URBAN STUDIES: TRAJECTORIES AND TENSIONS

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Abstract

This article analyzes trajectories of the categories “periphery,” “favela” and “urban social movements” in Brazilian urban studies, from the developmentalism of the 1950s to the recent neoliberal period, focusing on intellectual production from the Rio-São Paulo axis. It examines the tension between the influence of Eurocentric theoretical frameworks and conceptualizations developed from the Brazilian context. It discusses the role of institutions such as ISEB, CEBRAP and CEDEC in shaping the field, as well as the limitations of the interpretations they produced, which have frequently overlooked race and gender as structuring dimensions of urban experience. Finally, it proposes bringing together urban political economy and decolonial perspectives through the analytical triad of the coloniality, imperialism and nationality of power. This approach seeks to reinterpret the production of urban space in Brazil, highlighting how epistemic and racial hierarchies shape socio-spatial inequalities while also pointing to the emancipatory potential of knowledge and struggles emerging from the peripheries themselves.

Keywords

Urban Planning; Social Movements; Urban Periphery; Favela; Social Participation; Urban Theories; Coloniality of Urban Knowledge.

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CATEGORIAS E IDEIAS EM CIRCULAÇÃO NO PENSAMENTO CRÍTICO DOS ESTUDOS URBANOS BRASILEIROS: TRAJETÓRIAS E TENSÕES

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Resumo

Este artigo analisa trajetórias das categorias “periferia”, “favela” e “movimentos sociais urbanos” nos estudos urbanos brasileiros, do desenvolvimentismo dos anos 1950 ao recente período neoliberal, com foco na produção intelectual do eixo Rio-São Paulo. Examina-se a tensão entre a influência de matrizes teóricas eurocêntricas e as conceituações elaboradas a partir da realidade nacional. Discute-se o papel de instituições como Iseb, Cebrap e Cedec na formação do campo, bem como os limites das interpretações produzidas por elas, que frequentemente negligenciaram as dimensões de raça e gênero como estruturantes da experiência urbana. Propõe-se, por fim, uma articulação entre economia política urbana e perspectivas decoloniais, por meio da tríade analítica colonialidade-imperialidade-nacionalidade do poder. Tal abordagem busca reinterpretar a produção do espaço urbano no Brasil, evidenciando como hierarquias epistêmicas e raciais conformam desigualdades socioespaciais, ao mesmo tempo que aponta para a potencialidade emancipatória dos saberes e lutas que emergem das próprias periferias.

Palavras-chave

Planejamento Urbano; Movimentos Sociais; Periferia Urbana; Favela; Participação Social; Teorias Urbanas; Colonialidade do Saber Urbano.

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Introduction

Brazilian urbanization is marked by profound socio-spatial asymmetries that have historically provided a privileged vantage point for understanding the dynamics of peripheral capitalism. Since its emergence, the field of urban studies in Brazil has reflected tensions among different sociocultural, political, and economic projects, as well as the social struggles surrounding them. International theoretical paradigms, particularly those rooted in Eurocentric traditions, have exerted a strong influence over the field. At the same time, it is essential to understand how these paradigms have been adapted and appropriated within specific contexts.

By reconstructing the trajectories through which interpretive categories such as “urban social movements,” “periphery,” and “favela” were formed and transformed, this article seeks to identify how these categories became theoretical-analytical paradigms in the field of urban studies, while considering the role of institutions that produced interpretations of Brazilian urban reality. For this analysis, we focus on the period from the 1950s to the present, examining Brazilian actors and institutions operating along the Rio de Janeiro–São Paulo axis, two major economic and scientific centers, and ultimately seeking to offer an alternative critical approach to reinterpreting its object of inquiry—the production of urban space in Brazil.

A fundamental aspect of the analysis lies in the tension between epistemic autonomy and dependence: how Brazilian urban theories—while offering original conceptualizations of urban dispossession (Kowarick, 1979), the periphery, and the

favela—engage with and are shaped by Eurocentric intellectual frameworks; and how urban social movements, both as historical subjects and as an interpretive category, have oscillated between projects of radical transformation and forms of institutional engagement. The analysis thus starts from the premise that the production of urban knowledge in Brazil is intrinsically entangled with cognitive, racial, economic, and gender hierarchies that have been inherited and continually rearticulated over time.

In conclusion, the article highlights the theoretical and analytical potential of approaches that bring together urban political economy and decolonial perspectives, articulating the dimensions of coloniality (persistent ethnic-racial and epistemic hierarchies), imperialism (the active dynamics of global expansion and domination), and the nationality of power (projects and internal agency). This analytical triad enables a more nuanced reading of the Brazilian urban context, recognizing both global structures of oppression and the dynamics, contradictions, and possibilities for resistance embedded in national and local contexts. It also highlights how the oppressions of racial, gender, and class-based forms of oppression have become territorialized and are experienced in everyday life. Concepts such as the whitening of territory reveal how racialization also operates as a structuring principle in the production of space, acting both materially and epistemically to erase non-white histories, forms of knowledge, and territorialities. Thus, the article seeks not only to identify entrenched epistemic and socio-spatial hierarchies but also to envision pathways toward overcoming them, moving toward a more plural and emancipatory production of knowledge and urban space.

The text is structured into four main sections, in addition to this introduction and the concluding remarks. The first discusses the genesis of the categories “periphery,” “urban social movements,” and “favela” in the context of developmentalism and Brazilian Marxist thought. The second analyzes the institutionalization of urban struggles and the transformation of “popular participation” into State policy. The third examines the impacts of neoliberalism on urban planning and the emergence of models of entrepreneurialism and the commodification of cities. Finally, the fourth section explores the potential of the proposed articulation of urban political economy, coloniality, imperialism, and nationality of power, engaging with recent theoretical contributions that emphasize the racialization of space in order to develop a critical and integrated reinterpretation of the production of the urban in Brazil.

1. Interpretive categories of the Brazilian urban phenomenon: periphery, urban social movements, popular classes, and favela

The contradictions between the adoption of hegemonic ideas, practices, and models and reflection grounded in local, regional, and national realities have

been present since the formation of the field of urban studies in Brazil. Attracted by localist concerns in the 1920s through the 1940s, urbanism was also deeply influenced by eugenic and hygienist ideas rooted in Eurocentric thought, as extensively documented in the academic literature. Although the tension between epistemic autonomy and dependence has characterized Brazilian urban studies, its foundations can be traced to the early twentieth century, when urban planning thought was taking shape in Brazil and sought to adapt ideas from elsewhere to the national context, which was deeply permeated by racialized ideological constructs of Eurocentric origin (Lira, 1999).

Thus, eugenic and hygienist theses that racialized poverty and justified segregative interventions were incorporated into urban planning discourse in Brazil. Favelas and tenements were criminalized as sites of “racial degeneration”, while working-class garden-city projects sought not only to organize space but also for “racial improvement”. This medicalization of urban space reveals how emerging urban planning aligned itself with national projects of exclusion and the subalternization of the popular classes, who were predominantly non-white. Lira (1999) highlighted how sociological studies from the 1930s and 1940s, such as those by Samuel Lowrie and Oscar Egídio, produced what were effectively ethnic maps of Brazilian cities, identifying “enclaves” of immigrants and Black populations. Although couched in scientific language, these mappings reinforced racial hierarchies and informed policies of residential segregation. Urban space was thus conceived as an organism to be ordered according to racial and cultural criteria, where areas occupied by poor and predominantly Black populations were not even recognized as part of the city.

Beginning in the 1950s, Marxist and nationalist groups in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo sought to identify the specific features of national development through interpretations of the formation of the Brazilian working class, in an effort to understand the production of urban space. Institutions such as the Superior Institute of Brazilian Studies (ISEB), the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP), and the Center for Studies of Contemporary Culture (CEDEC) became important centers for developing interpretations of Brazilian urban reality, thereby influencing subsequent generations of scholars.

In the years preceding 1964, the so-called “ISEB ideology” stood out among non-partisan intellectual circles, based on the notion that Brazil could overcome underdevelopment only through intensified industrialization, thus promoting the national-developmental project (Souza, 2010).

Created in Rio de Janeiro in 1955, the Superior Institute of Brazilian Studies (ISEB) was affiliated with the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) and was

intended to serve as a center for advanced political and social studies. According to Toledo (1997, p. 123), ISEB intellectuals' sought to organize a relatively coherent set of ideas that would enable them to "play an active role in transforming society as a whole, unifying the general interests of the nation".² The notion of industrialization as the basis for State-led modernization became part of the debate over the social and economic reforms advocated by the government of João Goulart (1961–1964) and by nationalists.

ISEB was a center for the production of distinct national-developmental ideologies, which shared the view that the principal contradiction in Brazilian society was the struggle between "nation" and "anti-nation" and identified the "Brazilian people", rather than any particular class, as the principal agent of history. Hélio Jaguaribe, for example, placed his hopes in the development of an indigenous form of capitalism on the Western periphery (Ridenti, 2009).

In the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) interpretation, particularly from the March 1958 Declaration onward, feudal or semifeudal remnants persisted in the countryside and were to be eliminated through a bourgeois, national, and democratic revolution. This revolution would unite all forces interested in national progress and overcoming underdevelopment—the bourgeoisie, proletariat, middle strata, and peasantry—against those seeking to preserve Brazilian underdevelopment: imperialism and its domestic allies, large landowners, and sectors of the middle strata aligned with multinational interests. The socialist revolution would follow in a second stage, either relatively soon or much later, depending on the interpretation of each party faction. The PCB's position was derived from the Sixth Congress of the Communist International, held in Moscow in 1928, which advocated a national and democratic revolution in colonial and semicolonial countries through a united anti-imperialist and antifeudal front.

According to Ridenti (2009), this type of analysis effectively brought communists and nationalists closer together, since both prioritized development, with the State playing a decisive role in planning and financing. This perspective entailed a silencing of class struggles and a conception of the State as standing above them, while underdevelopment was viewed as the "absence of capitalism rather

1. ISEB originated from the Itatiaia Group, established by intellectuals and administrative technicians who began meeting informally on a monthly basis in 1952, "with the aim of formulating solutions applicable to society, with a view to developing a project for socioeconomic development" (Souza, 2010, p. 147). Among the main proponents of this national-developmental project were Hélio Jaguaribe, Guerreiro Ramos, Cândido Mendes de Almeida, Roland Corbisier, Álvaro Vieira Pinto, and Nelson Werneck Sodré.

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

than its outcome” (Ridenti, 2009, p. 4). This conception, in turn, underpinned a dual understanding of the city, in which impoverished areas represented backwardness or a form of marginality to be incorporated into modern society—and, by extension, the modern city—through industrialization.

Because of its privileged location in Rio de Janeiro, close to the offices of national newspapers, publishing houses, political parties, and government ministries, ISEB became an important actor in public debate. As an official State institution with a strong communist presence, it became a target of repression following the 1964 military coup, forcing its intellectuals to seek refuge abroad.

In São Paulo, intellectuals from the sociological tradition of the Universidade de São Paulo (USP)³, some of whom had returned from exile, established the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP) in 1969. Over the following decades, CEBRAP became an important center for theoretical, analytical, and methodological renewal in the social sciences, as well as for oppositional and left-wing thought, although the national-developmental perspective also found some space within the institution. With a strong foundation in urban sociology, these intellectuals came to occupy a predominant position in the field of urban studies.

The intellectuals from São Paulo distinguished themselves from those in Rio de Janeiro, characterizing ISEB as a center for ideological production, whereas CEBRAP was regarded as a site of “true” scientific production: “ISEB’s analysis was closer to reality and also more ideological, whereas we, as scientists, produced abstract, categorical, ‘Marxist’ analyses” (Schwarz, 1999, p. 90). This biased interpretation stemmed from ISEB’s aim of formulating a social theory oriented toward intervention in Brazilian society, particularly in the State. CEBRAP, for its part, was not free of formulations aimed at social intervention, in accordance with the ideological positions of its authors, although these were more diverse. National-developmental tendencies can be identified alongside Marxist currents that sought within society the forces capable of driving social transformation.

CEBRAP established strong ties with institutions based in Chile, such as the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL). The intellectual and institutional

3. Many had been students of Florestan Fernandes. CEBRAP was initially composed of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, José Arthur Giannotti, Elza Berquó, Paul Singer (whose political rights had been revoked), Juarez Lopes Brandão, and Cândido Procópio Ferreira de Camargo. In the following years, Octavio Ianni, Francisco de Oliveira, Bolívar Lamounier, Lúcio Kowarick, Vilmar Faria, and Carlos Estevam Martins joined the permanent staff, which initially also included Francisco Weffort, Boris Fausto, Regis de Castro Andrade, Luiz Werneck Vianna, and Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida.

relationships maintained there, including international funding agencies,⁴ were crucial to the process of establishing and consolidating the institution, enabling progressive intellectuals to continue their work in Brazil after their forcibly removed from their university positions as a consequence of Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5)⁵ (Monteiro; Moura, 2009).

CEBRAP thus forged its place within academic Marxism, drawing on “solid training in formulating a social analysis purged of ideological rhetoric. This would be one of the ‘strong’ aspects of CEBRAP’s work and, in a certain sense, would even facilitate its survival during the period of repression under the military regime” (Sorj, 2001, p. 15). By combining political expression with academic expertise, its members reached a broad intellectual audience (Lahuerta, 2001, p. 3). Moreover, they were attuned to new international trends in thought, including European and North American sociology in general, the New Left, and the Counterculture (Fernandes, 1977, p. 191).

This Marxism developed in the context of empirical research on growth, poverty, and social movements. The accumulation of academic research addressing a wide range of specific topics, much of it quantitative, gave CEBRAP’s sociological diagnoses of Brazilian reality considerable breadth, with pioneering studies in various fields of the social sciences and humanities (Perruso, 2008).

CEBRAP was responsible for the first Marxist attempt to explain the urbanization of São Paulo, the largest city in South America, in *São Paulo 1975: crescimento e pobreza* (Camargo et al., 1976). In this work, the periphery emerges, for the first time, as a category designating areas of the city intended for working-class housing, characterized by precarious housing conditions and a lack of urban infrastructure. An understanding of the social production of urban space in Brazil is linked to the specificities of Brazilian industrialization, an approach strongly influenced by the work of one of its members, Francisco de Oliveira, particularly in “Crítica à razão dualista” (Critique of Dualist Reason) (Oliveira, F., 2003).

The publication of *A produção capitalista da casa (e da cidade) no Brasil industrial* (Maricato, 1979) further developed this interpretation by examining the specificities of urban production in Brazil and introducing new elements concerning

4. Unable to rely on university resources, they innovated by seeking funding from outside institutions, taking on new demands, topics, approaches, and concepts. The Ford Foundation was the center’s principal source of support from 1969 to 1973, which was not without controversy. Apparently, the autonomy of intellectual work was preserved (MICELI, S. *A Fundação Ford no Brasil*. São Paulo: Sumaré, 1993).

5. Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5), issued in 1968, marked a sharp escalation of Brazil’s military dictatorship, granting the government broad powers to suspend political rights, close Congress, and intensify political repression.

the production of the periphery and urban workers' access to land. The volume addressed debates on urban land rent in articles by Singer (1979) and Lefèvre (1979), the role of state policies in income concentration and the reinforcement of patterns of socio-spatial segregation (Bolaaffi, 1979), and the agents involved in producing peripheral space (Bonduki; Rolnik, 1979).

The periphery became an explanatory concept for understanding the urban phenomenon in São Paulo's public and academic debates, linked to discussions on the specificities of national development (Tanaka, 2006). The production of the city came to be understood as part of a process of concentrated capitalist accumulation, which Oliveira (2003)⁶ characterized as low-wage industrialization and Maricato (2000) as low-wage urbanization. Oliveira (2003) critiqued the idea that poverty in Brazil was a vestige of the country's agro-export past that would be overcome through industrial development (in dialogue with marginality theory and, especially, with Celso Furtado, one of the leading formulators of the so-called theory of underdevelopment), thereby exposing the interweaving of backwardness and modernity. The growth of poverty in Brazil's major industrial centers would thus be a result of the low-wage industrialization model, with precarious housing conditions in favelas and peripheral areas constituting one of its expressions (Tanaka, 2006).

In the 1970s and 1980s, we highlight what Kowarick (2002) called "engaged critical research", not only because of the strong presence of empirical investigation in theoretical reflections, but also because of its activist character, whether in urban struggles or in the search for paths toward genuine social transformation. This characteristic took on different forms in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In the city of São Paulo, the urban question took shape around the construction of the periphery as a privileged locus for the action of urban social movements. In Rio de Janeiro, the problem of the favela came to occupy the center of urban conflicts. The concept of urban dispossession was also introduced in *São Paulo 1975: crescimento e pobreza*, in the chapter entitled "A lógica da desordem" (Camargo et al., 1976).

Kowarick's (1979) concept of urban dispossession further developed this interpretation of urbanization in Brazil by offering an account of the working class in the "periphery of capitalism". The phenomenon results from two concomitant processes that exhaust the labor power. In the sphere of production, high rates of labor exploitation are associated with conditions of impoverishment. In the sphere of reproduction and collective consumption, poor housing conditions and

6. Originally published as "A economia brasileira: crítica à razão dualista," in *Estudos Cebrap*, no. 2, 1972.

inadequate public infrastructure require workers to devote additional labor, during their free time and on weekends, to producing housing and urban infrastructure in the peripheries through collective self-help efforts (*mutirões*).

Drawing on Kowarick (2000) and Sader (1988), the working class in Brazil can be understood as a popular class, taking into account the distinctive characteristics of the urban working class under peripheral conditions: high rates of labor turnover, the predominance of informal work, and forms of collective organization of everyday life through which the means of subsistence are secured—not as remnants of primitive or backward forms, but as structural elements of the superexploitation of labor. Through their everyday experiences of urban life, the popular classes found the basis for the formation of a class identity from which significant social struggles would emerge. For Sader (1988, pp. 37–60), urban workers constitute themselves through their struggles as subjects of rights, capable of projecting themselves as political subjects, indicating a “new class configuration” shaped by an identity constructed in the public spaces created in the peripheries.

It is important to recall that Sader (1988) and Kowarick (2000), in the texts cited above, draw on a structuralist Marxist framework to understand the production of the urban periphery and urban social movements. Although they address everyday life in the periphery, they do so through the lens of a separation between the production and reproduction of the labor power. Reflecting on the production of the eastern periphery of the São Paulo Metropolitan Region, Barone (2013) corroborates this interpretation, showing how plans, projects, and works aimed at facilitating urban occupation in the region between the 1960s and 1980s turned into a “labor storage vector” (Barone, 2013, p. 71), a phenomenon that, from the perspective of reproduction, is reflected in the emergence of the dormitory city.

Understanding how the periphery was produced through the contradictions of Brazilian industrialization was closely tied to the development of theories of urban social movements as emerging social and political forces in the 1970s and 1980s. Publications by the Center for Studies of Contemporary Culture (CEDEC) (Moisés et al., 1978; Moisés et al., 1982a) played an important role in bringing popular demonstrations, strikes, and the breaking of train and bus windows into public debate. These forms of collective action came to be understood as autonomous expressions of the popular classes, with potential to foster organization, the formation of collective identities, and the constitution of political subjects (Tanaka, 2006; 2017). This body of work was grounded in European structuralist Marxism, particularly Manuel Castells’s interpretation in *A questão urbana* (Castells, 1983), as developed within French Marxism (Arantes, 2009).

In this work, Castells presents the city as a space of collective consumption, use, and everyday life. Unlike individual consumption of commodities, collective consumption takes place economically and socially not through the market, but through the State and its public policies, which are responsible for the “production of the essential means for the reproduction of the labor power: health, education, housing, collective facilities, etc.” (Castells, 1983 apud Arantes, 2009). In Castells’s account, the urban is understood predominantly as the site of social reproduction: the locus of the reproduction of the labor power, the object of public services (housing, transportation, sanitation, etc.) and state actions aimed at integration and repression (Arantes, 2009).

Jacobi (1987) and Cardoso (1997) emphasize the strong influence of Castells, who, together with Lojkine, highlighted the transformative potential of urban struggles arising from the antagonism between popular forces and the State. The National Association for Research and Graduate Studies in the Social Sciences (ANPOCS) established a working group on social movements as early as 1977 (GT Lutas Urbanas), reflecting the strong influence of the European paradigm of new social movements, “with Alberto Melucci, Alain Touraine, Manuel Castells, and Claus Offe as its main theoretical references, along with Gramsci and his formulations on civil society” (Gohn, 2014, p. 84).

From this perspective, popular mobilizations around urban problems were understood as the result of conflicts between workers and the State over the reproduction of labor power and as expressions of the structural contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. This challenged communist orthodoxy, on the one hand, while, on the other, lending support to conceptions that regarded these mobilizations as having the potential to transform society.

In Rio de Janeiro, during the 1960s, the favela eradication program polarized public debate around the opposing approaches of removal and consolidation (Silva, 1981). Although it had the support of the middle classes and the real estate sector, removal efforts such as the one in Brás de Pina generated considerable public attention and popular resistance. Support from sectors of the Catholic Church enabled residents to remain in place, giving rise to proposals for favela urbanization, which aimed “to integrate the subnormal community into the adjacent neighborhood” (Blank, 1977, p. 11). Because of the participatory methodology employed, the Brás de Pina case became a reference point in the national debate.

As a campaign pledge, these initiatives were implemented by the Community Development Company (CODESCO), established in 1968 under the state administration of the Social Democratic Party (PSD). With funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a US government agency

responsible for implementing economic and social programs in “underdeveloped” countries, CODESCO was organized into teams comprising economists, sociologists, architects, and social workers. Its members included sociologists Luiz Antonio Machado da Silva and Ana Clara Torres Ribeiro, anthropologist José Sergio Leite Lopes, and architect and urban planner Carlos Nelson Ferreira dos Santos, who, while still an undergraduate student in 1962, had already worked in Brás de Pina through contact with the Federation of Favelas of the State of Guanabara (FAFEG) (Freire; Oliveira, 2000, p. 315).

This experience emerged as one of the alternatives taking shape as the military regime intensified its repression of favela residents who resisted forced removal, a process that peaked between 1968 and 1974. In opposition to the prevailing diagnosis of social marginality,⁷ this context lent popular participation in the urbanization process a different meaning. This engagement emerged from residents’ mobilization and was understood as part of a pedagogical process aimed at developing civic consciousness, a conception widely disseminated in Latin America during the 1950s and 1960s by reform-oriented institutions such as the Church (Silva, 1981).

Building on the experience of Brás de Pina, Carlos Nelson dos Santos (2017a) became a key reference in debates on favelas. In opposition to the individualistic “typical architect”, guided by an abstract ideology of progress, and to planners with totalizing and authoritarian visions, Santos argued for the need to look to Brazilian social reality, particularly the favela, for concrete situations that escaped the hegemonic theoretical debates. His perspective, which emerged from his militant engagement, proposed an anthropological approach attentive to detail and particularity, to understand the city through the social relations and networks of meaning present in the everyday lives of its residents.

In the author’s approach, the favela emerges not as a homogeneous unit, but as a diverse space shaped by material and symbolic representations, in which residents are recognized as active subjects, capable of interpreting and negotiating discourses. Santos was also a pioneer in approaching the favela as a form of heritage conquered and built by its residents. He acknowledged the need for intervention while seeking to recognize the relationships embedded in urban space (Santos, C., 2017a).

Extending this analysis to the peripheries, Carlos Nelson dos Santos (2017a) emphasizes the heterogeneity of these territories, identifying a multiplicity of

7. A term rooted in a legal concept according to which part of the population was not fully integrated into society, without taking into account the concrete processes in which it was embedded. Both the formulations presented here concerning the periphery and the construction of the “favela problem” challenge this designation.

activities, forms of integration, and informal economies with their own dynamics, while relating the precarious conditions of the periphery to the logic of land valorization and the unequal distribution of urban amenities under the capitalist mode of production. He therefore argued that professional intervention should be grounded in rigorous empirical study and carried out in collaboration with the population, with residents informed at every stage of the process and about how the knowledge underpinning the intervention was obtained. This ethical and methodological stance sought to prevent residents from becoming mere passive spectators or victims of planning processes, and instead, to promote their emancipation as agents of the spaces they inhabit and produce.

The propositions advanced by Carlos Nelson dos Santos challenged the conception developed by John Turner (1972; 1976),⁸ which was highly influential in shaping views of favelas in Rio de Janeiro during the 1950s and 1960s. Turner's conception attributed a fundamental role to housing in the social integration of rural migrants into modern urban life (Santos, C., 2017a).

The first favela residents' organizations in Rio de Janeiro emerged in the 1950s and 1960s to fight for land tenure, social investment, and urbanization, and against policies aimed at eradicating favelas, asserting favela residents' status as workers and demanding full citizenship (Tanaka, 2017). The Union of Favela Workers (UTF), established in 1955 under the strong influence of communist lawyer Magarinos Torres, opposed the idea that this form of housing was merely transitory (Nunes, 1980). The Federation of Favela Associations of the State of Guanabara (FAFEG), founded in 1963, advocated public investment in favelas and recognition of favela residents as workers (Mello, 2014; Cardoso, 2007). In the 1960s, FAFEG led the "Do You Know the Favela Resident?" campaign, aimed at showing that favela residents were neither marginal nor disconnected from society (Mello, 2014). During the military dictatorship, FAFEG leaders were threatened and persecuted, reducing their role in urban struggles and limiting their ability to change the dominant representation of the favela.

As Silva (2002) points out, the favela was for a long time interpreted as an expression of the reproduction of inequality in Brazilian society and of the corresponding form of the State, characterized by restricted, hierarchical, and fragmented citizenship. He argued that the favela was socially constructed as

8. For Turner (1972; 1976), what official housing policies failed to recognize was that housing performed three fundamental functions in the social process—location, security of tenure, and comfort—which assumed different levels of importance depending on the stage of the migrant's integration into urban life. The favela was regarded as transitional housing, presupposing an evolutionary process of social integration, that is, the progressive adaptation of rural migrants to modern urban life.

a problem. From repressive public health policies to the “negotiated control” established in the 1940s and consolidated by the 1937 Building Code, which institutionalized the clandestine status of favelas, a heteronomous representation of favela residents emerged, centered on the illegality of their housing. Rather than their status as workers, this representation became the core of their social identity. Even as this segment of the population gained recognition as political actors, particularly from the 1950s and 1960s onward, collective mobilizations remained constrained by this framework. According to Silva (2002), the pattern of “negotiated control” has permeated relations between the State and favelas since the 1940s, combining and alternating, depending on the circumstances, repression, tolerance, eviction, and urbanization.

In Cardoso’s (2007) view, the notion of the favela as subnormality—extended to the settlement as a whole and reduced to the physical dimension of housing, infrastructure, and services—persisted even as urbanization efforts advanced during the 1980s and 1990s. To some extent, this understanding revived the dominant perspective embedded in urban planning theories at the beginning of the twentieth century, according to which intervention in space could impose civilizing and disciplinary transformations on the “dangerous classes”. Drawing, to some extent, on modernization sociology theories that strongly influenced Latin American intellectual thought between the 1950s and 1970s, the postulated socioeconomic development paradigm that underpinned these interventions sought to achieve social integration through physical integration. The Marxist critique that emerged during these decades, however, challenged these assumptions, particularly given the support they received from multilateral financing agencies.

As discussed above, the categories highlighted here—periphery, urban spoliation, popular classes, urban social movements, and favela—reflect the influence of a Eurocentric framework for interpreting social processes and the production of urban space. The academic production discussed above, which emerged from the intellectual centers of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, was not limited to importing paradigms and applying them to the urban realities of the two metropolises. Rather, it gave rise to a body of critical scholarship that affirmed the specificities of urbanization under peripheral capitalism. The authors discussed herein engaged directly with empirical reality, the concrete contradictions of social relations in Brazil, and the specificities of state intervention in the peripheries and favelas, while making distinctive contributions through their examination of new practices and political spaces within the popular field.

Beginning in the 1980s, significant changes in the economic, social, and political context in São Paulo led to a reassessment of interpretations of the

periphery and social movements. The transformations anticipated as a result of urban social struggles had failed to materialize, prompting the emergence of “critical assessments”. Living conditions deteriorated, unemployment increased and the country experienced a deepening social crisis amid the broader economic crisis, accompanied by a decline in social mobilization. Some analyses reflected a decline in expectations, while others emphasized the need for a historical interpretation that took into account the tangible advances achieved within their specific context (Tanaka, 2017).

The interpretive frameworks developed to establish urban social movements as a sociological category revealed their limitations in the face of a regressive political and economic landscape, contributing to diminished expectations of social transformation. This theoretical exhaustion was also related to their inability to account for the diversity of forms of social and political organization that emerged in Brazilian society over the years that followed.

In Rio de Janeiro, by contrast, the expansion of urbanization policies and new approaches to integrating favelas into the city, together with the strengthening of residents’ associations and community organizations in the context of redemocratization, gave rise to new interpretations of the condition of favela residents. The pioneering proposition advanced by Carlos Nelson dos Santos (2017a), which called for understanding the favela in terms of its diversity and specific social relations, took on new dimensions through programs such as *Favela-Bairro* (Favela-to-Neighborhood),⁹ which implemented interventions to improve the quality of the urban environment in favelas with the participation of their residents. Silva (2002) emphasized the importance of avoiding definitions of the favela, or of any social configuration, based on the characteristics, means, or resources it lacks, thereby supporting the thesis advanced by Zaluar and Alvito (1998 apud Silva, 2002) that “the favela has won”. The idea of “negotiated control”, however, remained persistent, continuing to constrain its social power:

The undeniable creativity of favela residents—which is largely responsible for the very heterogeneity of favelas—along with their ability to organize and express themselves in the most varied ways and to secure rights and symbolic recognition, has, since the emergence of the favela as a social category, always been “encapsulated” and thus had little effect on transforming the prevailing pattern of urban integration. Instead, it has functioned as an unforeseen and

9. The *Favela-Bairro* Program was created in 1995 by the Rio de Janeiro City Government, with funding from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). A substantial body of literature has examined its pioneering character and analyzed its results, which cannot be developed within the scope of this article.

unwanted mechanism for reproducing a fragmented and deeply hierarchical mode of urban integration. In short, the “victory of the favela” came at the cost of constituting a subordinate social category whose hard-won intervention in the public sphere did not alter the basic pattern of urban sociability, doing little to change its relative position within the social stratification and its role as a social force. (Silva, 2002, p. 224)

It is necessary to recognize that the debate presented herein is centered on institutions and authors based in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, whose analyses emerged from specific realities and were developed within the context of the 1960s through the 1980s. New social actors, new agendas, and a new state project emerged with the process of democratization that began with Brazil’s Constituent process in the mid-1980s. With the approval of the 1988 Federal Constitution, new fields of dispute and intellectual elaboration opened up, along with new dynamics surrounding the struggle to shape a public policy agenda.

2. “Popular participation” on the agenda: social movements and the periphery as producers of interpretive categories and the institutionalization of urban critique

In economic terms, the 1980s and 1990s are considered “lost decades”, marked by the rise of neoliberalism, high inflation and a deterioration of social policies. Against a backdrop of worsening living conditions, rising unemployment, and deepening social crisis, social mobilization declined, as had already been anticipated in the late 1970s. From an analytical perspective, critical assessments began to emerge regarding the failure of the anticipated transformations to materialize. These assessments were characterized by lowered expectations and a call for a more historically distanced perspective that took into account the tangible advances that had been achieved.

Those who placed their hopes in urban social movements as a democratizing force capable of bringing popular demands into the State’s decision-making spaces witnessed, to a large extent, a resurgence of clientelist dynamics and processes of co-optation that neutralized the autonomous and innovative practices of social movements (Gohn, 1985), as well as a loss of momentum in the face of the “reformist” alternatives promoted by the State and its institutions (Moisés, 1982; Gohn, 1985). With the gradual democratic opening that began in 1985, the State became more receptive to popular demands, and public investment began to reach the peripheries, albeit to a limited extent.

Popular participation came to be incorporated into official State discourse, in what Dagnino (2004) calls the perverse effect of the neoliberal project.

In its discourse, the neoliberal agenda embraced the need for greater income redistribution, downplaying the notion of conflict and going so far as to advocate institutional policies—top-down and targeted—that sought to partially address social demands. Participation and social control, popular demands advanced during the constituent process, were ambiguously incorporated into the agendas of governments across the political spectrum, from progressive to conservative administrations, and were often implemented with little or no actual decision-making power. In this way, they fostered the reintroduction of archaic practices of patronage or served as a means of minimizing social tensions with opposition groups. The periphery was thus partially incorporated into the public agenda without actually being integrated into the city.

Nevertheless, the urban question gained prominence on the State agenda as a result of changes in the social base. The periphery and popular housing assumed a central place in political discourse and major electoral campaigns, with the emergence of new political subjects—the movements fighting for housing, basic sanitation, and public transportation—that turned to the State to demand new legal frameworks and urban public policies.

Whereas in the 1980s several of the above-mentioned authors in the field of Marxist urban sociology had documented the emergence of new urban social movements in the peripheries of São Paulo—including mothers' clubs, Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), and mobilizations around urban infrastructure and land tenure regularization—by the late 1980s and early 1990s, movements involved in these struggles began to formalize and establish themselves as national organizations seeking to challenge the State through political and institutional participation. In this context, left-wing and popular-based political parties emerged and reorganized, including the Workers' Party (PT).

In São Paulo, 1981 saw the first recorded instance of a collective urban occupation as a strategy for pressuring the State to allocate vacant land to popular housing programs. Emerging from neighborhood organizations, the occupation gained national attention and became a landmark in the housing movement (Ronconi, 1995). The National Confederation of Residents' Associations (CONAM)—linked to the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), but also including members of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB)—was founded in 1982 at an assembly held in São Paulo attended by approximately 2,700 delegates representing 8,000 neighborhood associations. Also in São Paulo, in 1984, housing movements held their first municipal meeting, bringing together more than one hundred representatives of neighborhood organizations under the motto "Cooperativism, mutual aid, and self-management" (Lopes, 2011). In 1987, many of these associations, linked to the

CEBs, the São Paulo State Architects' Union (SASP), and PT, founded the Union of Housing Movements (UMM). The Popular Movements Center (CMP), which also focused strongly on housing and land tenure regularization, was established in 1993, with closer ties to PT and the Unified Workers' Central (CUT), a trade union confederation closely associated with the Workers' Party that also came to represent the so-called "new unionism" (Gohn, 2003).

From the manifesto announcing its founding in 1980, PT incorporated the participation of left-wing academic activists and professionals from the fields of architecture and urban planning and urban sociology in São Paulo, bringing popular housing and the urban agenda into its programmatic platform. Also in the early 1980s, inspired by rural land struggles and sectors of the Catholic Church, such as the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), efforts began to coordinate urban struggles at a national level. Known as the National Urban Land Articulation (ANSUR), the organization brought together popular leaders and activists with the aim of fostering the development of a platform that would consolidate the demands of urban movements and unify their struggles (Maricato, 1996). These meetings already contained, albeit in embryonic form, the idea of an urban reform movement, reviving the platform of access to land and housing in the city articulated at the Seminar on Housing and Urban Reform, held in 1963.

Although ANSUR's existence was brief, it was an important catalyst for the National Urban Reform Movement,¹⁰ which was effectively constituted with the establishment of the National Constituent Assembly (ANC) in 1987 (Maricato, 1996, p. 311). This movement was initiated in Rio de Janeiro by a group of organizations,¹¹ which gradually brought together forces, particularly in São Paulo, and subsequently incorporated sectors of the popular movement fighting for land and housing (Cardoso, 1997, p. 88).

Lula's¹² victory in the 2002 presidential elections, and the creation of the Ministry of Cities in 2003 are regarded as significant achievements of the struggle

10. The movement was formalized in 1989 as the National Urban Reform Forum (FNUR). In 1991, housing movements collected 850,000 signatures through the Pro-National Housing Fund Committee for a Popular Initiative Bill aimed at creating the National Popular Housing Fund (FNMP) for social housing programs (UNIÃO DOS MOVIMENTOS DE MORADIA UMM). Alternativas habitacionais e qualidade de vida urbana – reflexões sobre a trajetória de lutas da UMM. In: GRAZIA, G. de (Org.). *Direito à cidade e meio ambiente*. Rio de Janeiro: Fórum Brasileiro de Reforma Urbana, 1993. p. 126–44.).

11. These organizations included ANSUR, the Institute of Architects of Brazil (IAB), the Institute of Urban and Regional Research and Planning (IPPUR), the Union of Architects and Urban Planners of the State of Rio de Janeiro (SARJ), the Federation of Residents' Associations of Rio de Janeiro (FAMERJ), and the Union of Engineers in the State of Rio de Janeiro (SENGE).

12. Lula (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva) was president of Brazil from 2003 to 2010 and a founding leader of the Workers' Party (PT).

for urban reform, reflecting the public policy networks formed around social demands (Frey, 2000). However, this agenda was consolidated amid criticism, as the movement shifted toward institutional planning centered on Participatory Master Plans, instruments that are rarely implemented and have had little impact on the production of cities (Tanaka, 2017). Despite the dissemination of a language of rights, predominantly Black popular territories remain segregated and historically criminalized spaces.

3. Neoliberalism and the “new urban question”

The urban reform agenda, however, lost ground in the 1990s, as interpretations that explained urban problems as a consequence of the disconnect between the city and the global economy gained increasing prominence. Within the field of urban policy, democratizing coalitions were confronted with the emergence of the model known as strategic planning, which held that cities should compete with one another to attract investment, marketing themselves as commodities, and assigning a prominent role to businesses and entrepreneurs (Vainer, 2000). New institutional arrangements began to require connections among different dimensions of local policies, as well as articulation among public, semi-public, private, and non-governmental agencies. In the absence of economic and institutional barriers to the mobility of capital, private companies were able to hold the State hostage by invoking the specter of local crises and demanding, for example, the “relaxation” of environmental and urban planning regulations (Acselrad, 2004). The emergence and consolidation of strategic planning provided the methodological and ideological tools for developing and implementing a new repertoire of urban policies and practices in the years that followed, which became the particular focus of numerous urban scholars (Vainer, 2000; Lima Jr., 2003; Ferreira, 2007; Fix, 2015, among others).

Within the prevailing model of urban entrepreneurialism and urban marketing, Brazilian metropolises continued to produce and reproduce inequalities, as illustrated by the cases of the 2014 FIFA World Cup, held in multiple Brazilian cities, the 2007 Pan American Games, and the 2016 Olympic Games, both in Rio de Janeiro. Although international media coverage emphasized Brazil’s geopolitical and economic rise, these mega-events functioned locally as mechanisms for disciplining urban space and opening new fronts of capitalist accumulation. These processes, marked by major urban interventions, particularly in Rio de Janeiro, generated threats of eviction that mobilized residents and their allies in multiscale resistance strategies (Silvestre; Oliveira, 2012).

As Graham (2011) has pointed out, the hegemony of neoliberal governance policies over the past three decades, combined with the expansion of punitive and authoritarian forms of social control, has intensified urban disparities. As a consequence, marginalized populations face both the precarization of public services and active processes of stigmatization and criminalization. This dynamic makes it easier for political, business, and military elites to portray residents of informal settlements as existential—or even “sub-human”—threats to the neoliberal formal economy and its privileged urban enclaves, devoted to housing, production, real estate speculation, and tourism. Along the boundaries between these segregated spaces, a clear process of militarization may be observed, in which state and corporate security forces not only police these areas but also profit from mediating between the groups. Moreover, precarious settlements are frequently targeted for coercive removal by state or private actors, whether to facilitate infrastructure projects or real estate developments, under the pretext of combating crime and epidemics, or simply to conceal poverty from more affluent areas.

4. Coloniality, imperialism and nationality of power over urban knowledge and practices

On the one hand, it is possible to identify a largely original Brazilian and Latin American theoretical and practical “tradition” within urban studies—although, in Brazil, this tradition has been centered predominantly on academic production in the Southeast, which itself presents certain contradictions. On the other hand, throughout history, the material and intellectual influences of Euro-North American centers of power on institutions, policies, and knowledge production in the region have been striking, frequently revealing their inadequacy (or forced adaptation) to the distinct local, regional, and national realities of countries on the periphery of capitalism. The tension provides an important starting point for examining the contemporary work of some decolonial and Marxist scholars who have brought these perspectives into dialogue, opening possibilities for new approaches to urban studies and to the processes of city production in their multiscale, transscale, economic, ethno-racial, gender, and sociocultural dimensions.

“Coloniality of power,” defined as “a fundamental process in the structuring of the modern/colonial world-system” (Grosfoguel, 2008, p. 126 apud Ballestrin, 2013, p. 100), connects the global economic periphery with ethno-racial hierarchies. This “global coloniality”, hegemonized by the United States through institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the Pentagon, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has maintained vast areas in a colonial condition, even in the absence of direct colonial administration.

According to Venezuelan sociologist Edgardo Lander, one of the founders of the Modernity/Coloniality Group, the worldview of liberal market society constitutes a true “cosmovision” articulated around the idea of modernity, a notion that would encompass four basic dimensions:

1) a universal view of history associated with the idea of progress (from which the classification and hierarchization of all peoples, continents, and historical experiences are constructed); 2) the “naturalization” of both social relations and the “human nature” of liberal-capitalist society; 3) the naturalization or ontologization of the multiple forms of separation characteristic of this society; and 4) the necessary superiority of the knowledge produced by this society (“science”) over all other forms of knowledge. (Lander, 2005, p. 13)

Coloniality thus constitutes the dark and constitutive side of modernity, with the two emerging simultaneously from the conquest of the Americas, as modernity/coloniality. This process enabled the capitalist world-economy and the global articulation of forms of labor—slavery, serfdom, and wage labor—with Europe as the hegemonic center (Quijano; Wallerstein, 1992; Mignolo, 2003; Quijano, 2005; Ballestrin, 2013). In this process, race, gender, and labor emerged as the principal categories of classification that structured colonial/modern capitalism from the sixteenth century onward, organizing relations of exploitation, domination, and conflict (Quijano, 2009).

Eurocentrism is thus identified as the hegemonic perspective within a mythologizing narrative that positions Europe and its Western descendants¹³ as the apex of the civilizational trajectory, erasing the contributions of non-European/Western societies. This logic operates through “hierarchical dualisms” (civilized/primitive, rational/irrational, modern/traditional) that, in turn, serve to legitimize the material and subjective domination of peripheral societies (Quijano, 2005).

The coloniality of knowledge is likewise grounded in this logic, reproducing and hierarchizing forms of knowledge and shaping the production of knowledge by intellectuals in the capitalist periphery. Through epistemological erasure, it suppresses popular, Indigenous, African, Afro-diasporic, and other subalternized forms of knowledge worldwide, while selectively appropriating those elements deemed useful to the dynamics of accumulation and the exercise of domination (Quijano, 2005).

13. Colonized countries populated by predominantly white populations, such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, with the United States as their principal representative.

Thus, the forms of labor that constitute and shape knowledge production are concentrated primarily in elite institutions of the Global North (Connell, 2012). According to Alatas (2003), the imperialist structure not only defined political and economic relations but also shaped the mentality of colonized peoples, generating intellectual dependency characterized by exploitation, tutelage, and conformity. This dynamic frequently relegated intellectuals from the peripheries to a secondary role, while scholars from the “metropolises” rationalized the “civilizing mission” on the basis of a presumed superiority. Alatas (2003) further argued that this relationship creates a subjective dimension in which academics from dependent regions passively assimilate the agendas, methods, and theories of hegemonic centers (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France), thereby reinforcing a sense of intellectual inferiority vis-à-vis these countries.

In considering imperialism, a concept proposed by Ballestrin (2017), we arrive at a complementary line of reflection. For Ballestrin, if coloniality is the logic that persists beyond the formal end of colonialism, a similar reasoning can be applied to imperialism as the transcendent logic of imperialism, operating as a driving, expansionist force underlying dynamics of domination. From this perspective, coloniality is not self-sufficient, but rather depends upon an active imperial force, through military interventions and economic control. At the same time, this perspective draws attention to certain limitations in decolonial theorizing that treats modernity as an “origin myth”, potentially obscuring forms of internal resistance and strategies of decolonization that emerge within the modern framework itself.

Imperiality thus entails a desire for expansion, intervention, and multidimensional control—economic, political, and cultural—operating, for example, through accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004) as exemplified by large-scale urban projects such as Porto Maravilha in Rio de Janeiro, and through militarized neoliberal urbanism (Graham, 2011). These processes are sustained by connections between local and national actors, such as construction companies, and global actors, such as investment funds. Moreover, a “global governance (supposedly) without government”, centered on informal mechanisms of power—including international financial institutions, multilateral agencies, and NGOs—would reproduce imperialism through agendas such as “democracy” and “development”. From this perspective, the wholesale negation of modernity overlooks its contradictions and possibilities for resistance, including human rights and social movements. Confronting coloniality would therefore require confronting imperialism through integrated strategies that bring together economic analyses (political economy) and cultural analyses (postcolonial/decolonial approaches).

Although postcolonial studies and critiques of the coloniality of power have provided indispensable tools for denaturalizing epistemic and global political hierarchies, their application may encounter certain analytical limitations. As Ribeiro (2011) argues, an excessive emphasis on the colonial legacy as a singular structural force risks reproducing a form of historical determinism that condemns former colonies to perpetual subalternity, thereby obscuring the agency of national projects and other historical dynamics.

The construction of Brasília offers an important counterpoint to deterministic readings of colonial power. The transfer of the capital from Rio de Janeiro to the Central Plateau in 1960 was not simply an outgrowth of coloniality, but also a founding act of Brazilian “nationality of power”. The monumental project, driven by developmentalist nationalism and a utopian vision of territorial integration, symbolized the deliberate decision of a national elite to break with the coastal economic and symbolic pattern inherited from the colonial period. This case demonstrates that, in certain historical contexts, national projects may acquire causal primacy over the colonial legacy and the practices of imperial powers, constituting an object of analysis that is often specific and even autonomous (Ribeiro, 2011).

There is therefore no need to treat coloniality as a single master key; rather, it is necessary to integrate, in each concrete context, the context-dependent causal hierarchy among coloniality, nationality—with its projects, internal contradictions, and forms of agency—and the globality of capitalist power. This analytical triad can inform research in urban studies by examining, for example, the urban policies of emerging powers, discourses of regional integration and large-scale urban projects, or social movements that articulate local demands with global agendas.

Today, struggles over the city have expanded and diversified, moving beyond classic demands for housing, basic sanitation, and public transportation to encompass struggles for the rights of itinerant informal workers, such as street vendors and delivery workers, who demand public spaces that support their well-being; for the right of women and the LGBTQIAPN+ community to move freely and safely; for the right to history and memory, including struggles against the erasure of Black, Quilombola, and Indigenous histories from urban spaces; for spaces that accommodate diverse forms of religious practice; and for diverse forms of popular cultural practice, many of which are criminalized by dominant white culture, such as funk, hip-hop circles, and slam, among others.

Theoretical production has also been renewed, bringing new approaches and perspectives that have contributed to (re)thinking the past and present of the urban and cities. Intersectional and multiscalar perspectives, such as those developed

by Manzi and Anjos (2021), expand the notion of territory by interconnecting the dimensions of the body, the home, and the city while articulating Black feminism, critical geography, and decolonial thought. These perspectives challenge traditional perspectives by demonstrating how urban dynamics are shaped by intersecting forms of race, gender, and class oppression. By revealing the home as a space of exploitation and resistance and the body as a political territory, they make visible the agency of Black women and introduce analytical tools for uncovering the relationships among coloniality, power, and urbanization.

In addition, research by Renato Emerson dos Santos (2018, 2025) has demonstrated how racialization operates as a structuring principle in the production of peripheral urban space. Spatial segregation, racial hierarchization, and the subalternization of Black and non-White populations are central to the formation of Brazilian cities, insofar as racism is not merely a social phenomenon but a geographical force that shapes the urban landscape to the benefit of capital. Social movements and the production of insurgent cartographies, centered on the resistance and (re)existence of these populations, in turn seek to challenge the dominant racial and spatial order (Santos, R., 2025).

The “whitening of the territory” (Santos, R., 2018), both a foundation and a product of these processes, can thus be understood as a hegemonic racial biopolitics that becomes territorialized through mechanisms of power materialized in spatial policies such as settlement, evictions, and forced displacement. This process articulates the biological and cultural dimensions of racialization, operating through the production of representations, the control of regimes of visibility, and the imposition of specific cultural forms of relating society to nature. Thus, “whitening” is not merely an ideology but a concrete spatial practice that reproduces racial hierarchies and facilitates capitalist accumulation in peripheral cities, consolidating the city as a site of conflicts and resistance in which race and class are inextricably intertwined.

The production of knowledge on the “Latin American city” in this context is marked by a coloniality of knowledge that, by interpreting peripheral realities through Eurocentric paradigms, produces a double erasure: the long history of Black territorialities and the validity of the knowledge produced within them (Davies, 2022). In this sense, the “whitening of the territory” analyzed by Renato Emerson dos Santos (2018, 2025) is also an epistemic whitening. Contemporary struggles over memory, culture, and mobility in cities are therefore likewise forms of resistance to this coloniality, calling for an understanding of the metropolis through other geographies of knowledge.

The contemporary urban question is being reshaped by the renewal of demands emerging forcefully from low-income neighborhoods. Struggles for recognition of the real city have led to the incorporation, both on maps and into the public agenda, of the city produced at the margins of the law, identified by terms such as “illegal”, “informal”, “favelas”, “precarious settlements”, “vilas”, “*mocambos*”, “peripheries”, and numerous other designations used throughout Brazil. Zoning regulations in various cities have begun to include Special Zones or Areas of Social Interest, along with other forms of delimiting popular settlements that were criminalized by traditional urban planning and regulatory practices. These forms of recognition have represented a step forward following the institutional frameworks for land regularization established by the Federal Constitution and the City Statute. Yet they still mark a form of segregation, maintaining a boundary between the “formal” city (regulated and provided with infrastructure and public services guaranteed by municipal authorities) and the “informal” city (the object of specific policies and actions, but never fully integrated).

Concluding remarks

This article has sought to trace, albeit non-exhaustively, the trajectories of categories that have historically been central to interpreting the urban in Brazil—favela, periphery, and urban social movements—examining how their meanings have evolved and how they have been mobilized across different historical and theoretical contexts. The analysis has highlighted the constitutive tension between the influence of Eurocentric theoretical frameworks and the development of concepts and analyses deeply rooted in the Brazilian urban experience. Conceptualizations such as urban dispossession (Kowarick, 1979), the periphery as an explanatory category of peripheral urbanization, and the notion of popular classes (Sader, 1988) represent distinctive theoretical contributions that emerged from a critical engagement with Marxism and the concrete realities of Brazilian metropolises.

The trajectory analyzed above gives rise to several reflections. The category of “popular classes”, as developed by Kowarick (2000) and Sader (1988), does not deny the centrality of economic exploitation but expands the analysis to what has been termed the “circuit of social reproduction”, in which the struggle for survival generates new forms of antagonism, such as struggles over transportation fares, which likewise emerge as forms of class conflicts. This approach rejects views that reduce class to an individual’s position within formal production, demonstrating how class identity is constituted at the intersection of labor exploitation and the spatial segregation experienced in the peripheries.

However, even this conceptual expansion proved limited in encompassing the complexity of the relationships established in urban space. Race and gender were still not fully recognized as structuring axes of peripheral experience. Black women, for example, who are overrepresented in precarious forms of employment, combine labor struggles in their everyday lives with urban demands for basic services—transportation, sanitation, and childcare— thereby expanding the very meaning of “class” itself. Their experience reveals the ongoing interweaving of paid employment, social reproduction, and unpaid labor, which unfolds across diverse urban spaces that transcend the boundaries of formal production.

As we have sought to demonstrate, this intellectual production has, to a large extent, remained tied to cognitive and epistemic hierarchies rooted in Euro-North American thought. Although institutions such as ISEB, CEBRAP, and CEDEC played a fundamental role in criticizing developmentalism and analyzing urban conflicts, their interpretive frameworks frequently reproduced dualisms that rendered fundamental dimensions of urban experience invisible, such as race, gender, and the epistemologies and forms of knowledge of peripheral and favela territories. The very notion of urban social movements, although crucial to the politicization of demands for housing, infrastructure, and participation, also revealed its limitations as it was incorporated and, at times, neutralized through the institutionalization of “popular participation” and the subsequent rise of a neoliberal urban agenda focused on competitiveness and the entrepreneurial management of cities.

Against this backdrop, it is argued here that the renewal of critical urban studies in Brazil requires a conscious effort toward epistemic decolonization. The proposed articulation between urban political economy and decolonial perspectives, within the framework of coloniality, imperialism, and nationality of power, offers a fertile analytical triad for understanding the multiscalar dynamics that shape the Brazilian urban. This approach makes it possible to recognize, on the one hand, the global structures of oppression and accumulation that shape our cities and, on the other, the forms of agency, resistance, and political projects that emerge from peripheries, favelas, and racialized territories. Concepts such as the whitening of the territory (Santos, R., 2018) demonstrate how racialization often operates as a structuring principle in the production of space, requiring the integration of the material and symbolic dimensions of domination.

Contemporary urban struggles—for the right to housing, for mobility, for Black and Indigenous memory, for popular culture, and for territory—reveal that the city remains a field of conflict in which class, race, and gender-based forms of oppression intersect. Likewise, recent urban interventions, under the discourse of

revitalization and globalization, frequently reproduce hygienist and exclusionary logics, now updated through the financialization and militarization of space.

Therefore, these considerations reaffirm the value of perspectives that combine political-economic critique with decolonial and subaltern contributions. Beyond deconstructing hierarchies of knowledge, it is necessary to confront the material structures that perpetuate socio-spatial inequalities. This entails recognizing the city not only as a product of a geopolitics of knowledge that marginalizes local and insurgent forms of knowledge, but also as a space for the practical and theoretical reinvention of the city. Scholars of the urban, in dialogue with social movements and engaged planners, must adopt an epistemological and politically engaged stance capable of seeing favelas and peripheries not merely as places of deprivation, violence, and poverty, but as territories in which alternative forms of life, knowledge, and the city are produced.

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