

Space, Social Theory and Brazilian Social Thought

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to present a research agenda under development by the author since his PhD and which is focused on a discussion about the role of “space” in social theory and Brazilian social thought. One of the theses which I sustain is related to the possibility of interpreting spatial images as cognitive modes of social life and not just descriptive categories of landscapes. Besides, I argue that these images perform a central role in non-central societies, which originated at the margins of European classical modernity. I also suggest that it is possible to analyze Brazilian social thought using this analytical tool.

Key words: Space, Brazilian Social Thought, Modernity.

This article aims to situate a research agenda that I have been developing since my doctoral dissertation (Maia, 2006)¹, focused on the statute of space in social theory and Brazilian thought. One of the hypotheses I have sustained along this trajectory addresses the possibility of interpreting spatial imagery as modalities of socially embedded cognition, and not only as descriptive categories belonging to an “actually existing” physical setting. In other words, categories such as backlands (“sertão”), “desert”, “frontier” usually escape simple denotation as geographical spaces, thus becoming argumentative forms indexing further and broader theorizations about modernity and its variations. Furthermore, I argue that these images are endowed with exceptional centrality by peripheral societies, constituted at the margins of European modernity and facing the problem of how to occupy vast, unknown territories that were never

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¹ My dissertation deals with the meanings of “land” in the writings of Euclides da Cunha and Vicente Licínio Cardoso, focusing on how this particular image may be considered a form of peripheral imagination that inscribes Brazil within a civilizing dynamic that brings it closer to Russia and the United States. During this research, I could testify to the centrality of space to Brazilian social thought. The dissertation was presented in the Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas e Estudos do Rio de Janeiro (IUPERJ) and was published in 2008 by Jorge Zahar .

fully encompassed by a civic-urban regulatory model. The centrality of such categories for classic and modern Brazilian social thought is rendered explicit when closer attention is paid to the centrality conferred by reflections on Brazil's civilizing process to least known areas of the national territory. The present article introduces arguments that underpin the abovementioned hypothesis, also offering some examples of works that have productively explored this tendency.

This article is structured as follows. Firstly, I discuss the classical position occupied by space in social theory, arguing that this category entails an analytical potential that goes far beyond its geographical reality. Secondly, I stress the privileged place occupied by this thematic within the peripheral imaginary, including the American, Brazilian and Russian experiences. Finally, I present a brief discussion based on selective research in the field of social thought, which I see as opening wide interpretative possibilities to the field.

Space and social theory

To most reflections in the social sciences field, time is the determinant category. In modern imagination, space seems initially to appear as resistance, as tradition's trench, destined to be overwhelmed by the forces channeled by new social experiences: capital, class struggle, capitalism, socialism. From this perspective, the explicative economy of modernity relies on temporal dynamics as key to deciphering social phenomena. In one takes the two main trends of sociological tradition, the Weberian and Marxist, it is evident how concepts such as charisma, market, revolution, class struggle and others, indicate processes of historical transformation that could unfold over any geographical background. Those are narratives of the modern drama centered on the sedimentation and dissemination of social energies (in terms of class consciousness and the protestant ethics, for instance). Space, conversely, seems to be relegated to Geography as a specific field of knowledge, at its most breaking the frontiers of historiography, as in the current animated by Braudel.

However, a thorough observation reveals how space has been kept alive as a relevant category for modern social imagination, being shaped in the most diverse forms. From Montesquieu to the Chicago School's urban ecology studies, the spatial problem has persisted through a series of important authors, reminding us that it is no stranger to this specific historical experience.

During the nineteenth century, different currents of scientific thought already devoted special attention to the spatial theme. I make reference here to the intellectual scenario of Ratzel, Taine, Buckle and others, who highlighted the relevance of space as a category of scientific explanation. This discourse resulted in the emergence of Geography as a discipline and in the production of a series of theoretical mechanisms known as "geographical determinism".

The name Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) fully embodies the project of making space an independent analytical variable, capable of explaining men and their customs. According to this perspective, the problem of human diversity would

be captured by the scientific dissection of physical realities endowed with the capacity of carrying on direct or indirect influences on human life. According to Ellen Semple (1911), a pioneer interpreter of Ratzel's work, his textualization of man as a product of earth's superficies entails a particular take on the civilizing process, characterized not only as the pure emancipation of man vis-à-vis nature, but also as the increasing sophistication and elasticity of their relation. The so-called anthropogeography of Ratzel, however, did not achieve immediate currency amongst Brazilian intellectuals, more impressed as they were by the determinist theories of the French philosopher Hippolyte Taine.

Heir to French positivism and a widely-acknowledged erudite during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Taine (1828-1893) was known for a strongly determinist thought. Endowed with a critical and fearful attitude toward his own time - marked by growing democratization and the emergence of mass society - and deeply impressed by the Darwinian revolution, Taine produced a long and influential series of studies about the history of France in which the categories of race and environment held a decisive interpretative weight. The impact of his work was mainly due to his insistence in delimiting a geographical interpretative framework aimed at understanding historical phenomena. A similar set of instruments was mobilized by Henry Thomas Buckle (1821-1863), whose formulations about the relations between nature and civilization had also repercussions in Brazilian contexts. The first section of *History of Brazilian Literature*, by Sílvio Romero, is partially constituted as a critical dialogue with Buckle, for whom the possibilities of reasonable civic life in the Americas meet strong impediments on the geographical conditions of the continent, marked by gigantism and an oppressive nature.

By different means, Taine, Buckle and Ratzel have produced a physics of space characterized by different degrees of determinism, which seizes social reflection in order to reject metaphysical formulations. These authors wish to dominate space by fitting it as an independent variable in their respective theoretical horizons, thus presenting to their readers a framework able to analytically decipher the diversity of the moral phenomenon. The pair space-morality would consume itself along this procedure.

Another example of the so-called "geographical thought" helps us to amplify this formulation. I refer here to the writings of Alexander von Humboldt, which evade a simple "physics" of spatiality. According to Lúcia Ricotta (2003), German naturalism understood science as a project in which the aesthetical played a leading role. More than to classify and analyze phenomena, or dominate them by means of instrumental reason, the core idea was that science communicates our experience of nature. This thesis allows this author to recognize the centrality of Humboldt's poetic language, operating in his work as both a "compensatory realization" (producing an expressive form that allows an esthetic fruition of nature) and a "complementarity", which enables the visualization of previously unseen dimensions of experience. According to the same author,

In the two landmark pieces of Humboldt's oeuvre, *Views of Nature* (*Ansichten der Natur*), of 1808, and *Cosmos*, the most relevant, as I see, is to verify how the scientific gaze over the natural phenomenon is constructed. How, ultimately, this gaze converts a determined physico-spatial reality into image, i.e., a visible reality, aesthetic, paisagistic (RICOTTA, 2003: 16).

The perception that science and scientificity are not necessarily merged, as shown by the nineteenth century's rich experimentations on the boundaries of science and culture, is certainly not exclusive to Ricotta, nor is it limited to the field of geographical thought, where Humboldt belonged. Wolf Lepenies (1996), when considering the history of the disputes between the social sciences and literature over the monopoly of interpretation of society and human dilemmas, arrives at similar conclusions. According to him, it is evident that these quarrels unfolded differently in France, England and Germany, resulting in different sociological configurations. Whereas in France one notes the academic specialization of sociology and its framing as a specialized and autonomous science, in England, sociological knowledge was appropriated by the reformist movement and different state agencies. Furthermore, in Germany, the polemics between the sciences of culture and the sciences of nature allowed for the introduction of problems similar to those recognized by Ricotta in Humboldt into the universe of the sociological sciences.

If our attention is turned again to the question of the relations between Western thought and the thematic of space, we realize how Ricotta and Lepenies's suggestions provide us with a better instrumental to tackle it. In this sense, the election of space as a central category to the human sciences is conditioned by the need of approaching it as an image loaded with meanings that extrapolate by far its physical circumscription.

The mobilization of the category of space along the discursive production about men, cultures and societies has a twofold nature. On the one hand, space is a determinant variable, as in large part of nineteenth century geographical thought, concerned with classifying physical environments that supposedly shaped specific human types. On the other hand, the spatial theme can be also mobilized by means of metaphors and analogies, as a matrix for the production of images and comparisons related to the social world. Hence, notions such as the "desert" signify not only a specific and geographically delimited natural desert, but more emphatically an image associated to a type of social experience. Raymond Williams' (2000) suggestions, for instance, corroborate the second version of the spatial problem as more attentive to the symbolic dimension of the relation between landscape and culture. It is therefore necessary to investigate this relationship more closely.

Space and symbol

Space can be accessed symbolically. But what does this mean in theoretical terms, and what analytical possibilities are offered by this approach? In order to

open this discussion, it is necessary to address some philosophical formulations regarding the nature of the symbol.

In his work on the nature of symbolic forms, Ernest Cassirer (2001) mobilizes a Kantian philosophical arsenal claiming that the forms structuring sensible data and purposes are spiritual productions organized as a relational system, not naturally given in the world. In these terms, an evident human symbolic function would exist, clearly expressed through language. To Cassirer, language is not only an expression of the sensible, or a simple direct translation of the real, but a form free of determinations and capable of producing generalizations. In the author's terms, symbolic forms would be of a twofold nature. He explains,

In each linguistic 'sign', in each mythical or artistic 'image' there is a spiritual meaning, which in itself transcends the sensorial, hereafter converted to the form of the sensible, audible, visible or tangible. Then rises an autonomous configuration, a specific activity of consciousness which, even though different from any other immediate data of sensation or perception, employs them as an attachment and a necessary means of expression. In these terms, the 'natural' symbolism, which, as we saw, belongs to the fundamental constitution of consciousness, is, on the one hand, used and reproduced and, on the other, suppressed and refined (CASSIRER, 2001: 62-63).

The disclosing (never merely reproductive) potential of words was taken to a new level by the hermeneutical tradition. Paul Ricoeur (1987) is one of the chief voices within this tradition, who ascribes great centrality to the problem of textual interpretation. According to the hermeneutical register, writing can only be deciphered if the distance between its original production and the subsequent readings is situated as a pivotal mediation, which structures the realm of possibilities opened by the text. This assumption allows for a semantic autonomy of the text, as it cannot be reduced neither to the original intention of the author nor to the context of textual production. In Ricoeur terms, "Thanks to writing, man and only man is endowed with a world, and not only with a situation" (RICOEUR, 1987: 47). It is worth remarking that the author makes reference here to "a world" and not to "the world", therefore stressing the imaginative potential that characterizes hermeneutical interpretation. In these terms, he highlights the creative potential of reading, not because it is based upon an inflated text, but because the very text unfolds a world that is not limited by its original contextual boundaries. In other words, what in Cassirer was a symbolic function nested in the human spirit, in Ricoeur is transformed into the product of an inevitable dialogue between text and reading, from which a horizon of experience transcending the author's mental space is unveiled. Within the scope of this article, both authors help to characterize, in a generic fashion, the symbolic function of the notion of land. After all, in Ricoeur's terms

The meaning of a text does not lay underneath it, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but also unveiled. What is important to understand is not the initial situation of a discourse, but that which points to a possible world, thanks to the non-ostensive reference of the text. Understanding has less to do with the author than with his intention. It seeks to apprehend the positions unveiled by the textual reference. To understand a text is to follow its movement from meaning to reference: from what it says to what it talks about (Ibid: 99).

But how to consider the relationship between the problems of symbolism and space – the theme at stake here? Michel Foucault (2001) provides interesting material for this discussion. In a 1967 conference, he suggested that the great nineteenth century obsession is History, as if humanity could be thought of as an arrow traveling towards a precise target. Not by chance, I would add, that century was prone to all sorts of evolutionisms, from British Victorian anthropology to social Darwinism, passing through Marxism. Moreover, the priority given to the category of time implied a consecration of the European civilizational model. From this perspective, time would respond to a homogeneous logic, being therefore irreducible to the particular.

However, space resisted and still resists as an interpretative category. Nowadays, it seems too evident how it did not surrender that easily to the homogeneous logic once deemed inexorable by the confident eighteenth century men. The hegemony of the politics of “difference”, the routinization of cultural relativism and the propagation of theories centered on singularity, attest to the persistence of the “local”. In the same conference, Foucault observes that the twentieth century would be an epoch of spatiality. According to him,

We live in a moment in which the world is experienced, I believe, less as a great path moving throughout the ages than as a network that reconnects its points and that interweaves its threads. Maybe one could say that the ideological conflicts animating contemporary controversies can be thought of as a struggle between the devoted descendents of time and the fierce inhabitants of space (FOUCAULT, 2001: 411).

Foucault goes on to argue that utopias and heterotopias would be combined along the concrete characterization of space. Whereas the first would refer to an entity with no real placement, a projection of non-existent dimensions of the quotidian, the latter would be embodied in concrete settings, merging unrealized social desires and available physical objects. That is, a public park, conceived under the auspices of the state, may combine already known references, thus reflecting the repertoire of images of a given society, and breed them with utopian projections developed by engineers and architects about the ideal society. A mirror would be the perfect metaphor to describe the work of

heterotopias. At the same time that it reflects something real, this reflex is projected towards a space that only exists virtually.

One may note how geographical thought itself has embodied a symbolic perception of the problem of space, especially through the concept of landscape. In an article approaching this theme, Vera Melo (2001) sustains that the 70's were characterized by the revitalization of more properly cultural researches about landscape, which rely especially on theoretical trends stemming from phenomenology. Since then, hermeneutical perspectives - attentive to the discursive nature of phenomena - proliferated, as well as studies influenced by the British Marxist tradition epitomized by Raymond Williams. Generally, these interpretations lean towards the symbolic dimension of landscape and its social production, liable to be explained as a sort of code historically animated by paintings, pictures and other expressive signals. It is indeed to this aspect that Edvânia Gomes (2001) refers when she states that: "The landscape is denoted by morphology and connoted by a content and its process of capture and representation (...) A landscape only exists in so far as the individual that organizes it combines and promotes formal and substantial arrangements of its elements and processes, as in a mosaic" (GOMES, 2001: 30).

But it is in the work of a historian that the symbolic approach achieves a higher explicative and even theoretical reach. In his work on the relationship between landscape and memory, Simon Schama (1996) shows how nature has been culturally shaped. Against simplistic ecological reflections conceiving the natural as a primitive entity, supposedly authentic and polluted by human artifacts, Schama argues that nature is inherently connected to culture. After all: "(...) it is our active perception that establishes the difference between raw matter and landscape" (SCHAMA, 1996: 23).

In his book, Schama mobilizes multiple historical registers in order to show how landscape is an intellectual production organizing the referents provided by the natural setting as powerful metaphorical images, which come to life and escape the simple description of the already existing. In his own words:

Landscape is culture before it is nature; it is an imaginative construction projected upon forests, water, stone. However, it must also be recognized that when a particular notion of landscape, a myth, a vision, becomes a concrete space, it merges categories, renders these metaphors more real than its referents, becoming a constitutive part of the scenery (ibid: 70).

One can extract from these debates two suggestive points that help us rethink the problem of the present article: space on the one hand as a metaphor or an intellectual construction, and, on the other, as a potentializing agent, a living force that shapes human life. The second meaning, akin to the work of one of the masters of Brazil's spatial imagination, Euclides da Cunha, is rendered evident by Schama in the following section, dedicated to a series of notable social constructors of landscape:

Writing about the cold Polar lands, the burning Australian desert, ecological transformations of New England or the disputes for water in the American West, authors such as Stephen Pyne, William Cronon and Donald Worster realized the prowess of transforming an inanimate topography into historical agents with a life of their own. By extending to the land and the weather, the creative unpredictability conventionally reserved only for human actors, these writers created histories in which man is not the single agency at stake (Ibid: 23).

These formulations find resonance on a classic of sociological theory. In his writings about the sociological meaning of space, Georg Simmel (1997) argues for a definition of space as a category of the imagination, projected as a form destined to give meaning to the experience of interaction. Loyal to his own sociology of forms, Simmel suggests that what is important to social analysis is not the physical space, but the spatialization of sociological processes. In these terms, space is analogous to artwork, both being human activities which, through the closings and ruptures they introduce between the object and the exterior world, are able to produce a determined form. (Indeed, Simmel's reflections draw heavily on Kant's philosophy and his postulations about space-time as a priori categories of human understanding, that is, forms organizing and lending meaning to empirical experience, inaccessible as a "thing in itself"). After tracing a parallel between the limits of the artwork and the boundaries of space, he states: "The frontier is not only a spatial fact that has sociological consequences. It is a sociological fact that is spatially shaped" (SIMMEL, 1997: 143).

From this section I would like to retain a few points. First, space is certainly a physical scenario, a geography populated by referents. But it is also a metaphor or an image that provides meaning to social experiences. In sum, even when directly referred to as an immediate physical reality, an image may extrapolate this dimension and operate as an idea that embodies broader themes and problems. It is thus not a matter of postulating an exclusively cultural and symbolic dimension informing the apprehension of landscape or space (although that is a decisive step toward unraveling the problem), but arguing that symbolism might be suitable not only to the representation of a place, but to a theoretical discussion in which space is associated with particular qualities or properties of phenomena that belong to a different order. How, therefore, can this conjunction between symbolic imagination and social thought be observed in practice, and what is its finality?

Spaces and peripheral imagination

The symbolic dimension of space is never gratuitous. It is also a privileged means to reassess some cherished themes of Western political thought. To use a recurrent, but still productive expression in anthropology: space is "good to think through". One finds the same trajectory in Louis Althusser's (1972) work on Montesquieu. The distinction drawn by this French nobleman between prairies, associated with despotism, and mountainous areas, thought of as a

privileged breeding site of free people, is famous. Because some chapters of the *Spirit of Laws* are dedicated to the study of the necessary relations between environmental factors and the habits and customs of peoples, Montesquieu is frequently considered one of the founders of the social sciences. However, Althusser sheds interesting light on other much richer and instigating aspects of the sociological dimension of Montesquieu's thought.

Regarding the famous passages about the geography of despotism, Althusser makes his reader gradually perceive this regime as a "political idea" that cannot be circumscribed by the real physical space described along the text. According to him, "[Despotism] is the government of extremes lands, of extreme extensions, above the most extreme skies. It is a boundary-government and the boundary of government" (ALTHUSSER, 1972: 107). The space to which the Oriental prairies are reduced is a space with no place. It is unbounded and endless, because deprived from the conditions that would have allowed social cohesion, order and hierarchy. It is an invented desert, one could say, and invented for the despot's enjoyment - "The deserts are exactly what despotism establishes as its boundaries, burning the land, including its own lands, in order to isolate itself, to protect itself from the contagion and the invasions of forces from whose attack it can never be fully safe" (ibid: 113).

The desert, the social geography of despotism, is, therefore, an image loaded with meaning, capable of being transported even to France. One of the most famous classics of South-American thought, Domingos Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo*, also employs spatial images in order to reflect on our dilemmas. In these terms, a real region, the Pampas, populated by introverted characters, self-centered and opposed to urban sociability, echo the great despotic regions depicted by Montesquieu. An interesting reading of this work is provided by Antônio Mitre (2003) in his essay "A Parábola do Espelho: Identidade e Modernidade no Facundo de Sarmiento", where the author relativizes the classic dichotomy between civilization and barbarism (considered one of the landmarks of Sarmiento's work), arguing that they are not considered the natural property of specific regions. In other words, barbarism would not be the intrinsic expression of an American ontology because the epistemic construction of Sarmiento is rationalistic, preceded as it is by an introspective process grounding explanation on the author himself. His preoccupation would be with the generic modern dilemma, not particularly concerned with the problem of the American proper or the manifestations of historical diversity. In Mitre's own words, "From this perspective, the notions of civilization and barbarism, instead of alluding to particular historical or geographical spaces, represent the elementary ingredients that, in variable proportions, constitute the hybrid substance of the modern project as a whole" (MITRE, 2003: 46-47)

Mitre stresses the rationalist substance of the debate raised by Sarmiento, which he deems irreducible to the particular geographies mobilized by his work. Certainly, with the emergence of the gauchos, barbarism is incarnated as History, and embodied in specific and regionally circumscribed characters. It becomes a specific circumstance. But this barbarism

is neither the utopia of the lost kingdom nor the swan song of an age, and even less the incarnation of evil. It is the ancestral language of consciousness shaken by a new epoch. A terrible and yet fascinating force that Europe buried in its over-populated cities, but which, by transfigurations and veiling, is kept alive, nested as an inherent part of the whole civilizing adventure (ibid: 59).

Both Althusser's reading of Montesquieu and Mitre's interpretation of Sarmiento shed new light on the issue of space, exposing dimensions broader than the realm of Geography. One of these dimensions is the mobilization of geographical images for the production of narratives and interpretations about civilization and its dilemmas. The Pampas and the Oriental prairies are discursive resources that allow the few who took advantage of them to mobilize comparisons that were crucial for the refinement of their arguments. They enabled the visualization of human experience and the definition of distinct civilizational matrixes, recognizable up to these days through the historians' languages: the "desert", the "frontier" and, in Brazil, the backlands ("sertão").

A similar phenomenon is observed in the case of cities, assumed as the spatial image of modern life par excellence, and the symbol of its main forms of sociability. In a piece about urban life according to the European thought, Carl Schorske (2000) shows how the perceptions about this environment proceeded through three different stages: the city as virtue, the city as vice and the city beyond good and evil. If Voltaire and the Illuminists perceived the city as the cornerstone of civilization and the place for the refinement of conduct and customs, British poets of the eighteenth century such as Blake warned about the degeneration prevalent in industrial centers. Only after Baudelaire's impact on French culture, the city lost its univocal connotations, coming to be narrated as the ambiguous place of the multitudes, which offered pleasure and pain, individuality and anonymity, enthroned as an inescapable destiny that must be intensely experimented. More than a temporally situated place - a civilizing future (in Voltaire's version) or a treason of the values of the past (the pastoral British version) -, the city is endowed with temporal attributes, offering fleeting and instantaneous moments of experience.

It is worth noting, however, that the spatial imagination takes on particular hues in the peripheries, where classic themes of European modernity were reinterpreted and urban experience was always regarded as a sort of "phantasmagoria". Marshall Berman (1986), for instance, employs the category of "underdeveloped modernism" in order to decipher the trajectory of Russian modernization. When he characterizes the city hosting the Occidentalizing dream, Petersburg, as a city created by thought, Berman suggests that in Russia urban life was introduced as utopia, as a project inscribed in the real. This aspect would have endowed peripheral modernity with a scandalous, exaggerated, and, why not, baroque vein. Angel Rama (1985), in his classic work about Latin America, follows a similar path and observes that the city in this region may be thought as an active organizing movement of the Idea, an

intellectual activity of engineering native life. José Luiz Romero (2004) shows how peripheral cities have undergone different stages, being permanently transformed by diverse fluxes of Westernization. One of his interesting points has to do with the confluence between, on the one hand, a heteronymous dimension of the cities, entailed by the very act of their political foundation, and, on the other, the autonomous rhythm of development. It was amidst the tension between a colonial will creating ex-nihilo, and the eruption of subterranean groups and forms of life that the city was bred in Latin America.

Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's (1995) classic narrative in *Raízes do Brasil* about the distinctive directions taken by Portugal's and Spain's colonizing missions revisits the point above while adding a different inflexion. In his investigation of the urban configurations in both Portuguese and Spanish regions, the historian argues that the Portuguese were endowed with a more plastic mentality than their peninsular neighbors, more open to adaptations and opposed to the geometrical and abstract planning that would have characterized the Spanish villages in America. In these terms, the baroque nature recognized by Romero in Latin American urban mentality – able to generate court societies which were nobler and more impermeable than the European themselves – would have been attenuated in Portuguese territories by a mundane and non-speculative pragmatism.

This peculiar spatial imagination provides not only meanings that are distinct from those attributed by Schorske to European reflections on the city. It also unleashes images with a powerful capacity of representing modern dilemmas, such as the backlands (*sertão*), the frontier, the desert, the Pampas, amongst others. However, before I elaborate on how these images are mobilized, I would like to highlight how the problem of space is tackled by the peripheral imagination not only in terms of a specific intellectual cartography, but as a deconstruction of the classic modern norm. This exercise has been taken forward since the 1960's by multiple means, gaining a particularly strong momentum in post-colonial studies.

In this internally diversified scholarly tradition² the periphery emerges not only a geographical but an intellectual place. Edward Said (1990; 1999) was pioneer in describing and critically analyzing the politico-ideological foundations of the binary logic undergirding the construction of the concept of "the Orient". In these terms, his production strived to unveil the strategies of power and classification structuring European intellectual heritage, and allowing for a discourse about the other depriving it from autonomous existence. At the same time, Said avoids opposing the imperialist discourse to a narrative fascinated by some pre-colonial "authenticity". In fact, his epistemological perspective tries to make evident the interweaving of geographies and the articulation giving meaning to imperialism. The proposal here is to understand how the discourse

² According to Sérgio Costa (2006), post-colonial studies do not share a single theoretical tradition. In this sense, this group can be identified as a heterogeneous set of works commonly oriented towards the critique of essentialisms and bynarisms that have regulated European modernity.

addressed by the center encompasses the problem of resistance, as much as the forms whereby anti-colonial theories mobilize European repertoire, thus orienting their interpretations toward a broader human dimension. This perspective lends meaning to the postulation that the anti-imperialist struggle must not be reduced to nationalism, going beyond its language and becoming a discourse of radical liberation.

From India emerged various scholarly works interested in questioning the statute of European political science's classic language (CHATTERJEE, 2001) – nation-state, civil society, etc. – therefore accomplishing a strategy of “provincializing Europe” (CHAKHARBARTY, 2000). These projects are a sample of the production associated with the so-called Subaltern Studies, a name originally attributed to a group of Indian historians attempting to circumvent both imperial British narratives and Marxist narratives that framed Indian nationalism. Inspired by Ranajit Guha's (1983) work on the political universe of Indian peasants, a great number of intellectuals became interested in questioning the historicism and organicism entailed by teleological narratives about modernization (one of the most visible targets being Eric Hobsbawm's use of the “pre-political” in his study about rebellions and social bandits).

By making evident the existing tensions between the institutional forms introduced by the colonial regime and the socio-cultural dynamics informing the practices of Asian peasants and workers, authors such as Chatterjee (*op. cit*) rendered explicit the limitations of modern European political language (liberalism and nationalism, for instance) and suggest the possibility of considering the problem of modernity from a non-Eurocentric horizon, not circumscribed by the social logic of functionally autonomous spheres.

Therefore, instead of observing the periphery as a collection of deviating cases, the works assembled under the umbrella of Subaltern Studies struggle to relativize the very norm through a marginal perspective. The extended use of geographical metaphors and images within the argumentative economy of post-colonial authors – a device common to a section of post-structuralism, especially Foucault e Deleuze – is not gratuitous. It expresses their questioning of historical narrative as a way of organizing our cognition about men and things, an approach which tends to privilege evolutionary, linear and even metaphysical outlooks. The recourse to space-based reflection enables the displacement of explanations that postulate overarching logics interested in disciplining the concrete diversity of events and practices. To reflect spatially, I would add, opens the doors to new ways of thinking, productively suspicious of the great classic narratives that used to textualize the periphery under the sign of a teleological fulfillment.

Symptomatically, societies that engaged late within the European classic model of modernity – especially those dispersed throughout wide territories – privileged the use of space to support its socio-political imaginary. The Russian case, for instance, is exemplary of this tendency and finds its greatest expression in the revolutionary agrarianism of the so-called “populist movements” (VENTURI, 1981; BERLIN, 1988). This group embraced the rural world as a

possibility of affirming an alternative socialism, detached from the urban-industrial European alternative. In the United States, the trope of the frontier was established as a central issue for the historians since the publication, in 1893, of Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. This essay stimulated an enormous bibliography about the influence of the "empty spaces" (BARTLETT, 1974) on U.S. state-formation, also consolidating a tradition whose terms would extrapolate the limits of American history. In his multi-sited comparative analysis of this scholarship, American historian Mark Bassine (1993) calls special attention to how nineteenth century Russian historiography appropriated the problem of the frontier in order to mobilize the country's enormous "empty spaces" as part of a new national identity. In these terms, Siberia and the ongoing migratory routes of the Slavs throughout the East are equated with the libertarian expansionism of the American pioneers moving West - both people seeking and experimenting new forms of life. This initially awkward kinship between Russia and United States was not ignored by the Russian *intelligentsia*, which found in the colossal North American country the example of a young society that emerged autonomously and despite of the old parameters of the European civilization. As Bassine notices in another occasion (1991), this kinship became central to the public preoccupations of men such as Alexander Herzen.

Neither the Brazilian Republican intellectuals could avoid noticing the rise of this strange comparative geography, which approximated huge territories belonging to the margins of the world. Bruno Gomide (2004) attested to the great receptivity of Russian romance in Brazil, and the fecundity of the comparative exercises stimulated by these cultural products. Moreover, in my own doctoral dissertation (MAIA, 2006), I sought to stress the enthusiasm with which "Americanist" intellectuals addressed the Russian model. One can see, therefore, that the recognition of a peripheral imagination aimed at disrupting traditional Eurocentric modalities of reflection (such as the binary Occident x Orient) must take into consideration the weight and relevance of spatial imagery to these alternative cartographies.³ All happens as if the spatialization of thought offered an antidote to the uniformization produced by the hegemony achieved by time as the key-category of modernity. We are left, therefore, with the task of showing how Brazilian intellectual life took advantage of this interpretative trope in order to reopen the doors of our tradition.

Space, Brazilian thought and the peripheral imagination

³ Although including the United States as part of this alternative peripheral matrix might seem strange, one should not forget that this article mobilizes "periphery" as a category associated with countries that emerged as part of the great territories away from Europe and which appeared as "new" nations before the world in the beginning of the twentieth century. Here I am not employing the concept of periphery used by theorists of imperialism and dependency theory. These alternative dimensions of the United States formation were also realized by perceptive Marxist authors such as Antonio Gramsci, who dedicated considerable amount of pages to the phenomena of "Americanism" and "Fordism".

This section seeks to briefly recollect some publications and research projects that have approached space and locality as fruitful means to rethink Brazil and its modern dilemmas, testifying to the analytical force of the paradigm already introduced. In Geography, the works of Lia Osório Machado (2003) and Roberto de Moraes (2002) are the best contributions to the topic, attributing a central critical connotation to Brazil's spatial imagery. Machado highlights how the appropriation of European scientific theories by Brazilian Republicans aimed at establishing the conditions for the emergence of "progress" and for overcoming the "disorganization" that supposedly characterized the country by means of a centralized and deterministic discourse. In addition, Moraes points to the inherent authoritarianism of these territorial reflections, typical of the colonial tendency of naturalizing space and identifying it with a state-centered political project which obscures the subaltern subjects involved in these processes.

In the broader field of social sciences, especially sociology of culture, the spatial problem requires a renewed treatment, more sensitive to the interpretative possibilities entailed by the topic. These studies are part of a larger set of issues whose purpose is to undo the traditional lines dividing Brazilian non-academic thought and sociology, shaped by a hegemonic tendency to reduce the first group to the universe of "ensaísmo". Exemplary of this new perspective is the work of Nísia Trindade Lima (1999), concerned with the reexamination of the dualism littoral/backlands assumed by the author as fundamental to the imagination of the First Republic's thinkers. Her book contemplates not only classical narratives – Euclides da Cunha, Visconde de Taunay etc –, but also the academic sociological production post-1930s, therefore stressing the vigor of this spatial matrix to Brazil's national imagination. According to Lima, in these writings the backlands acquire either a negative judgment as a place of sickness and abandonment, or a positive one as the symbol of a deep and still unknown national authenticity. The author also narrates this process as the emergence of an alternative cartography, as I suggested in the previous section. The book illustrates how the backlands appeared to a particular "Americanist" scholarship: as a primitive and incipient frontier space, very diverse from the European frontier represented by the coastal cities. Lucia Lippi Oliveira (2000) elaborates more carefully on this equation having in mind the construction of national identity in both Brazil and the United States, where geographical representations played a leading role.

The proximity between Brazil and US is also stressed by Robert Wegner (2000), who analyses Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's work having as reference his *Caminhos e Fronteiras*. Wegner realizes that the polarity between cordiality and modernity, so accentuated by *Raízes do Brasil*, is dissolved in this late work, where the North-American theme of the frontier is translated into the civilizing adventure of the Brazilian *bandeirante*. From this perspective, the adaptive movement undertaken by these men during their expeditions is narrated as a rationalization of their original Iberism, leading Brazil to modernity through an alternative path which does not simply reiterate the European experience. The same reading embodies theoretical consequences when analyzed by Luiz

Werneck Vianna (1997), who, through the Gramscian notion of “passive revolution”, inscribes Brazil’s Iberic tradition in an American geography definitely open to the modern, in spite of being more gradualist and averse to radical ruptures. Even though not primordially interested in the problem of space, Werneck Vianna still dedicates considerable attention to it when he stresses the centrality of territorialism for the action strategies of Brazil’s political elites.

The perception that peripheral spatial imagination may be associated to a peripheral civilizational matrix is further refined in the work of Rubem Barboza Filho (2000) on the Iberic baroque. Studying this political philosophy as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon liberal model, Barboza Filho exposes how space is fundamental to the constitution of its hierarchical and “architectonic” language, heir to Thomism and the holistic conceptions that flourished in the Peninsula. Therefore, while the individual proprietor and market relations provided the basic axioms of liberal reflection, the political baroque analyzed by the author is supported by an ontology characterized by communities organized around the sovereign’s will, akin to a “cartography” in its full meaning. Transplanted to the colonial arena, this language is forced to reckon with the great colonial territories, populated by distinct peoples ruled by diverse logics, which pushed the Iberic men towards an immense creative effort of reinventing traditions and modes of life that preserved the expressive content of the political arguments they were used to. One may notice that the problem of the vast unknown lands (central to both the American and the Russian experiences) also haunted those responsible for the Iberic colonial adventure.⁴

What are we to retain from all these suggestions? In a recent work (MAIA, 2007), I sought to render explicit that the centrality of the space to our imagination is related to the production of a peripheral political sociology, and not simply to an authoritarian reification intended to undermine the historical and quarrelsome nature of Brazil’s formation. In this sense, I argued that space could lead us toward an interpretation of our civilizing process able to acknowledge the work of *invention* and the open-ended nature of our modernization process. The expression “American Russia”⁵ addresses some of these characteristics, juxtaposing Brazil and other societies where space was

⁴ According to M. Bassin, the eighteenth century Czarist bureaucracy was fully aware of the example set by Iberic colonies in America, usually taken as an analogue of Siberia. According to him, “The common practice of understanding Siberia on the light of Western Colonial territories, and referring to it as “our Peru” or “our Mexico”, as “Russia’s Brazil” or even “our Easter India” reveals a mental habit that persisted within the high Russian bureaucracy during the entire nineteenth century” (Bassin, 1991: 770)

⁵ Here it is important to stress that this expression, present in the first section of Gilberto Freyre’s *The Masters and the Slaves* has been recently redeployed by Ricardo Benzaquen de Araújo (1994), who also tried to argue for the open and moving dimension of Brazil’s social formation.

similarly encompassed by processes of nation-building which did not merely replicate the moral economy of the urban European citizen. As one may see, it is possible to draw on our own social thought in order to produce broader theorizations.

This idea – the articulation of “ensaísmo” and theory – is at the center of the contemporary research agenda about Brazilian thought, opening itself even to the production that has been conventionally called “rural sociology”. After all, as André Botelho (2007) shows in a recent article, one of Brazilian political sociology’s key aspects is the dialectics between legitimate public order and extended private worlds, the latter usually pertaining to the spaces of the great agricultural regions. Not by chance, those are the places taken as a reference by Maria Isaura de Queiroz and Vitor Nunes Leal, two prominent scholars dealing with the intercrossing between political and rural sociology. There is still a myriad of objects, texts, intellectuals and essays to be explored by this perspective.

Finally, these works suggest the need for a broader look on our own tradition. If the debate on “Americanism” and “Iberism” (WERNECK VIANNA, *op. cit*) has lately acquired great projection, thus evidencing the cosmopolitanism of Brazilian intellectual matrixes, this effort cannot cease there. As I have tried to show, the relationship between space and peripheral imagination still carries countless points to be unpacked, especially those stemming from other sources of reflection outside the European classic axis. When global geopolitics now witnesses a strong realignment of culture, societies and traditions, it is imperative to reexamine social thought under the scrutiny of perspectives that help us to build new global cartographies. If almost a hundred years ago Brazilian intellectuals were bold enough to analytically compare Brazil and Russia, why abstain from such a challenge today?

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