



Social thought and paths to modernity: space and figuration in brazilian essayism

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ABSTRACT. The paper aims to analyze the Brazilian essayism through the category of modern chronotope and reflect upon the theoretical junction between imaginative cartography and figuration as interpretative axes of essayism and Brazilian social thought as an example of peripheral intellectual experience, highlighting the multiple paths and interpretations of Modernity.

Keywords: brazilian social thought; essayism; sociological theory; brazilian studies; sociology of intellectuals.

Pensamento social e caminhos da modernidade: espaço e figuração no ensaísmo brasileiro

RESUMO. Este artigo almeja analisar o ensaísmo brasileiro a partir da categoria cronótopo moderno, elaborando a junção teórica entre cartografia imaginativa e figuração como eixos interpretativos do ensaísmo e do pensamento social brasileiro como um exemplo de experiência intelectual periférica, ressaltando os múltiplos caminhos e interpretações sobre a Modernidade.

Palavras-chave: pensamento social brasileiro; ensaísmo; teoria sociológica; estudos brasileiros; sociologia dos intelectuais.

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Introduction

Recently, numerous studies have significantly enhanced the chances of theorizing about Brazilian social thought, showcasing the breadth of topics and approaches (Botelho & Schwarcz, 2011) from the perspective of the establishment of this field of study (Oliveira, 1999; Maia, 2017), the organization and actions of intellectuals (Carvalho, 2007), interpretative research lines (Vianna, 1997; Brandão, 2005), the relationship between intellectuals, culture, and politics (Miceli, 2001; Arruda, 2004), the intellectual repertoires available (Alonso, 2002), the collective actions of intellectuals and their interactions with social movements (Perruso, 2020), and ideas and their contextualization (Carvalho, 2000; Bastos, 2011; Brasil Jr., 2015).

These perspectives have paved the way for investigations into the connections between social and sociological theory and Brazilian social thought, extending the possibility of sociological theorization beyond the confines of the North Atlantic (Connell, 2012; Maia, 2017). Peripheral scientific contexts and interconnected sociologies (Bhambra, 2014) have emerged as crucial elements in supporting alternative explanations of Modernity. By transcending their national contexts, these perspectives contribute to the construction of contemporary sociological theory on global themes such as modernism, modernization, and different manifestations of Modernity (Tavolaro, 2005, 2017; Maia, 2011). In a certain way, these peripheral modern experiments challenge the Eurocentrism inherent in sociological explanations (Chakrabarty, 2000) and propose new approaches to understanding the production, dissemination, and assimilation of ideas and cultural products. Furthermore, they allow for a reformulation of social theory regarding the motivations behind social actions and, thus, a reevaluation of the meanings and significance attributed to social actors throughout the historical development of these regions.

The development of national and regional sociologies, particularly in peripheral contexts, has brought attention to these specificities as unique characteristics of peripheral modern experimentation (Patel, 2010; Agwele, 2012). Contrasting and comparing the trajectories and historical developments of peripheral areas

with central regions has played a crucial role in interpreting these places¹. In the case of Brazil, the flourishing of essayism in the 1920 and 1930s was instrumental in characterizing the process of national modernization. It stands as one of the most prolific expressions of local modernism (Fernandes, 1958, 1977; Coutinho, 1997; Candido, 2000, 2006; El-Dine, 2019; Martins, 2019). This particular interpretation of Brazil reveals the essential factors that contributed to the formation of an imagined community (Anderson, 2008), the bureaucratization of public administration, the establishment of solidarities and social dominance, and the shaping of hierarchical subjectivities (Botelho, 2007; Lavallo, 2004). These elements were pivotal in mobilizing the social actors who played a fundamental role in Brazil's historical process, providing a foundation for understanding the rationale and meanings behind their actions, as well as the spaces in which these actions unfolded. Through its exploration of the relationship between space and social action, the essayistic interpretation of Brazil has constructed a rich diagnosis of the trajectories of Brazilian modernity.

In the first part of this article, we delve into the concept of the modern chronotope and its intricate relationship between space and time. Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin's (1988) insights, we aim to establish the foundational elements of the chronotope, which encompass temporal and spatial markers and would summarize the actions of characters, pointing out howp figuration is conceptualized within social theory. This exploration encompasses both the construction of a figuration space and the creation of an imaginative cartography.

Furthermore, we have delved into the interplay and contrasts arising from studies on space within Brazilian social thought. Our aim is to uncover the processes through which space was constructed, perceived, imagined, and/or experienced, and to establish connections between these spatial imaginaries and contemporary social theory. We place particular emphasis on exploring the physical and symbolic dimensions of these imaginative constructions of space.

Lastly, in the concluding sections of the article, we examine the substance of Brazilian essayism during the 1920 and 1930s. Our focus is on elucidating the operative mechanisms that connect figuration as an explanatory factor for social actions of actors with the imaginative cartography. We particularly highlight the contrasting elements within the peripheral trajectories of Modernity and their spatial imaginings.

Sociological theory and imaginative cartography: trajectories of modernity

The utilization of the concept of multiple modernities and its critique of the theory of modernization has prompted a reconsideration of the historical processes that have led different regions to modernity. As noted by Eisenstadt (2001), the notion of homogeneity should be discarded since actual developments in modernizing societies have contradicted the homogenizing assumptions of the Western program of Modernity. Instead, multiple patterns of societal organization emerged, which are undeniably modern but distinct from the Western model, such as European Modernity in this particular instance.² The notion of multiple modernities posits that the most effective approach to comprehending the contemporary world and explaining the history of Modernity would be to perceive it as a continuous process of formation and reformation of various cultural frameworks.

National or regional cases, with their distinctive characteristics, can be seen as part of a broader global modernity (Domingues, 2013) or world-system, as proposed by Wallerstein (2001). They would be characterized by a unified time-space framework in which a division of labor facilitates the material reproduction of the world. Its spatial scope, determined by its material-economic foundation, encompasses political entities and supports diverse cultural systems. As process by the capitalist world-economy, the division of labor and unequal distribution of surplus would give rise to central and peripheral activities based on the capacity of capital and state alliances to absorb surplus within various commercial chains, utilizing economic and non-economic means.

Expanding on our argument, if we were to critique the homogenization and Western-centric view of Modernity, we would have to consider how these national and regional examples made us to think the heterogeneities that emerge from the unique developments of each sociology within the context of nation-state formation, market economy, and the formation of social classes. Furthermore, it would prompt us to examine how these national and regional cases relate to the broader modern world-system in which they exist.

¹ Lynch (2013) would argue that the peripheral style of Brazilian political thought, as a terminologically indeterminate and amplified conception of interpretations of Brazil, contrasts with canonical works of European political theory by possessing, among other characteristics, a lower degree of generalization.

² 'Multiple modernities' has two implications. The first one is that Modernity and westernization are not identical. The Western standards of Modernity, or any specific standard, do not represent the only authentic modernities, despite historically preceding and continuing to serve as a significant reference for other conceptions of Modernity. The second implication is that 'Modernity' entails the recognition that these modernities are not static; they undergo constant change or mutation (Schmidt, 2011).

The analytical reconfiguration of trajectories towards Modernity has challenged the Eurocentrism inherent in classical and contemporary sociological perspectives, thereby questioning the universal validity of categories traditionally regarded as unambiguous markers of Modernity. This reconfiguration also scrutinizes the replication or imitation of modern patterns from central societies within different space-time contexts, shedding light on power asymmetries that underpin normative and prescriptive projections of these central societies onto peripheral space-time contexts (Chakrabarty, 2000; Bhabra, 2014; Connell, 2012). Ultimately, these alternative perspectives offer alternatives to the hegemonic notion of Modernity (Ahmad, 2002) and propose non-modular trajectories within it (Tavolaro, 2017).

Therefore, we can acknowledge the analytical existence of multiple trajectories within the modern chronotope, whether viewed through the lens of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2001), the world-system (Wallerstein, 2001), global modernity (Domingues, 2013), or hegemonic Modernity (Ahmad, 2002). This interpretive and constructive exercise aligns with the proliferation of theories concerning the social and political aspects of Brazilian thought, which stem from these non-hegemonic paths of Modernity. Moreover, it leads to the establishment of two fundamental elements in sociological theory: space and time. These elements form the basis of the analytical category known as the chronotope. Initially, we refer to Bakhtin's (1988) definition, which characterizes the chronotope as the essential interplay between time and spatial relationships artistically assimilated within literature.

According to the Russian author, the key concept of chronotope lies in the unification of time and space, with its literary function being the organization of narrative events through the condensation and materialization of time markers—such as human lifespan, historical time, and social time—within specific spatial contexts. When examined through the lenses of historiography and social theory, the perspective of chronotope enables a meaningful debate if the time markers were encapsulated by the actions of plot characters, their figuration, and the formation of figurative space, referred to as imaginative cartography.

In other words, as we bridge the gap between literary criticism and the formation of sociological theory, our aim is to emphasize time markers that allow for the systematization of non-hegemonic trajectories of Modernity (Tavolaro, 2017) present within Brazilian social and political thought. These factors present a dual challenge to the chronotope: figuration and imaginative cartography. It is worth noting that, in his exploration of the concept of 'formation' present in Brazilian essayism, Bernardo Ricupero (2008) draws upon Bakhtin's ideas, even with a quick look, to develop his arguments centered around the syntagma of ideas out of place, as proposed by Roberto Schwarz (1992). Ricupero (2008) rejects the notion that the concept of chronotope simply implies a standardizing aspect or recurring theme in every work or author within a particular context.

Weaving and contrastivity: imaginative cartography in the Brazilian social thought

Numerous studies have drawn attention to the theme of territory and space within the sociological imagination of Brazil's scholars (Souza, 1997; Vianna, 1997; Oliveira, 1998; Lima, 1999; Wegner, 2000; Maia, 2011). Oliveira (1998) emphasizes the significance of territorial conquest in shaping national identity while discussing the evolving meanings associated with the term '*sertão*' (hinterland) in Brazilian social thought. This exploration extends to the creation of the myth of hinterland (*sertão*) and the notion of borders stemming from the movements of the *bandeiras* (expeditions), leading to an analysis of the *bandeirantes* and their mythical function in organizing the symbolic world and constructing an interpretation of the country.

Candice Souza (1997) draws attention to the constructed versions and visions of Brazil's rural areas. Through an examination of various interpretations of Brazil that contribute to a reflection on national singularity within the spatial dimension, the author explores the geographical imaginary depicted in discourses surrounding the nation-building process and the formation of Brazilian identity. These native representations of nationality gave rise to a geographic nation, a discursive invention wherein nationality is equated with spatial terms. The country's fragmented unity, territorial discontinuity, spatial imbalance, heterogeneity, and the contrasting notions of hinterland and coast become recurring themes in the renowned narratives of Euclides da Cunha (2019), Cassiano Ricardo (1940), Oliveira Vianna (1987), Nelson Werneck Sodré (1962), and Nestor Duarte (1939).

Similarly, Lima (1999) delved into the power and significance of geographical metaphors in shaping representations of a national identity for a country perpetually embroiled in spatial conflicts. By uncovering

the portrayals of an identity that is consistently portrayed as incomplete or in need of reconstitution, Lima proceeds to analyze the mindset of modernizing intellectuals, who grapple with the irreducible distances between the numerous 'countries' within Brazil. She highlights the enduring divide and contrasting characteristics of the hinterland and coast, metaphorically fashioned by the country's interpreters.

Robert Wegner (2000), on the other hand, explores the connection between tradition and Modernity through an analysis of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's work, particularly focusing on the theme of borders and the expansion of the Brazilian West from São Paulo. By examining the concept of borders and the relationship between Iberian tradition and modernization, Holanda's works from the 1940 and 1950s discuss the characteristics of Modernity in a Brazilian context and reassess the dual polarities present in his interpretations of the 1930s. He envisions potential combinations between traditionalism and modernization, civility and cordiality, idleness and work, as well as Americanism and Iberian influences.

The recurrent nature of this theme prompts an analysis aimed at establishing markers for a reconstitution of the subject within Brazilian social thought, specifically within peripheral social theory. João Marcelo Maia's (2011) work is relevant in this context. According to him, there is a correlation between space and sociability in the interpretation of Brazil, which supports a dual dimension. Firstly, there is the production and analysis of space as an independent variable in explaining habits and customs, encompassing physical space as the backdrop of civilization. Secondly, there is a conception that associates space with images and allegories closely tied to forms of sociability and civilizing organization.

Lastly, Werneck Vianna (1997) delves into the territorialism of the Iberian elites in the development of Brazil, specifically in the formation of interests that would clash with the pace of the passive Brazilian revolution. This revolution, characterized by its transformative nature, serves as the driving force behind the actions of these characters and their aspirations over time, intertwining elements of tradition and rupture. It is within this framework that the political elites of the nation-state prioritize political reason above other rationalities, resulting in the preservation and expansion of territory and the exertion of control over the population.

Based on the insights and perspectives provided by scholars of Brazilian social thought, the theme of space can be understood through two complementary aspects. Firstly, there is an ordering of physical environments and social categorizations, presenting it as the stage where the civilizing process unfolds. Secondly, these physical environments serve as a foundation for the creation of images and symbols that imbue social experiences with meaning. It is through this fundamental duality that the construction of an imaginative cartography of Brazilian social thought takes shape, considering both the physical and symbolic dimensions within the framework of the constitutive imaginary of interpretation (Maia, 2011).

In line with this perspective, it becomes necessary to delve into the complex conceptualizations and interrelationships between space and territory. As Milton Santos (1997, p. 21) suggests, "[...] as a starting point, we propose that space be defined as an inseparable combination of systems of objects and systems of actions". In its entirety, this definition encompasses the process through which the natural space is appropriated through human intervention, influenced by the dynamic interplay between actions and the environment. This interplay encompasses material and immaterial aspects, encompassing economic, social, cultural, and practical needs. Space not only holds symbolic significance but also serves functional purposes.

Understanding space goes beyond the mere recognition that territories consist of objects from different periods. It also involves recognizing that territories are socially constructed and imbued with diverse meanings. As Santos (1997) argues, territories have layers of historical significance, with their past manifested in the forms and functions of objects and the natural environment. Moreover, territories are shaped by various cultural layers, reflecting the meanings and values attributed by society to different aspects and portions of the territory. This complexity is evident in the interpretation of landscapes. A rural landscape, for example, can evoke a sense of bucolic connection with nature while simultaneously being seen as archaic or associated with backwardness and ignorance. Conversely, urban environments are often characterized by dynamism and temporal acceleration.

Having said that, the construction of an imaginative cartography extends beyond the physical substance of territory or landscape. It encompasses how this substance is interpreted and given meaning by different individuals. This process involves contrasting and evaluating different places, resulting in spatial differentiations in both form and substance. Moreover, the understanding of space is characterized by its referentiality and the contrasting relationships it establishes with other territories or landscapes. The construction of these distinctive images of the territory relies on the power to represent and rank places based on various interests, aspirations, and

sentiments that are shaped by the complex web of social relationships and power dynamics inherent in the interpretation. In this sense, the imaginative cartography functions as a network, interweaving social relationships and power dynamics (Löw, 2013; Frehse, 2021). If space exhibits such characteristics in the construction of this imaginative cartography, then we must further explore the role of figuration in the process of structuring social groups, different forms of sociability, and the motivations and meanings underlying social actions that would fill the ground with density established by the imaginative.

Essaysm and social figurations: a social action theory

From the perspective of social theory, the concept of figuration encompasses the intricate network of interdependent relationships among individuals, which manifest in various ways and at different levels. The collective actions of interdependent individuals give rise to a structure characterized by a multitude of emergent properties. These properties include power dynamics, tensions, class and stratification systems, forms of solidarity, and social hierarchies.

According to Norbert Elias (1987, 1994), figuration represents a profound interconnection between subjectivity and social and historical structures. He argues that individual actions cannot be understood in isolation from the social structures that enable or hinder them. Figurations would be forms of relationships that emerge and evolve over time; their alterations and transformations end up shaping both social organization and subjectivities in concerning corruptions. The concept of figuration goes beyond mere technical or narratological description, although it can be seen as an elaborate effect of characterization. A figuration is an interdependent network that is both structuring and structured by the interactions and conflicts arising from power dynamics among groups or individuals fulfilling different roles. Furthermore, the conception of figuration highlights the agency of individuals in shaping historiography, as certain groups exert influence within this interdependent network.

Figurations, seen as meaningful social relationships, become more intricate when they intersect with time and space (Rosa, 2019). Space assumes a crucial role as the backdrop for social actions, in the way how time is socially generated (Frehse, 2021), while time encapsulates the collective experiences of social actors. Ultimately, it is the understanding of space as a relational arrangement of beings and objects in the ways in which space (Löw, 2013, 2016) and time (Rosa, 2019) are experienced.

Returning to the concept of chronotope, influenced by Bakhtin (1988), space is envisioned through the lens of imaginative cartography, while social action finds expression through figuration. Broadly speaking, figuration and imaginative cartography involve a process of semiotization, where a language is constructed to convey meanings and generate pragmatic effects in the analysis of Brazilian essayism.

According to Afrânio Coutinho (1997), the essay is embraced within Brazilian culture not so much as an attempt, but rather as a mode of interpretive study. It becomes the paradigmatic form for historiographical, philosophical, political, and sociological interpretations during the first half of the 20th century. Therefore, the act of writing transcends the realm of fictionality typically associated with literature. In Brazil, the essay is a genre that defies disciplinary boundaries.

In a sense, building upon Coutinho's ideas as presented in *Literatura e sociedade*, Antonio Candido (2000) has approached Brazilian essayism by emphasizing its connection to the tradition of thought and the intersection of fictionality found in literary works with a scientific foundation.

The allure of literature would exert a strong influence on the sociological inclination, giving rise to a hybrid genre of essay that merges history with economics, philosophy, or art. This distinctive form of investigation and exploration of Brazil is uniquely Brazilian, and it has produced notable works such as Sílvio Romero's *História da literatura brasileira*, Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*, Oliveira Vianna's *Populações meridionais do Brasil*, Gilberto Freyre's writings, and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's *Raízes do Brasil*. It is fair to say that this line of essay— which skillfully combines imagination and observation, science and art—represents the most characteristic and original aspect of Brazilian thought (Candido, 2000, p. 119).

Regrettably, Candido did not delve into a more systematic reflection on the genre that he himself considered to be “the most characteristic and original aspect of Brazilian thought.” Nevertheless, he viewed the essay as a distinctively modernist manifestation, as it interpreted Brazil through a synthesis that allowed for the discovery of authors associated with what is known as the pre-modernist period. The presence of the essay as a defining feature of those years is indisputable. However, the choice of this type of writing represented an expansion of what had been done in the 19th century, blending a ‘sociological tendency’ with the essay form.

According to Coutinho (1997), the essence of the essay lies less in attempting something and more in the notion of study, where writers are primarily engaged in exploring the factual aspects rather than indulging in fictional realms. In his words, “[...] they are not truly essayists, but rather philosophers, historians, sociologists, political thinkers” (Coutinho, 1997, p. 122). Another issue is that the argumentation should address the intricacies that this literary support would encompass in condensing a tradition that has been reinvented over the course of two centuries. While in the formation of the state, the essay encompassed elements of political philosophy that encompassed sociology, towards the end of the 19th century, as Candido (2000) argues, the sociological tendency became more implicit.

Taking these considerations into account, it is necessary to assess the notions of space and time in the essayistic interpretation of Brazil, with the goal of framing the imaginative cartography and the figuration of the modern chronotope through social and sociological theory.

Regarding the topic of space and its role in shaping his interpretation of Brazil, Duarte (1939) stated:

In this analysis, let us emphasize from the outset that one of the most determining physical factors in shaping the form, style, and orientation of Brazilian social organization is not solely the climate, its biochemistry, flora, or fauna. It is, in fact, the territorial expanse available to and required by the people to meet economic needs and pursue the aims driven by economic instincts or ought to be driven. Every form of production in Brazil has had and continues to have a large-scale approach. Above all, it is a production of space (Duarte, 1939, p. 42).

In fact, authors such as Oliveira Vianna (1987), Paulo Prado (1997), Gilberto Freyre (2002), Caio Prado Junior (2011), Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (2016), Nestor Duarte (1939), and Afonso Arinos de Melo Franco (1936) highlight the elements of rural life in Brazil, characterized by its unique features: their isolation, the absence of an internal market between different segments, the centrifugal force of an agro-exporting economy, the relatively weak urban centers and their players, the challenges of colonization and land occupation, the lack of roads and communication infrastructure, and the limited presence of the state in establishing internal public regulations.

Each rural nucleus, or each complex between the ‘*Casa grande*’ and the ‘*Senzala*’ (to use Gilberto Freyre’s expression), would be a social microcosm, a small collective organism, with full capabilities for isolated and autonomous living. These phenomena, with their cultural and sociodemographic roots, would allow essayism, through its conceptual tools, to interpret the *modus operandi* of certain oligarchic structures of domination that are incompatible with the establishment of a liberal democracy, yet highly effective in acquiring, organizing, and exercising power in a hierarchical manner. The prominence of certain individuals and their figuration—social action within a network of interdependence—would form the basis of the interplay between politics and society.

This type of clan-based solidarity, linked to historical heritage, did not seem destined to disappear as a mere consequence of development or modernization in the political sphere. It would be like a cultural constant, a kind of amalgamation of the national collective psychology. The existence of this pattern of domination is intertwined with the absence of a spontaneous articulation of interests between social groups and the apparatus of the state, which, in turn, would be obliged to interact with these social groups through vertical structures of power, with the rural clan chief, landowner, landlord, or patriarch at the top, depending on the designation given to this character in each work, marking this civilizing process (Vianna, 1997; Oliveira, 1999; Lavallo, 2004; Brandão, 2005; Candido, 2006; Bastos, 2006; Ricupero, 2008; Lynch, 2013; Meucci, 2015; Martins, 2020, 2022).

It would become evident for sociological essayism of the 1920 and 1930s that political power and social power would organize themselves pyramidally, in such a way that each rural chief would connect to another to form a structure of domination articulated through reciprocal exchanges, as seen in analyses of issues such as political patronage based on gratitude and/or friendship, matters related to an ethic of cordiality, and the specification of pivotal points of patriarchy as foundations for the failure of liberal ideals and institutions. One conclusion would be that, in this type of sociopolitical construction, there would not have developed a national or public interest transcending immediate and particular interests. In this political activity, instead, there would be a purely partisan and exclusive conception, exercised and consumed strictly within the small circle of the group, the clan, the faction, the local directory, the family.

In summary, based on the latifundium and rural life, the type of solidarity that formed and the stability that revolved around family groups, which allowed for the formation of a web of stable, permanent, and traditional social relations, with the patriarchal figure of the *pater familias* as the source of authority, led to

patrimonialism in the handling of the public sphere, the subjugation of private interests over the public interest, and the establishment of a social ethic based on sentiment.

The large rural property and, consequently, the notion of agrarian exclusivity and the simplifying function of latifundia became crucial in this explanatory model of the conditions in which solidarity and interests were formed in the peculiar Brazilian case. With the differences acknowledged, these interpreters of Brazil realized that this simplifying function would hinder trade and the emergence of a commercial bourgeoisie or an industrial class, which would be concentrated on the coast or in small towns inland, but without any political power. Thus, between the class of free workers and the landowning aristocracy, solid bonds would not be formed, accentuated by the absence of a middle class of the European type.

It is during the 1920 and 1930s that the Brazilian essayism experienced a significant increase in the proliferation of its arguments, particularly in relation to its connections with modernism and the political sphere. These essays of general interpretation are closely tied to the emergence of Brazilian sociology and have since become classics in the field of interpreting Brazil. Due to their genre, the essay, they have become an integral part of the tradition of sociological discourse known as essayism. Critiques and analyses of Brazilian essayism as a whole offer us valuable insights into how this form of writing was conceived and examined within the Brazilian context (Vianna, 1997; Oliveira, 1999; Lavalle, 2004; Brandão, 2005; Bastos, 2006; Candido, 2006; Ricupero, 2008; Lynch, 2013; Meucci, 2015; Martins, 2020, 2022).

Thus, we undertake a three-fold exploration with the aim of constructing an interpretation of Brazilian essayism. Firstly, we delve into interpretations of Brazilian social thought through the lens of space, connecting it to the quest for defining the significance of the imaginative cartography crafted through the fusion of social theory and Brazilian social thought itself. Secondly, we examine the social theory of meanings and the potential of figuration as an interpretive framework for Brazilian social thought. Lastly, we investigate the convergence of imaginative cartography and figuration in shaping the modern chronotope and its relevance to interpreting Brazilian social thought, with a specific focus on the essayism of the 1920 and 1930s.

By reexamining some of the most prestigious essays originally published between the early 1930s and the mid-1940s, we probe into their interpretative affinities around two correlated questions: on the one hand, the conceptions of time that implicitly or explicitly underlie their views on the intricacies of Brazilian social life and, on the other hand, how such notions predetermine their ideas about the asymmetric place and the particular condition of this society in the modern world. We conclude by examining the correspondences and symmetries between these authors representations of Brazil, showing that they tend to allude to a temporality that is only partially in synchrony with social and political visions of modernity (Tavolaro, 2005, 2017; Maia, 2011, 2017).

While revisiting some of the most acclaimed oeuvres of the so-called Brazilian social thought, we examine the feeling of temporal mismatch that underlies a wide variety of portraits of social life in Brazil. We contend that notwithstanding the variegated analytical perspectives inherent to this intellectual constellation, most of these oeuvres are inclined to ascribe to Brazil a peculiar temporal configuration, only partially synchronized with the homogeneous and linear-progressive time envisaged in modernity. That said, we also interested in investigating a set of critical propositions to the sociological imagination in order to assess an additional hypothesis, namely: these very same visions of Brazilian society seem to insinuate an alternative theoretical frame of reference, sensitive to the unbalances, asymmetries and contradictions that crisscross modernity's temporality.

The hypothesis of Brazilian singularity is the single most powerful idea in Brazilian social thought. As no other, it has succeeded in circumscribing and shaping the agenda of research and reflection concerning the country's social experience. Conjured up a entirely unique compared to others, Brazilian society is elevated to an analytical category and, in the same measure, a privileged object of investigation, worthy of specific explanatory and interpretive efforts (Martins, 2019, 2020, 2022).

Excesses and absences: the brazilian modernity diagnosis

Together, but not as a unified whole (Botelho, 2010), and beyond the intellectual context from which these diagnoses emerged, the distinctive feature of Brazilian essayism, in operationalizing concepts such as patriarchy, familism, patrimonialism, personalism, agnatism, clientelism, and the myriad of privatist obstacles enshrined in its ideals, is the decisive role in the constitution of public life. In the tradition of Brazilian political and social thought, the emergence of this theme is recurrent. There are positions that

glimpsed this interpretive path in the 19th century, but essayism provides it with new concepts and assertions. In these terms, the recurrent appearance of such a conceived public life can be understood either as manifestations of outdated and definitively surpassed readings of reality or as a legacy of interpretations with varying degrees of plausibility (Lavalle, 2004).

Instead of assuming a characterization of public life as settled or surpassed in historical or analytical terms, it seems more productive to problematize its role as an explanatory device for the ambiguous configuration of the Brazilian public sphere. The recurrence of this theme appears through the literature and the object of study in a dual aspect. On one hand, in the realm of ideas, it entailed a nuanced examination to reconstruct the specificity of the approach and understanding of the public sphere by the essayism of the 1920s and 1930s, namely its emergence, crystallization, reproduction, and analytical method (Fernandes, 1958, 1977; Coutinho, 1997; Candido, 2000, 2006; El-Dine, 2019; Martins, 2019). On the other hand, the centrality of this theme can be explored as a phenomenon in which fundamental dilemmas of the configuration of the Brazilian public sphere and its private counterpart become apparent, highlighting historical difficulties brought about by the emergence of the modern State in peripheral environments (Tavolaro, 2005; 2021; Maia, 2011; 2017).

Analysts of hegemonic modernity (Ahmad, 2002) may not have realized that the process of modernization leading to Modernity could not assume a Westernization of modernism that starts from the center and extends to the periphery (Chakrabarty, 2000; Patel, 2010; Agwele, 2012; Connell, 2012; Bhambra, 2014). European modernity was unable to uniformly transcend its values and aesthetic standards to the rest of the world without upheavals, as the process of modernization differed across various areas of the world. For Eurocentric social/sociological theory, what characterizes modernity is the partitioning of reason, that is, its differentiation into institutionally autonomous spheres. Historically, the differentiation of the political system occurred when political authority crystallized around legal positions that control the means of force. Within the framework of societies organized around the state, markets emerged and acquired their own logic. These systems are formally organized domains of modern social action, with their historical beginnings in the political revolutions of the 18th century and their subsequent cultural and philosophical manifestations (Habermas, 2002). Thus, Modernity emerged as a project on European soil, with the establishment of the organizing principle of modern subjectivity and the separation of spheres of value. Self-referential in its historical consciousness, it had to derive its own normativity from within itself.

In the case of Brazilian essayism, more or less explicitly present in the interpretations proposed by the authors above mentioned, we find the idea that, in their contemporary Brazil, the State, economy, and civil society were never fully able to differentiate themselves and become dynamic based on their own logics and codes. The public domain would be abducted and subjugated to the logic and purposes of family realms, personal and private codes, with restrictive sociability. That is why impersonal and rationalized rules were often relegated to a secondary position. In this society, the degree and extent of social differentiation, secularization, and the separation between the public and the private observed in central modern societies were never achieved.³

This matrix of Brazilian social and political thought expresses an alternative path to modern development through its dichotomies, both in the composition of an imaginative cartography (countryside and city, rural and urban, coast and hinterland, center and periphery) and in the figurations of social action (interest and virtue, initiative and inactivity, enterprise and commitment, will and contingency). Such peripheral intellectual experience would carry a contradiction as the foundation of its modernity, particularly in how it approached space and its characters within the modern chronotope.

In other words, while seeking to explain this difficult synthesis, the authors would understand Brazilian modernity in terms of contemporaneity and historicity, and from the perspective of a kind of alternative modernity or as a non-model path of Modernity (Tavolaro, 2017). The countryside would have its own sociology, its main characters with their subjectivity and agency in the world. The latifundium would serve as a backdrop for the realization of interests and virtues for the landowner; the slave, the henchman, the common free man, and the slow passage of time would shape social life and establish certain types of solidarity and interests. The city would be the site of social interrelations and the locus of fast-paced time, initiative, the lust for modern living, with its liberal characters and sociability often subsumed under the rural world and unable to find fertile ground for its advancement.

³ This point is crucial for understanding the differences between the 'kinds of modernity' that emerge from the fusion of modernism and modernization in Brazil compared to other national contexts.

The understanding of the city and the rural world would involve analyzing all the elements that compose their framework: land, water, climate, people, civilization, culture, architecture, labor, ideas, symbols. The countryside and the city would not only be materiality; they would possess a symbolic and subjective dimension that would also shape their spatial forms. The significance of space, whether urban or rural, would give individuals and communities unity and identity with their surroundings, in a sort of signifying structuring of space. Each place would shape an imaginative cartography that attributes certain ways of living, thinking, and experiencing the world to a specific time-space, certain social types, a particular solidarity, and a certain constitution of interests and virtues in its sociability, all aimed at revealing an alternative to hegemonic modernity with its excesses and absences in a dialogic manner.

Conclusion

In this article, we examine Brazilian essayism from the 1920 and 1930s as an interpretation of Brazil that considers the meanings of Brazilian collective action and the resulting political culture in the formation of its nation-state. The explanatory role of this strand of Brazilian social thought reflects the possibilities and constraints that arise outside the traditional and modular explanations of hegemonic sociology. With these characteristics, the characters in historiography gain intelligibility and plausibility within the framework of social theory that guides these interpretations that seek to employ history as an analytical method for understanding society and the state. This approach postulates that the foundations and concepts of sociology are best suited to uncover the origins and uniqueness of the country and its history, thus establishing a strategy that constitutes a theory of interpretation.

Undoubtedly, the leadership arising from rurality and its manifestation in solidarity, authority, and the composition of interests would constitute specific social types. Most importantly, it is the actions of these characters, these social types, within Brazilian history, in their public realm, and in the formation of the state that matter. When isolated from this broader analysis of their social and political agency and constitution, the different characters lose their depth.

Around the imaginative cartography, encompassing the countryside and the city, the coastline and the hinterland, the center and the periphery, their interweaving of themes such as solidarity, authority, freedom, and equality, their figuration through composite characters driven by specific interests and virtues, demonstrate that the overall concern of essayism surpassed the criteria of a strictly culturalist interpretation of the country. The central and mobilizing concepts, such as patriarchy, patrimonialism, familism, among others, served to elucidate the configurations of the relationships between the state and society. These were relationships that could be intertwined in the process of forming the political community, in the bureaucratization of public power, in the formation of social solidarities connected to such types of authority in the constitution of subjectivities.

Lastly, it is important to point out that the development of distinct national or regional sociologies, especially in peripheral contexts, has emphasized the differences in historical trajectories as a singularity of peripheral modern experimentation (Patel, 2010; Agwele, 2012), anchored in the delay or inadequacy between theorization developed in hegemonic contexts and its production, circulation, and acclimatization in peripheral contexts. This perspective can be understood from the center-periphery framework of the world-system (Wallerstein, 2001), multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2001), or global modernity (Domingues, 2013). Simultaneously, it becomes essential to investigate the relationships between social/sociological theory and Brazilian social thought, which gives rise to the demand for sociological theorization from the margins (Connell, 2012; Maia, 2017) to provide alternative explanations on global topics such as modernism, modernization, and different configurations of modernity (Tavolaro, 2005; Maia, 2011). This approach allows for the reformulation of sociological theory and the realignment of the meanings and significance attributed to social actors throughout the historical development of these areas.

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