

Social Theory and Brazilian Social Thought: Notes for a Research Agenda

Pensamento brasileiro e teoria social: notas para uma agenda de pesquisa

Pensée brésilienne et théorie sociale: notes pour un agenda de recherche

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ABSTRACT

So-called “social thought” has always occupied a prominent place in the social sciences in Brazil. Current research in the field has increasingly sought to articulate in its analysis of national essayistic production broader theoretical preoccupations regarding the status of modernity in non-central societies. Taking as its starting point this intellectual state of affairs, this article seeks to accomplish two principal goals: a) justify the need for a dialogue between Brazilian social thought and social theory, in particular post-colonial theories and criticism of the Eurocentric tradition in sociology; b) explore possible further points of dialogue between these areas through an examination of analytical nexuses common to both fields of research.

Key words: Brazilian social thought; social theory; Eurocentrism; intellectuals; post-colonialism

RESUMO

O chamado "pensamento social" sempre ocupou lugar de relevo no quadro das ciências sociais tais como praticadas no Brasil. Recentemente, as pesquisas nesse campo têm buscado cada vez mais

articular suas análises do ensaísmo nacional a preocupações teóricas mais gerais, referentes ao estatuto da modernidade em sociedades não-centrais. Este artigo parte dessa circunstância intelectual para buscar dois objetivos: a) justificar mais explicitamente a necessidade de diálogo entre pensamento brasileiro e teoria social, em especial à luz do pós-colonialismo e das críticas ao eurocentrismo da sociologia; b) explorar possíveis diálogos entre essas áreas tomando como objeto de análise alguns eixos analíticos comuns aos dois campos.

Palavras-chave: Pensamento brasileiro; Teoria social; Eurocentrismo; Intelectuais; Pós-colonialismo.

RÉSUMÉ

La dénommée "pensée sociale" a toujours occupé une place de relief dans les sciences sociales telles que pratiquées au Brésil. Récemment, les recherches dans ce domaine ont tenté de plus en plus d'articuler leurs analyses de l'essayisme national avec les inquiétudes théoriques plus générales, liées au statut de la modernité dans des sociétés non-centrales. Cet article part de cette circonstance intellectuelle pour chercher deux objectifs: a) justifier de façon plus explicite le besoin de dialogue entre la pensée brésilienne et la théorie sociale, en particulier à la lumière du postcolonialisme et des critiques à l'eurocentrisme de la sociologie; b) explorer les dialogues possibles entre ces domaines ayant comme objet d'analyse certains axes analytiques qui leur sont communs.

Mots-clés: Pensée brésilienne; Théorie sociale; Eurocentrisme; Intelectuels; Postcolonialisme.

Brazilian social thought is one of the most enduring areas in the recent history of post-graduate studies and research in social sciences. And it continues to attract professional academics and post-graduates, as evidenced by the very regularity and longevity of the ANPOCS¹(National Association of Post-Graduate Studies in Social Sciences) working group dedicated to this topic. The reasons for this interest are familiar to us, pointing not only to the thematic continuity between institutionalized sociology and so-called “essayism” (Lima, 1999), but also to the presence of Brazilian classics in the discourse of modern social sciences in Brazil (Melo, 1999). According to Gildo Marçal Brandão (Brandão, 2005),

¹ According to L. Lippi Oliveira (Oliveira, 1999), the group originated in 1981 from a proposal sent by Mariza Peirano and Luiz Antônio Castro Santos to the academic committee of ANPOCS. The first meeting took place in 1983.

the persistence of this area of study is also related to cyclical nature of crises in Brazilian capitalism, consequently replenishing the themes of origin and under-development. He writes:

Everything comes about as if the effort to ‘think the thought’ were ignited during the moments when our poor formation becomes clearer and the nation and its intellectuals see themselves compelled to retrace in spirit the paths already taken before embarking on a new adventure—only to fall and get up again (Brandão, 2005, p.235)

First of all, there should be nothing unique about this line of research; international forums such as the International Sociological Association have groups dedicated to the history of sociology and the delineation of national traditions of theorizing. However, in the case of Brazil, this ongoing hermeneutics appears to hold a special meaning, breaking away from the simple inventory of formative traditions and assuming larger theoretical claims. The field entitled “interpretations of Brazil” brings together not only scholars interested in the history of Brazilian essayism, but also some of the most productive researchers engaged in interpreting Brazilian modernity, such as Jessé Souza and Luiz Werneck Vianna, to name just two. For a synthesis of these characteristics of the field, we turn again to the words of Gildo Brandão:

The reflection on political and social thought revealed itself, meanwhile, to be too rebellious to be treated as a mere ideological pre-history to be abandoned as soon as it had access to the academic institutionalization of science. On the contrary, its assumptions were continually restocked throughout the transformation of institutionalized science—as an indication of the existence of a body of intellectual problems and solutions, of a theoretical and methodological stock that the authors are obliged to refer to when encountering new questions posed by social

development, as a sharp instrument of regulation of our internal market of ideas in its exchanges with the world market of ideas. (Brandão, 2005, p.233)

There are good signs therefore that it is possible to obtain a current theoretical yield from Brazilian social thought, but that this potential remains implicit and without adequate methodological justification. After all, why theorize using a *national* intellectual tradition as intermediary? What does a re-reading of this particular set of ideas and classic essays give us that is different and unique to the field globally known as “social theory”? This article postulates that the discursive universe denominated as Brazilian social thought can be viewed as a form of theoretical imagination in dialogue with post-colonialism. That is, I suggest that Brazilian social thought speaks not only of Brazil, but also to global dilemmas from a point-of-view that is distinct from the European and Anglo-Saxon perspectives. To demonstrate this, it is not sufficient to point to affinities between the two discursive universes. It is also necessary, moreover, to point to possible lines of discussion that can be theoretically explored using the distinct tradition of Brazilian social thought. In so doing, I hope to make it clear that post-colonialism will not be treated as if it were a new field of study or intellectual fad emerging out of the great centers of research. Rather, I approach post-colonialism as an alternative discursive formation with multiple foundations, including intellectual traditions from Brazil.

This article adopts a theoretical perspective distinct from the linguistic contextualism of the so-called Cambridge School, renowned in the general fields of the history of ideas and intellectual history. One encounters in the works of Quentin Skinner (Skinner, 1978; Tully, 1988) the most vigorous defense of an interpretive approach to classic texts that attempts to reconstruct the particularity of the communicative universe of its authors, avoiding anachronistic fallacies and the subjugation of the text to perspectives alien to its origin. This historicist vision has produced a set of methodological procedures that has doubtless taken intellectual history to a new level. However, the exercise proposed here addresses a different set of problems that should not be confused with those addressed by Skinner

and his colleagues. This article takes seriously the lesson offered by Jeffrey Alexander (Alexander, 1999) regarding the discursive nature of social theory and the constant hermeneutic exchange between classical texts and contemporary writings. The appeal to the Brazilian social thought is not intended to reconstruct its specific linguistic range or more precisely establish the intentions of the producers when writing. Rather, I wish to set in motion contemporary theoretical productions taken from intellectual formations commonly dismissed as purely “essayistic”. In this sense, my intention is not to challenge the historicist program, but simply to emphasize that it is not the only viable means to interrogate classic texts.

In this context it is important to clarify what is meant by Brazilian social thought as an area of study. I refer here to the contemporary intellectual field dedicated to the study of Brazilian essayism production, taking as its point of reference contemporary academic reinterpretations of this tradition. It is furthermore assumed that studies undertaken in this chronology nourish themselves on the great interpretive traditions of the first four decades of the twentieth century, nevertheless also adopting a decidedly reflective posture regarding this hermeneutic enterprise.

This article is divided into three sections. In the first, I present social theory’s critique of Eurocentrism, with special emphasis on the discussion of post-colonialism. The objective here is to demonstrate how it is possible to extract from this body of literature two major lines of discussion that, in my view, establish possible connections with lines of inquiry in Brazilian social thought. Specifically, I refer to the debate on the difficult relationship between the nation-state and society in countries originating from European expansion as well as the actual discussion regarding the colonial status of modernity in these lands.

In the second section, I argue that it is possible to read a large part of the contemporary debates in the field of Brazilian social thought in terms of these two major lines of discussion, a point that constitutes for this article strong evidence for the claim of a sustained affinity between the two intellectual traditions and discourses. In the first case, I return to the debate about Iberianism in Brazil,

as well as the discussions about the division between the public and private spheres. Both discussions produced significant theoretical reflections regarding the differentiation of state and society, moreover in a context distinguished from that of the European universe in which the classical theories on this topic were generated. In the second case, I consider how some of the discussions about the Brazilian formation—with its constitutive dualities—confirm a general state of discontent among the nation’s intellectuals as a specifically modern phenomenon. In both cases I return to the debate about “misplaced ideas” and the discussions about the coast versus the *sertão*² in Brazilian social thought. Lastly, I contend that the broader realization of this agenda for dialogue can furthermore aid in a re-reading of the classical Brazilian imagination beyond its specific national boundaries, examining its objects (books, essays, ideas and authors) from a contemporary discursive position. In addition, I argue that this same dialogue can also contribute to the enlargement of the theoretical field conventionally known as post-colonialism, directing its gaze toward intellectual worlds that are commonly overlooked. In other words, Brazilian social thought has much to contribute to post-colonial theory.

Social Theory and Post-Colonialism

It’s not easy to trace the origins of post-colonial criticism, especially if we resist treating the term as an academic brand associated with certain groups of intellectuals, as in the case of Subaltern Studies from India. After all, innovative theoretical formulations produced in countries regarded as “peripheral” to the European and Anglo-Saxon world were common in social thought in the twentieth century. It is possible, for instance, to cite examples from Brazil in the 1960s (Guerreiro Ramos and his sociological reduction), or Malaysia in the same period (Syed Hussein Alatas), and of course one should not fail to mention the national liberation writings of the Martinican Frantz Fanon.

² *Sertão* is the Brazilian term for the vast interior of the country, roughly equivalent to “hinterlands” and often also synonymous with “interior.”

A common feature in all of these formulations was the perception that theoretical invention in these non-central locations implied, at the very least, a critical reception of authors and categories produced in European literature and, ultimately, a questioning of the very foundations of this literature and its discursive position. Thus, although the term “post-colonial” was associated with a context marked by the emergence of new nations in Africa and Asia, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, the scope of this critique extended to encompass discourses produced in other historical and geographical contexts in which discontent with the relation between “center” and “margins” was both present and a crucial factor in the organization of intellectual life. Fernando Coronil maintains (Coronil, 2004) that Latin America experienced several moments of post-colonial theoretical formulation from authors and works that are not limited to the official history of the term. This has led some scholars of the region to postulate a more profound connection between modernity and colonialism, linking it to the very process of “invention” of the Americas since the European conquest.

According to Sérgio Costa (Costa, 2006), despite its diversity and plasticity, so-called post-colonial thought was unified in its recognition that the critique of Eurocentrist social theory implied a de-centering of that theory and concurrently a search for new cognitive paradigms. That is, beyond mere nativism, this intellectual framework oriented itself toward a broader discussion, moving from the margins of modern experience to the heart of contemporary social theory. It is theoretical movement that goes beyond a simple affirmation of difference translated into national terms to reinvent the very parameters of this discourse. As we shall see in the final section of this article, this quality is crucial to the critical formation of scholars of Brazilian social thought.

Two particular themes exemplify this search for new cognitive paradigms: the relation between nation-state and society and the colonial dimensions of modernity. Together these themes comprise the analytic axes relevant to the production of post-colonial theory. In presenting the first, I will offer a brief summary of the work of Partha Chatterjee and Mahmood Mamdani. For the second, I focus on the

writings of Paul Gilroy and Walter D. Mignolo. The choice of these authors is guided as much by a criterion of representativeness as it is by the wealth and influence of their writings. Additionally, I intentionally chose authors from diverse groups and schools, allowing for a more profound investigation of the themes while also avoiding a sample that might be considered biased. I want to stress that the chosen topic far from exhausts this literature; my brief analysis of these works and authors is analytically oriented and aims to establish points of dialogue and exchange with another form of social imagination.

Partha Chatterjee is an Indian political scientist associated with the group *Subaltern Studies*. His diverse body of work was inspired by a profound historiographical revision undertaken by Indian intellectuals in the first half of the 1980s. These intellectuals challenged the traditional liberal and Marxist models of interpretation of political conflict in their land. Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chakrabarty, 2002) notes that these scholars rejected the obligatory association between modernity and the universality of both capital and abstract reasoning. Instead they affirmed subaltern agents—most notably peasants—oriented by an alternative logic to that of the Western model for collective action. A key publication for this tradition is the work of Raja Guha (Guha, 1983) titled “Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India.” In it he highlights the specific forms of peasant mobilization in India, scrupulously avoiding recourse to any notion of the “pre-political” in this agency.

In a bold preface to an anthology of the group’s writings, Gayatri Spivak (Spivak, 1988) argued for a strong affinity between their critical revision and the deconstructionist philosophy associated with Derrida and his cohorts. In this regard, the impact of this critical enterprise promoted by the Indian intellectuals extended well beyond the national explanatory models that reduced subaltern practices, experiences and modes of consciousness to nationalist or teleological schematas to involve and affect theoretical production in the center of capitalism. That is, the *Subaltern Studies* group promoted a critique of the conceptual assumptions that informed political science, for instance: the centrality of the state, the public-private dichotomy, and the separation of civil society and religious traditions.

The work of Chatterjee (Chatterjee, 2001; 1993) on nation and nationalism in Indian history is exemplary of this perspective. In questioning the teleology that guides the orthodox historiographical visions of the process of Indian independence, Chatterjee demonstrated how certain totalizing concepts rendered invisible other specific modes of protest and political expression of subaltern groups in India. In other words, the political science that shaped these studies subsumed the diverse fragments of popular insurgency to the limits of what was considered properly “political”, thereby ignoring forms of agency and consciousness that escaped the mold of the public sphere as formulated by European political science. The nation-state was meant to serve as the great administrative and bureaucratic apparatus, capable of explaining the continuing conflicts between colonialism and subalterns, even in a context of national independence, where the nation-state would represent a form of domestication of the multiple political expressions of these social groups.

His reading of Gramsci was mediated by this critical concern. Thus Chatterjee contends that the European conception of civil society proved to be inadequate in accounting for the modern urban and subaltern sectors of Indian political dynamics. Using the Gramscian concept of political society, Chatterjee maintained that the forms of protest and collective action deployed by these sectors involved illegal networks and religious practices that forced the state to recognize unprecedented political logics—or at least political practices that escaped the image and notion of the civic sphere presumed to be exemplary.

Chatterjee’s writings fall within the program of a provincialization of metropolitan theory, as described by Chakrabarty (Chakrabarty, 2000). Comprehending the universalist status of the theoretical discourse of European political science as a conceptual translation of a *particular* history consequently transforms that discourse from an unquestionable starting point into a problem for research. Thus Chatterjee’s contributions to this dialogue help to reopen this theoretical universe on the basis of a recognition of other templates of political organization associated with specific discursive locations.

The intellectual work of the Ugandan Mahmood Mamdani (Mamdani, 1996) follows a similar path. In his work on the African colonial experience with governance, Mamdani chooses Uganda and South Africa as case studies, arguing that both the Eurocentric intellectuals and the Africanists make the same mistake: they ignore the specific dimension of the bifurcated state in these societies. According to the author, European colonialism combined forms of direct government based on traditional civic mechanisms with practices from indirect government that incorporated customary rights and sovereign rights considered to be native. Thus, while the large cities and capitals of civil society operated under the civic language of rights (combined, of course, with racial barriers), in the rural environment the native authorities were handed a *de facto* dominion—a form of decentralized despotism that recreated in hierarchical form whatever was held to be tradition.

According to Mamdani, the split state was not dismantled in the national liberation. Whereas urban civil society fought against racial exclusion, the tribal practices that despotically ruled the countryside were left intact. This specific political configuration could not be understood with recourse to the classical narratives of social theory, such as those centered on the concept of the “patrimonial state” or “patronage system”. Not even the appeal to strengthen civil society could solve this persistent problem in these nation-states. Mamdani unveils the forms of political domination in post-colonial agrarian world by moving the “rural” to the center of his analysis. The results of Mamdani’s analysis therefore suggest the need to reopen the cognitive universe of political theory.

This cognitive opening is also found in studies that seek to equate colonialism with modernity. This is case with Paul Gilroy and Walter D. Mignolo, two authors with very different theoretical inspirations.

In his renowned book on the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy (Gilroy, 1993) argues that the culturalist narratives on race tend to imprison themselves in nationalist or essentialist discourses. In supporting his thesis of a floating network of sites, paths and migrations that shapes a set of artistic and political practices originating in the experience of black slavery, Gilroy endeavors to depict the

emergence of a kind of counter-modernity that defies the boundaries of the central theory of modernity. That is, whereas in the heart of Europe politics and culture were considered to be separate and autonomous spheres, with the rational subject abstracted from all particular conditions, in the so-called Black Atlantic these conditions were radically questioned from the site of a peripheral articulation of the modern.

Gilroy examines biographies, music, writing and memoirs of black artists and intellectuals, reading for signs of an inversion of the classical Hegelian allegory of intersubjectivity born from the mutual dependency of master and slave. By pointing to the violent, radical and utopian dimension of many of their expressions of liberation, Gilroy asserts that it is possible to locate a black narrative of modernity, but also questions the abstract universalism of the bourgeois public sphere and its logic of instrumental reason. At the same time, he claims that this empirical material represented a form of expression that associates freedom with personal self-invention. In this context, the concept of “double consciousness” is fundamental because it articulates this simultaneously internal and external inscription of the modern world.

I would like now to draw our attention to the manner in which Gilroy constructs his argument. In recovering the writings and personal trajectories of intellectuals, authors and activists, Gilroy presents a study that we might classify as social thought. Far from simply wishing to enhance the reputation of classical works in this tradition, he endeavors to reopen the theoretical discussion about modernity from the margins. More than merely recuperating memoirs from a forgotten tradition, the Black Atlantic becomes a discursive location and practice that orients itself towards the constellation of a global modernity.

One may question the scope of Gilroy’s narrative, since it is oriented toward the delineation of a civilizational geography with ethnic hues (the Black Atlantic). However, the author himself suggests the possibility of extrapolating from this delimitation to affirm the transnational potential of this structure

of sensibility. It is as if that other Atlantic translates an alternative and critical modernism capable of revealing the limits of the liberal democratic universe and conversing with other subjects and groups.

Walter D. Mignolo operates in a different register, one typical of what is conventionally known as “de-colonial studies.” The members of this collective believe that post-colonial studies as practiced by Southeast Asian intellectuals ignore the Americas and their reflections on the colonial experience. This disregard prevents them from fathoming the depth of the connection between modernity and colonialism. In his book on the Renaissance, Mignolo (Mignolo, 2003) argues that the colonization of the New World entailed the universalization of an abstract, European epistemology that subsumed other forms of cognition in the colonized world and for that reason should be understood in conjunction with modernity. This epistemology was based upon a disembodied conception of the knowing subject, assumed to be a thing of reason that could ‘know’ the object from an abstract and supposedly neutral position, conferring the power to classify and order the “native” Other.

According to Mignolo, this process transformed spatial differences into temporal ones, producing what he calls a “denial of coevalness.” Analyzing maps of the New World produced by the Europeans, Mignolo shows how the geometrization and rationalization of American space transformed these territories into local and peripheral sites, vessels of a putatively universal and general European history.

Mignolo however also points to the persistence of alternative forms of cognition in these territories. The violent encounter between Europe and the New World produced a “space-in-between,” a kind of epistemological frontier that recognizes and affirms its externality in a critical manner. In an article written together with M. Tlostanova (Mignolo, Tlostanova, 2006), Mignolo and Tlostanova rightly turn to the concept of “double consciousness” to develop this notion of the frontier and to point to its critical-theoretical potential, hence approaching the perception of Gilroy of a critical space produced by modernity’s colonial expansion.

We can thus say that, in different ways and by different paths, Mignolo and Gilroy arrive at a critical conception of modernity, illustrating its provincial character and connection with theoretical practices that transformed European subjects into universal subjects of knowledge. At the same time, both authors show how spaces of negotiation and confrontation are formed within epistemological frontiers through which other subjects could affirm distinct ways of seeing that reflect their externality. This is not about depicting a nativist discourse that understands itself as pure in relation to the modernity-colonialism pairing. Instead they trace a form of theoretical imagination that recognizes the intrinsic relation between the two poles of this pairing and seeks to produce categories and concepts based upon this recognition.

As one can see, the two thematic axes presented here reflect the contemporary productivity of post-colonial theories. While Chatterjee and Mamdani encourage us to rethink the political universe, taking as our point of departure other sites and forms of relation between the state and social life, especially where the language of civil society appears to be more limiting than explanatory, Gilroy and Mignolo call our attention to the discontent that characterizes the discourse of modernity in the world produced by European colonialism as well as to the critical possibilities for thinking from these territories. The next section shows how, despite the differences in articulation, these two themes represent a considerable share of the more significant debates in the field of Brazilian social thought.

Brazilian Social Thought and Theory: Possibilities for Dialogue and Debate

For analytical purposes, I will consider the following debates: in the case of the relation between state and society, I will examine the debate on Iberianism and the discussions regarding the public-private distinction. For the reflection on modernity and colonialism, I return to the reflections on “misplaced ideas” launched by Roberto Schwarz, and the coastlands-hinterlands dualism—an unavoidable topic for any scholar in the field. Of course, these debates do not encompass the entire

field of Brazilian social thought, they do nevertheless inspire the most concentrated theoretical reflections. My aim is to show how these two axes of deliberations can be linked with some of the theoretical conclusions of post-colonial criticism, allowing for the postulation of a promising space for dialogue among scholars of Brazilian social thought.

In the first case, a *locus classicus* for the modern debate is the book by Richard Morse (Morse, 1988), in which the renowned Brazilianist maintained the positivity of Iberian cultural roots counterposed to the liberal, Anglo-Saxon universe. In esteeming the communitarian and holistic characteristics of the former, Morse initiated a well-known polemic with Simon Schwartzman in the scholarly journal *Novos Estudos CEBRAP*. In this debate, Iberianism was understood as a source of civilization and cultural foundation with a social vision opposing the commercialization of social relations and the disenchantment of the world produced by modernity's bureaucratic rationalization. Morse's methods involved a rereading of the classical Spanish and Portuguese tradition of political thought in search of contemporary theoretical insights. This approach to Iberianism as a central category to comprehend Brazil as a unique civilization in the Western order had an enormous impact on subsequent debates.

Luiz Werneck Vianna subsequently incorporated the Gramscian theme of passive revolution in an attempt to extract from the classic national essayistic discourse categories that could elucidate the Brazilian civilizational dynamic within a broader framework related to the central narratives of the historical sociology. His study of Tavares Bastos and Oliveira Vianna (Vianna, 1997) develops the concepts of Americanism and Iberianism not only as objects of a history of ideas, but also as modes of articulation between state and society. In other words, Vianna uses these categories to consider non-classical paths of modernization, without this necessarily turning into a lament about the disparity between the theories produced in the European world and the reality on the margins.

According to Werneck Vianna, Iberianism therefore represents a way in which the State could assume a major role, at times acting as a modernizing force in a constant dialectic between the social

world and the bureaucratic elites. While in the liberal narrative the state is the contractual expression of previous given interests, in the Iberianist case the state is the creative actor that produces the modern. It should be noted here that Vianna's vision holds a certain affinity with the pioneering work of José Murilo de Carvalho (Carvalho, 1980; 1988), in which the Minas Gerais historian pointed to the formation during the Second Empire of a semi-autonomous state order as a response to organized economic interests.

In the work of another scholar of the subject, Rubem Barboza Filho (Barboza Filho, 2000), Iberianism is associated with barroque political philosophy. Returning to Morse's thesis regarding the particularity of the Iberian intellectual and cultural tradition, Barboza Filho demonstrates how this tradition produced a political language that affirmed not only the dominance of the public over the private, but also an architectural conception of society. The author also underscores the expressive dimension of this language that esteems rules of sentiments as a central mechanism for the production of political subjectivities, distancing itself from the regulation of interests that structured commercial-bourgeois society. This implies a different conception of the relation between individual and society, one no longer guided by the moral economy of liberalism, but instead based upon the possibility of a constant renewal and reaffirmation of tradition.

As can be seen here, Werneck Vianna's and Barboza Filho's visions of Iberianism lead to an interpretation of the relation between state and society in Brazil that affirms the unique place of the country in the West, without allowing this to turn into a lament over the supposed peripheral and incomplete dimensions of this site. This is most visible in Werneck Vianna's (Vianna, 1999) article on the reception of Weber in Brazil. The author points with acute critical perceptiveness to how this powerful, politico-sociological source material was mobilized to explain Brazilian "backwardness," with ample use of concepts such as patrimonialism and estate.

Precisely this discursive position allows the authors to incorporate Iberianism as a concept in a context that does not propose interpreting Brazil as a simple reproduction of the colonial matrix. In

other words, they avoid reiterating the culturalist argument on national identity (such as we find in the classic essay tradition) to support the notion of Iberian particularity. Rather, they indicate the distinct currents that explain the dissonances between state and society beyond the classical repertoire. It is as if Iberianism in the Americas offered a special analytical key for a renewed sociology of politics with a reach far beyond the Brazilian context.

This view is also perceptible in some of the studies of Brazilian social thought that explore the public-private relation in Brazil, for instance the recent work of André Botelho. In his article on Oliveira Vianna and the debate about the mishmash of public and private in Brazil, Botelho (Botelho, 2007) traces the persistence of this cognitive universe through an examination of the texts associated with institutionalized social science, such as those by Vitor Nunes Leal, Maria Isaura de Queiroz and Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco. In an attempt to define the issues, methods and frameworks of this political sociology ‘à brasileira’ Botelho suggests that social thought can be mobilized again and again on behalf of contemporary theory. Note that Botelho claims that this sociological tradition incorporated the rural geographies essential to the understanding of the forms of domination in Brazilian and other, similar societies. In a move similar to Mamdani’s critical enterprise, the author shifts to the center of his analysis the issues and themes of the rural universe: violence, the law of the *sertão*, and the vagabond nature of figures from popular culture. These topics are not read simply as archaic remains but as typical ingredients in the local process of modernization.

In an earlier work on the oeuvre of Ronald de Carvalho, Botelho (Botelho, 2002) explores the richness of culturalist vocabularies in the Brazilian imagination, highlighting the existence of an epistemology critical of liberalism in the social thought of the First Republic. In tracing the poet’s intellectual journey and the distinct forms he discovered to engage with the tendencies of his time, Botelho demonstrated the vicissitudes of the national issue in a formation such as Brazil’s. Ultimately, these are theories that can contribute to a critique of ‘real existing’ liberalism and its involvement in the social dynamic at a distance from the classic European world. As can be seen, the two axes of debate—

the Iberian and the examination of public and private undertaken by Botelho—mark the need to link the Brazilian intellectual tradition to another contemporary discursive location that can incorporate categories and analytical nexuses seldom considered by the social theory produced in the European and Anglo-Saxon contexts.

Another framing debate for the field of Brazilian social thought refers to the dissonances between nation and modernity, taking as its principal focal point discontent with the putatively inadequate development of modernity in a country such as Brazil. This debate tends to be inspired by two classic formulations in the area: namely, the problem of “misplaced ideas” launched by the São Paulo critic Roberto Schwarz, and the discussions around the duality coastlands-hinterlands (*sertão*), at times referred to as “real Brazil--legal Brazil” (“Brasil real--Brasil legal”).

In his famous introductory essay to a study of literary form and social process in the Brazilian novel, Schwarz (Schwarz, 1981) argues that the novelistic form adopted in Brazil in the nineteenth century was a European import that subsequently assumed a different and new tonality in the national environment. According to the author, this particular form originally implied a compositional process that incorporated the dynamic of a commercial society based on private property, autonomous labor, and the introduction of consumer products into all areas of social life. In other words, the classic novel had a critical realist flavor tailored to the capitalist order, translating this order into a liberal ideology that concealed the founding matrix of this order.

Schwarz concludes that liberalism in Brazil was experienced as a “misplaced idea,” a typically farcical expression for a society on the periphery. Rather than deny this notion in favor of some nationalistic affirmation supposedly more authentic, Schwarz suggests that one should take into consideration this particular configuration in the aesthetic treatment in order to demonstrate more effectively its contradictions and vicissitudes. According to the author, this was the great merit of Machado de Assis. Schwarz’s thesis indicated a certain discontent characteristic of intellectuals in spaces that experienced modernity as a spurious process that came to them under the boot heels of

dependency. Moreover, this discontent is recognized and dialectically incorporated by the author, who sees a relative advantage for the periphery in the ability to better discern the contradictions of capitalism and liberalism at the heart of the European world. Note, for example, the author's praise for the great Russian novel, which he views as holding great affinities with the work of Machado de Assis. He writes:

Also in Russia modernization lost itself in the immensity of the land and social inertia, clashed with the institution of serfdom and its remnants,--a clash experienced as inferiority and source of national shame by many, without the handicap of giving others a criteria for measuring the madness of progressivism and individualism that the West imposed and imposes on the world” (Schwarz, 1981: 23).

In another text, Schwarz (Schwarz, 1997) deepens his argument, distancing it from any chauvinist program. In responding to the charges of cultural copying and the mimetic dimension of Brazilian literary culture, Schwarz argues that the terms of the debate are misplaced. Assuming the possibility of reaching a national essence by means of some kind of progressive reduction of the exterior would not only be a chimera, but also demonstrate an inability to comprehend the focal points that link the Brazilian situation to the rest of the world. That is, Brazil is not a unique Other that can simply invent from nothing its destiny. Brazil is a dependent formation that shares deep ties with the global capitalist dynamic. In other words, Brazilian discontent is not a native expression; it is a peripheral manifestation of broader processes.

At first, this version of Marxism close to dependency theory appears to exhaust itself in a vision of the post-colonial problem too narrowly focused on the concept of periphery. Nonetheless it is important to recall here the affirmation of a discursive position capable of thinking the modern in a global and simultaneously decentered form, without, furthermore, reducing periphery to a mere

repository of the center. In this dialectic vision, the critique transcends the dualism and opens new spaces of theoretical production, transforming the periphery into a critical geography, even if entangled in the global dynamic. This movement helps Schwarz to avoid reducing the terms “universal” and “local” into two unique and essential entities. Contemporary scholars of post-colonialism experienced a kind of ‘rediscovery’ of Schwarz’s work precisely on account of these qualities (Brydon, 2001).

Despite the criticism he received in Brazil, Schwarz’s formulations continue to serve as a nearly obligatory reference in studies of Brazilian social thought on account of the acuteness of his characterization of the colonial translation of the modern. Not coincidentally, his work is often associated with other classic studies undertaken from a similar intellectual tradition, such as Antônio Cândido’s (Cândido, 1975) work on the formation of a national literature in Brazil. More recently, Bernardo Ricupero (Ricupero, 2004; 2008), a scholar of Brazilian political thought, reread this thesis in the context of a research program that endeavors to decode the political language of Brazilian romanticism.

Ricupero (Ricupero, 2008) recuperates Schwarz’s contribution and associates the theme of “misplaced ideas” with the problem of “formation” central to Antônio Cândido’s sociology of literature. With this critical move, Ricupero wishes to underscore the singularity of the peripheral condition and its aesthetics as well as the possibility to think through the historical processes of these societies as key points for a critical theory of global capitalism. In other words, it is as if the dynamic of “borrowing” that marks the ideological life of countries like Brazil produce a discursive space that is more acute and capable of revealing forms that are not particular to those countries. As Ricupero maintains, “(...) in this twist occurring on the periphery of capitalism one could encounter the truth of the capitalist center. Especially because much of what is concealed in the center can be revealed on the periphery without much difficulty” (Ricupero, 2008:65).

The discussion regarding the colonial aspect of modernity has another rendering in Brazilian social thinking associated with the investigation of the dualisms that have so marked classical Brazilian

thought. In this regard, pairs such as “Real Brazil--Legal Brazil” and “coastlands--hinterlands” are investigated as typical modes of speaking about the country and its differences from the modern world. Included in this track are classic works such as the essay by Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos (dos Santos, 1967; 1970) as well as more recent studies such as that of Nísia Lima (Lima, 1999). Of special note in the latter study is the manner in which the author treats this duality as a way of seeing the country, especially since the “hinterlands” that emerge in classic Brazilian social thought are less a defined geographical image than a way of speaking about the vicissitudes of the socio-historical conditions of the country as a whole. That is, there is a constitutive ambiguity in the language of the hinterlands, always oscillating between acclamations of authenticity and condemnations for its backwardness.

I would like to suggest, however, that this spatial language of dualities escapes a simple reiteration of the nation as object, setting itself as a form of social imagination over the modern, generated as it was in conditions distinct from those that characterized the European experience. If on the Old Continent the city and its objects were the nexus of theoretical imagination, in the case of Brazil the language of the interior (the *sertão*) became the mode of speaking about modernity. Speaking with Mignolo, one could say that the *sertão* is a “space-in-between,” an epistemological borderland from which intellectuals construct a discursive space that brings together colonialism, nation and European civilization. This space becomes more evident in eminently literary texts that take as their raw material this world of the *sertão*.

In writings such as those by Willi Bolle (Bolle, 1994-1995) and Heloísa Starling (Starling, 1999), this *sertaneja* literary imagination and its universal critical potential are interrogated through the oeuvre of Guimarães Rosa. In both instances and despite their differences, the investigation of Rosa’s literary *sertão*—centered here on themes of violence, the peripatetic figures of popular culture, and the possibilities of a social life in an order absent the classic civic values—is the entrance to a broader theoretical reflection on modernity’s detours in Brazil. Bolle, for example, argues that Rosa’s fiction

contributes to the mishmash between rural and urban, thereby demonstrating how the *sertão* functions just like this liminal space of discourse from which are generated the critiques of the forms assumed by modernity in Brazil.

In sociology, writings such as those by João Maia (Maia, 2008) develop the proximity of this spatial language of Brazilian social thought with other forms of imagination in extra-European contexts, especially Russian. Their aim is to call attention to the theoretical potential of this territorialist discursive space that unveils a world of objects and figures that do not enter into the classic theoretical narratives produced in the nineteenth-century urban European setting. To treat the land and space as ways of seeing means showing that these categories are not merely expressions of a geographic determinism but instead ways of narrating social experience that do not fit into the sociological metropolis (Carvalho, 1994).

Concluding Thoughts

As I have tried to show, there is a broad space of dialogue between Brazilian social thought and post-colonial theory, especially if we take into consideration the two main points of contact explored in this article. This space does not exist at random, but rather derives from the very nature of reflection on Brazilian essayism that frequently approaches a particular form of theorization based on a diagnosis of the difficult adjustments between Brazil and the European world seen as the productive center of modern reflection (Carvalho, 2006). There remains however a potential obstacle for this dialogue to overcome, one that also serves as a strong motivation for its realization. I refer here to the status of the nation as object of thought in these theoretical universes.

Scholars of post-colonialism commonly possess a critical vision not only in relation to nationalism but also of the political configuration of modern nation-states. As is evident in the reading of Chatterjee, these apparatus also convey a colonial political narrative that subsumes other possible forms of political community to the classical theoretical repertoire on sovereignty and power. On the

other hand, the construct of nation was also the grand theme that mobilized the classic Brazilian thinkers and that, in some respects, still appears to motivate their contemporary interlocutors. Is there a fundamental discrepancy here?

In fact, contemporary intellectual work in the field of Brazilian social thought does not limit itself to a past tense reiteration of the historical terms of the debate on nationality. In all of the works I presented here it should be clear that there is an endeavor to develop a *contemporary* interpretive hermeneutic of Brazil that recognizes contradictions of social thought. The discussion on Iberianism, for example, does not aim to better define the meaning of Brazilian identity, but to understand the intellectual dynamics that governed our formation and explore them from a present that harbors other issues. In the case of Barboza Filho (Barboza Filho, 2003), for instance, his examination of Iberianism aims to initiate a critical dialogue with contemporary democratic theory, in particular with the deliberative formulations of Habermas and his emphasis on proceduralism and neutrality in relation to values. In this context Iberianism functions as a theoretical alternative that allows the author to rearrange the theoretical repertoire of political science and question its supposed universality.

The debate about “misplaced ideas” also does not intend to create an archeology of ideas and define their ‘proper’ place. That is, instead of attempting to define a matrix of supposedly more authentically Brazilian ideas, this debate seeks to locate the tensions and contradictions of modernity from a space where said tensions and contradictions manifest themselves most acutely. In this sense, studies of Brazilian social thought are intellectual journeys that begin at the frontier spaces indicated by Mignolo. It is also with this sense in mind that Ricupero takes up Schwarz’s formulations of the periphery as a critical site and not merely a derivation of the center. In other words, this critical work also orients itself toward the metropolitan societies, which means globalizing the discussion of the Brazilian case without necessarily marking it as evidence of a deviation from the norm.

This decentralized traffic emerging from the frontier spaces of discourse has already been noted in post-colonial production. In an article on the topic, Mignolo (Mignolo, 1993) himself cites the work

of Schwarz as an example of critical theory that harmonizes with contemporary questions of post-colonialism and underscores the productive, non-derivative dimensions of Latin-American thought in relation to the central canon. In this sense, Brazilian social thought has much to offer global theory; its universe of images, narratives, and ways of seeing are important pieces in the constitution of this frontier space and its critical development.

The recent article by José Maurício Domingues (Domingues, 2009) on the Latin-American post-colonial program, for example, is a strong indicator that the critique of colonial modernity undertaken by Mignolo is too unilateral, overlooking as it does the complex Latin-American dimensions of this phenomenon, in particular when viewed from a society such as Brazil's. This dialogue can be greatly enriched by drawing upon some of the sources and foundations of the Brazilian imagination from this contemporary discursive space. The founding theme of this tradition is the discussion on the ambivalences of modernity, Domingues's central thesis and his principal point of disagreement with Mignolo.

The research agenda proposed here endeavors to strengthen some of the suggested parameters in order to frame this critical work in Brazilian social thought and reinforce its theoretical dimensions. If realized, this dialogue can expand the universe of questions directed at objects already considered dead and buried, in addition to opening a comparative space that decenters our own supposed singularity.

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