


Displacing Theory Through the Global South, ed. by Iracema Dulley and Özgün Eylül İşcen, Cultural Inquiry, 29 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 111–23

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Marx on the Periphery

The Making of a New Tradition at the University of São Paulo

CITE AS:

Bernardo Bianchi, 'Marx on the Periphery: The Making of a New Tradition at the University of São Paulo', in *Displacing Theory Through the Global South*, ed. by Iracema Dulley and Özgün Eylül İşcen, Cultural Inquiry, 29 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 111–23 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-29_08>

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ABSTRACT: With reference to the Marx Seminars at the University of São Paulo, this chapter discusses the creation of a specific tradition in the social sciences that marks a crucial moment in the history of postcolonial and decolonial studies. By means of the concept of periphery, I reconstruct how this tradition refuted temporal and stadial dualisms. Moreover, I argue that the development of this new perspective in the social sciences must be understood in terms of its efforts to rethink Marx but also, and more importantly, by the need to rethink Brazil's place in the world. Following this thread, I analyse Roberto Schwarz's work as paradigmatic for a proper understanding of the centrality of the concept of periphery in these discussions.

KEYWORDS: marxism; Capital; Brazil; backwardness; periphery; Schwarz, Roberto

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We were, however, not to Europe as feudalism was to capitalism; to the contrary, in addition to never having been 'feudal', we were a function of European capitalism on every front

Roberto Schwarz, *To the Victor, the Potatoes!*¹

While the Global South has come to be considered as the perfect epitome of postcolonial and decolonial studies, the concept of periphery has also played an important role that cannot be overlooked.² Accordingly, this 'outdated

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- 1 Roberto Schwarz, *To the Victor, the Potatoes!: Literary Form and Social Process in the Beginnings of the Brazilian Novel*, ed. and trans. by Ronald W. Sousa (Leiden: Brill, 2019), p. 5.
 - 2 For a discussion about the predominance of the term 'Global South' in contemporary analyses, cf. Caroline Levander and Walter Mignolo, 'Introduction: The Global South and World Dis/Order', *The Global South*, 5.1 (2011), pp. 1–11 <<https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.5.1.1>>.

concept' should be viewed in light of a rich process of self-reflection undertaken by social scientists living in societies outside Europe and North America. Perhaps even more directly than the concept of the Global South, the concept of periphery conveys a spatial grasp of an unequal system, as well as of the processes of extraction and violence that underpin it. After all, it was forged in direct opposition to the temporal dualisms that rely on a teleological and stadialist conception of the variations of societies around the world, which gave rise to pairs such as civilized/savage, modern/backward, and developed/underdeveloped.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss, by means of the concept of periphery, the making of a new tradition in the social sciences in Brazil that accounts for a specific moment in the history of postcolonial and decolonial studies. Accordingly, I will begin by reviewing the innovations behind the conception of the two Marx Seminars that took place at the University of São Paulo between the late 1950s and early 1960s, which, in a unique and innovative way, reframed theoretical problems that were at the forefront of international debate. The international relevance of these experiments will lead us to discuss a contemporary endeavour, notoriously led by Louis Althusser at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Rue d'Ulm, which resulted in the book *Lire Le Capital (Reading Capital)* in 1965.³ In a second moment, I will analyse how the concept of periphery responds to the interpretative limitations related to the idea of backwardness that dominated Brazilian social sciences in general and Marxist reflections in particular. In this sense, the concept of periphery, as it will be discussed, is a forceful response to temporal dualisms and stadialist

3 Louis Althusser and others, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015).

interpretations of Brazil and Latin America. Finally, by means of his interpretation of the work of Machado de Assis, I will address the literary criticism developed by Roberto Schwarz as an unavoidable chapter for understanding the centrality of the concept of periphery in this Brazilian tradition of the social sciences.

READING MARX IN SÃO PAULO

In 1958, after returning from an academic stay in France, the philosopher José Arthur Giannotti gathered friends and colleagues from the University of São Paulo (USP) to read and discuss Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*.⁴ The group included the economist Paul Singer, the sociologists Octavio Ianni and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the anthropologist Ruth Cardoso, and the historian Fernando Novais. They were joined by other frequent participants, including Roberto Schwarz, Michael Löwy, and Bento Prado Júnior.⁵ Although the meetings focused on the reading of *Capital*, they also discussed other works, such as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Questions de méthode (Search for a Method)*, published in 1957, and György Lukács's *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein (History and Class Consciousness)*, the French trans-

4 The most important reference here is the first volume of *Capital*, published in 1867 — cf. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol 1: The Process of Production of Capital*, ed. by Friedrich Engels, trans. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, 50 vols (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2004), xxxv (1996).

5 Unfortunately, I do not have the space to analyse each of these authors in detail. I will limit myself to highlighting the intellectual and political importance of these participants in Brazil and Latin America, reinforced by the centrality of the University of São Paulo in this context. It should be added, however, that Fernando Henrique Cardoso was the president of Brazil from 1995 to 2002.

lation of which was published in 1960.⁶ The reading of Lukács's *magnum opus*, in particular, was to have a strong influence on Schwarz, Novais, and others, be it for its role in the renewal of the European Marxist tradition, or for the centrality of questions of method.⁷ In 1964, however, the group disbanded.

A few years after the founding of the first group, on the eve of the *coup d'état* that established the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–84), a new Marx Seminar was organized in 1963. *Seminaristas* of the first group, such as Prado Júnior, Singer, Löwy, and Schwarz, participated in the new project.⁸ However, other participants joined them: the philosophers João Quartim de Moraes, Marilena Chaui, and Ruy Fausto, the historian Emília Viotti, and the sociologist and philosopher Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco, among others.⁹ Although influenced by the first seminar, including in its composition, the second one was marked by a new historical context. The *coup d'état* of April 1964 gave it a more activist character, and some of its members joined the armed resistance.¹⁰ In any case, academic en-

6 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963); György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

7 The centrality of questions of method corresponds to the intention, shared by the members of the group, to defend the scientific value of Marxism in accordance with academic conventions. Cf. Paulo Arantes, *Um departamento francês de ultramar* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1994), p. 43.

8 Henceforth, *Seminaristas* is the term by which I will refer to the participants of the seminars in question.

9 Cf. Roberto Schwarz, 'Sobre a leitura de Marx no Brasil', in *Nós que amávamos tanto 'O Capital'*, ed. by Emir Sader et al. (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2017), para. 1–17 (para. 4).

10 Historian Lidiane Rodrigues convincingly links the greater presence of women in the second seminar to the development of a more political orientation from the outset, in contrast to the more masculine and aca-

gagement remained intense, culminating in the creation of the journal *Teoria e Prática* (*Theory and Practice*), a publication that was interrupted in 1968 with the consolidation of the military regime.

FRENCH EXCHANGES

Almost exactly in parallel with the Marx Seminars at USP, Louis Althusser organized a seminar at ENS between 1964 and 1965. It was dedicated to the reading of *Capital*, from which, in November 1965, came the book *Lire Le Capital*, one of the most influential works in the renewal of Marxist studies in the mid-twentieth century. Although they were not linked, the USP and ENS seminars should be seen in light of the important historical circumstances that bring the two experiences together.

Firstly, the French influence in Brazil was enormous, both because of a long French-speaking tradition dating back to colonial times and, in the case of USP, because of the central role played by the French missions in its institutionalization throughout the first decades of its existence.¹¹ The situation was no different in the philosophy department, where many of the participants in the two Marx seminars came from. It is for this reason that Paulo Arantes dubbed the philosophy department of USP *Um departamento francês de ultramar* (*A French Overseas Department*) in his homonymous work on the formation of that academic environment. In a letter of 1957 to João Cruz

demic character of the first seminar. Cf. Lidiane Rodrigues, 'A produção social do marxismo universitário em São Paulo: mestres, discípulos e "um seminário" (1958–1978)' (Doctoral Dissertation, University of São Paulo, 2011), p. 46.

11 On the subject, cf. Ian Merkel, *Terms of Exchange: Brazilian Intellectuals and the French Social Sciences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022).

Costa, his doctoral supervisor, Giannotti wrote: 'I have adopted a motto: study modern Germans in the French fashion.'¹² Giannotti's words, which had in view the study of Marx, testify to the extent of the French influence on his project of reading the German author directly.

Secondly, both the first Marx Seminar and its French counterpart were animated by an effort to renew Marxist studies by returning to Marx's own texts, and to *Capital* in particular. But their affinities did not stop there in the eyes of Gerard Lebrun, who worked in the philosophy department of USP for six years, during which time he also attended meetings of the Marx Seminar. In 1966, he wrote on the dust jacket of *Origens da dialética do trabalho (Origins of the Dialectics of Labour)*, by Giannotti: 'in France as in Brazil one agrees to study Marx in the way that Gueroult comments on Descartes.'¹³ In fact, in 1960, in a text on the reading method used in the Seminar, Giannotti highlighted the importance of the 'structural analysis' of *Capital*.¹⁴ This hermeneutic proposal was in line with the method of structural reading of philosophical texts that had been widely disseminated at USP by Jean Maugé, Victor Goldschmidt, and Martial Gueroult.¹⁵ It should be remembered

12 Cf. Rodrigues, *A produção*, p. 34.

13 José Arthur Giannotti, *Origens da dialética do trabalho: estudo sobre lógica do jovem Marx* (São Paulo: Difel, 1966). In the same text, Lebrun also draws a parallel between Giannotti's book and *Pour Marx*, published by Althusser the previous year, affirming that both were the best books published on the German author at the time. Cf. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005).

14 José Arthur Giannotti, 'Notas para uma análise metodológica de "O Capital"', *Revista Brasiliense*, 29 (1960), pp. 60–72 (p. 63).

15 On Gueroult's influence on the philosophy department at USP, including the Marx Seminar, cf. Elsa Costa, "'But I Want the Truth!' The Legacy of Martial Gueroult in São Paulo Philosophy, 1935–2018', *A Contracorriente: Uma revista de estudos latinoamericanos*, 18.3 (2021), pp. 70–105.

that in 1953 Gueroult published his work on Descartes, revealing his structural method of reading 'according to the order of reasons', which was widely discussed at USP.¹⁶ However, the influence of Gueroult's structural method on Althusser's symptomatic reading cannot be argued without mediations, that is, without considering other thinkers and ideas with which Althusser openly engaged.¹⁷ For Althusser, quite explicitly in connection with Lacan, the question required doing 'more than a mere literal reading' in order to critically grasp the structure of the problematic, that is, what a text inadvertently determines as visible and invisible.¹⁸

Despite the rapprochement suggested by Lebrun, Giannotti was rather critical of Althusser and the general project of *Lire Le Capital*. In 1968, in a text originally published in *Teoria e Prática*, he accused Althusser of establishing an excessively rigid separation between object of knowledge and real object.¹⁹ The argument was revisited a few years later in an interview in which Giannotti rejected Althusser's 'epistemological standpoint that makes Marxism a theory of knowledge' in favour of 'Lukács's problematic of an ontology of the social'.²⁰ The critique conquered the hearts of his fellow students at the Marx Seminar, such as F. H. Cardoso, 'blocking the

16 Cf. Martial Gueroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, 2 vols (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1953).

17 In fact, one could argue that Althusser and Gueroult fought against the same enemies, such as existentialist methods and humanism, embodied by Roger Garaudy (for Althusser) and Ferdinand Alquié (for Gueroult).

18 Althusser, *Reading Capital*, pp. 24 and 218.

19 Cf. José Arthur Giannotti, 'Contra Althusser', in *Exercícios de filosofia* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1980), pp. 85–102.

20 José Arthur Giannotti, 'Entrevista com José Arthur Giannotti', *Trans/Form/Ação*, 1 (1974), pp. 25–36 (p. 36).

path of Althusserianism among us', in Arantes's words.²¹ Giannotti's critique points to an additional difference between the two proposals: the place they assign to the Hegelian legacy. Although Hegelian categories were praised by Giannotti and the other *Seminaristas*, they were, as is well known, passionately opposed by the French philosopher and his students. In light of these disputes, Lebrun's words may seem extravagant, but they suggest important lines of convergence between two experiments in the history of Marxism, without assimilating them into each other. Faced with a common set of historical problems, and independently from any mutual influence, they arrived at positions that are more similar than has been acknowledged.²² Indeed, making these affinities more accessible could contribute to the deprovincialization of Marxism.

DEPROVINCIALIZING MARXISM

Unlike its French counterpart, the main objective of the first seminar was not only to participate in the renewal of Marxism, but also to inaugurate a discussion on Marx within Brazilian academia, something that had already hap-

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- 21 Arantes, *Um departamento francês de ultramar*, p. 291. Cf. Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *Política e desenvolvimento em sociedades dependentes: ideologias do empresariado industrial argentino e brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1971), p. 111; Fernando Henrique Cardoso, 'Prefácio à 2ª edição', in *Capitalismo e escravidão no Brasil meridional*, 5th edn (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2003), pp. 15–24 (pp. 20–24). Cf. also Pedro Lima, 'As desventuras do Marxismo: Fernando Henrique Cardoso, antagonismo e reconciliação (1955–1968)' (Doctoral Dissertation, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2015).
- 22 One common ground is precisely the critique of temporal dualism, which will occupy the following section. I do not have the space to analyse Althusser's approach to the problem, but I would like to draw attention to his critique of the concept of feudalism in his writings on Montesquieu. Cf. Louis Althusser, *Montesquieu: la politique et l'histoire* (Paris: PUF, 1992).

pened in France. In appropriating Marx, the *Seminaristas* also sought to answer why Marx was relatively absent from the Brazilian academic debate. That is, why was Marxism not a real instrument for the self-understanding of the Brazilian reality within the universities? The answer lay in the history of Marxism in Brazil (and Latin America), given the limitations of this tradition to interpret this particular social reality. The Marx Seminar is still remembered more for the way in which it changed how Brazilians understand their society than for the renewal of Marxism itself. Against the obsolete temporal dualisms inherent in the Marxist tradition that, with rare exceptions, prevailed during the Stalinist period, it was urgent to reinvent theoretical approaches to colonialism and slavery. In doing so, the members of both seminars converged in a 'single critical environment', as Schwarz stated in relation to the work of two *Seminaristas*, about whom I will speak more below.²³

During the Stalinist period, Latin American communist parties defended a predominantly 'provincial' position for the subcontinent that was structured by a stadialist ideology, that is, a dogmatic view based on a temporal dualism.²⁴ This ideology, directly promoted by the Soviet Union, presupposed the need for a revolution in two stages. Firstly, there would be a national bourgeois revolution of democratic character against the local oligarchies. Secondly, the development and maturation of the productive

23 Roberto Schwarz, 'Um seminário de Marx', in *Sequências brasileiras: ensaios* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999), pp. 86–105 (p. 97).

24 It is worth noting that an analogous question began to generate controversy among researchers involved in the project led by Althusser, namely the relationship of the French Communist Party (PCF) to the Algerian war. In 1981, Balibar was expelled from the PCF precisely because of his criticism of that party's orthodox and colonialist position on Algeria. Cf. Don Reid, 'Etienne Balibar: Algeria, Althusser, and Altereuropéanisation', *South Central Review*, 25.3 (2008), pp. 68–85.

forces (there was little distinction between objective and subjective conditions of revolutionary processes) would lead to an actual socialist revolution. The debates associated with the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) reproduced this dominant dualist ideology. The resulting attempts to interpret Brazil, from Astrojildo Pereira to Nelson Werneck Sodré, relied on a reading of Brazilian society from a predominantly stadialist perspective that constantly revolved around the concepts of backwardness and feudalism.²⁵

Trapped in this interpretation, such analyses understood backwardness only negatively — in terms of ‘lack’ or ‘deficit’ — and not positively — in terms of how it is actually constituted, namely, as a result of the unique historical development of a country and the role a country plays within the global economy. Thus, the explanation in terms of backwardness became a story about how oligarchic greed and popular immobility combined to form a single essentialized block that could only be broken by an alliance between the most modern elements of society. Against this perspective, the *Seminaristas* have urged for backwardness to be seen not as a vestige of the past, but as the present realization of a subaltern role.²⁶ Brazil and Latin America were

25 For Pereira’s main texts, cf. Astrojildo Pereira, *Ensaios históricos e políticos*, ed. by Heitor Ferreira Lima (São Paulo: Alfa-Omega, 1979). The reference to a ‘semi-feudalism’ is recurrent. Nelson Werneck Sodré has given more systematic treatment to the notion of feudalism, which he expounded throughout his vast work. Cf. Nelson Werneck Sodré, *Capitalismo e revolução burguesa no Brasil* (Belo Horizonte: Nossa Terra, 1990).

26 It is important to note that similar responses to this problem have emerged from quite different contexts. Therefore, it is worth mentioning Raúl Prebisch’s research in the context of CEPAL or ECLAC (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) and, among the contributors to the *Monthly Review*, the works of André Gunder Frank, who later became one of the founders of dependency theory. Cf. Raúl Prebisch, ‘The Economic Development of

never feudal, just as they were never pre-capitalist. According to Schwarz, the great novelty that emerged from the seminars was the investigation of the ‘effective connections between capitalism and slavery’, thus breaking with the formalist perspective according to which slavery was the other of capitalism.²⁷ These innovations crystallized in two seminal works written by *Seminaristas* from the two groups: *Capitalismo e escravidão no Brasil meridional* (*Capitalism and Slavery in Southern Brazil*), by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and *Homens livres na ordem escravocrata* (*Free Men in the Slave Order*), by Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco.²⁸ In addition, there is the doctoral dissertation of Fernando Novais, which, although defended in 1973, deals with the same set of questions that I am addressing here. Moreover, Novais, like Schwarz and Cardoso, concedes an important role to Caio Prado Júnior in his work.²⁹

Latin America and Its Principal Problems’, Economic Commission for Latin America, 1950 <<https://repositorio.cepal.org/handle/11362/29973>> [accessed 11 February 2023]; Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967).

- 27 Cf. Schwarz, ‘Um seminário de Marx’, p. 93. Of course, this innovation has to be put into perspective, given the existence of notable works that have followed similar paths. I refer to *Black Jacobins* (1938), by C. L. R. James, and *Formação do Brasil contemporâneo* (*Formation of Contemporary Brazil*) (1942), by Caio Prado Júnior, a dissenting voice within the PCB. Cf. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2001); Caio Prado Jr, *Formação do Brasil contemporâneo* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2011).
- 28 Both works are the result of doctoral dissertations. Cardoso’s was defended in 1961 and published in 1962. Cf. Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *Capitalismo e escravidão no Brasil meridional: o negro na sociedade escravocrata do Rio Grande do Sul*, 5th edn (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2003). Carvalho Franco’s thesis was defended in 1964 but not published until 1969. Cf. Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco, *Homens livres na ordem escravocrata*, 4th edn (São Paulo: UNESP, 1983).
- 29 Cf. Fernando Novais, *Portugal e Brasil na crise do antigo sistema colonial (1777–1808)*, 5th edn (São Paulo: Hucitec, 1989).

CONCLUSION: SCHWARZ AND MACHADO DE ASSIS

Against this background, I mark the historical and theoretical significance of Schwarz's contribution. Years after the end of the seminars, but still under the influence of their 'critical environment', Schwarz published an article in 1973 entitled *As ideias fora do lugar* (*Misplaced Ideas*).³⁰ This text already reveals Schwarz's deep interest in the late-nineteenth-century Brazilian writer Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, a reverence he later developed in his own doctoral dissertation, *To the Victor, the Potatoes!*, and *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*.³¹ Through Machado de Assis's novels, Schwarz delves into the Brazilian reality of the time not to reveal its singularity, but to show that the texture of this society is produced in interaction with a world economic system. Schwarz's texts on Machado de Assis thus disclose important resonances with the work of other *Seminaristas*, whether in exploring the links between free and slave labour or in valorizing the standpoint of totality.

For Schwarz, the world described by Machado de Assis represents the very denial of the stadialist ideology as a valid interpretative key for nineteenth-century Brazilian society. Moreover, Schwarz's analyses of Machado de Assis are much more in line with what Fredric Jameson called 'spatial dialectic'.³² Accordingly, what is disclosed is not

30 Roberto Schwarz, 'As Ideias fora do lugar', in *Ao Vencedor as Batatas* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2000), p. 17.

31 Schwarz, *To the Victor*; Roberto Schwarz, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*, trans. by John Gledson, *Post-Contemporary Interventions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

32 Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso Books, 2010), pp. 66–70. This point has been convincingly argued by Nicholas Brown. Cf. Nicholas Brown, 'Roberto Schwarz: Mimesis Beyond Realism', in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*,

merely 'national in scope, but reaches out to the dynamic of what an older vocabulary called "combined and uneven development", the differential development of capitalism across geographic and political space'.³³ In the first place, then, the concept of periphery marks a preference for the spatial, the geographical, at the expense of the stadial and teleological, which are rooted in the temporal dualisms discussed here.

The concept of periphery is thus articulated from a critique of the conception of backwardness insofar as the latter presupposes an endogenous and diachronic conception of national development. The periphery, in turn, describes a situation of dependence in relation to a centre or core that produces an international space stratified by the unequal distribution of wealth, values, and knowledge. In this very process, the centre imposes itself as the universal model of civilization, the *telos* of human development. In this sense, however, it becomes clear that the concept of periphery explains the idea of backwardness, but the latter can never account for the former, just as it cannot explain the social processes that produce it.

ed. by Beverley Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O'Kane, 3 vols (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 1, pp. 465–78 (p. 471). It should be noted, however, that the description that Schwarz analyses as *dialectical*, as opposed to dualist ideologies, has been famously defended by Paulo Arantes. Cf. Paulo Arantes, *Sentimento da dialética na experiência intelectual brasileira. Dialética e dualidade segundo Antonio Cândido e Roberto Schwarz* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1992).

33 Brown, 'Roberto Schwarz', p. 471.

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