

CITY AND URBAN HISTORY: NOTES

CIDADE E HISTÓRIA URBANA: APONTAMENTOS

HISTORIA URBANA Y DE LA CIUDAD: NOTAS

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to present a theoretical debate about the approach, from a historical point of view, to the peripheral spaces of a city that, throughout its four centuries, has been marked by a history of valuing its founding nucleus, the “Praia Grande” neighborhood. Throughout the 20th century, books, magazines, guides, albums and audiovisual productions sought to reproduce representations of the city through its historic center. In order to overcome this limitation, through the contributions of Certeau, Bresciani, Bodei and Reis, we sought to develop an itinerary in which we considered all the social actors involved in the construction of urban trajectory, through the convergence of relations between objects and the links between the public and the private are essential for reading everyday life in urban space.

Keywords: City. Territory. Periphery.

RESUMO

Esse artigo busca apresentar um debate teórico acerca da abordagem, sob o ponto de vista histórico, dos espaços periféricos de uma cidade que, ao longo de seus 4 séculos, é marcada por uma trajetória de valorização de seu núcleo fundacional, o bairro da “Praia Grande”. Ao longo do século XX, livros, revistas, guias, álbuns e produções audiovisuais buscaram reproduzir as representações da cidade por meio de seu centro histórico. A fim de superar essa limitação, por meio das contribuições de Certeau, Bresciani, Bodei e Reis, buscamos elaborar um itinerário no qual se considerou todos os atores sociais envolvidos na construção da trajetória urbana, por meio da convergência das relações entre objetos e os vínculos entre o público e o privado são essenciais para a leitura da vida cotidiana no espaço urbano.

Palavras-chave: Cidade. Território. Periferia.

RESUMEN

Este artículo propone un debate teórico sobre el enfoque histórico de los espacios periféricos de una ciudad que, a lo largo de sus cuatro siglos, se ha caracterizado por una trayectoria de valoración de su núcleo fundacional, el barrio de Praia Grande. Durante el siglo XX, libros, revistas, guías, álbumes y producciones audiovisuales buscaron reproducir representaciones de la ciudad a través de su centro histórico. Para superar esta limitación, y basándonos en las contribuciones de Certeau, Bresciani, Bodei y Reis, desarrollamos un itinerario que considera a todos los actores sociales involucrados en la construcción de la

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trayectoria urbana, mediante la convergencia de relaciones entre objetos y los vínculos entre lo público y lo privado, esenciales para comprender la vida cotidiana en el espacio urbano.

Palabras clave: Ciudad. Territorio. Periferia.

1 INTRODUCTION

The urban history of the four-hundred-year-old São Luís (MA) is marked, from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century, by the valorization of its foundational nucleus, whose urban elaboration is attributed to the chief engineer Francisco Frias de Mesquita, at the beginning of the seventeenth century. including from the point of view of the urban organization of towns and cities (Macêdo, 2014). This legislation was in force in Brazil between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The territory known as Praia Grande³, had its layout defined according to the interest of meeting the demands of export farming, through its port; in the background, to meet the need to create means of permanence of a nascent local elite – although, this group was closely linked to Lisbon, and, later, to Paris and the Court, in Rio de Janeiro.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the city was characterized by being a trading post, a link between the large plantation of sugar cane and cotton (produced in the valleys of Itapecuru and Pindaré) and national and sometimes international trade. With the income from this trade, the city expanded and became a space for the experience of its elite, through the knowledge and practices of this group, and a supposed humanistic and civilizational vocation of this city – despite the non-humanistic slavery. According to Costa (2016), the local elite sought to create a tradition of distinction and uniqueness, based on the epithet of the Brazilian Athens – a stronghold of poets, intellectuals and figures of political expression. The focus of this text, however, is not to delve into the reasons for its creation, nor the uses and disuses of the concept of Athens. We are interested in the association of this concept with space, its streets, its stone and lime houses, seen as an archetype of a civilized and progressive city.

The arrival of the republican regime did not represent ruptures, since the interpretations of the city still revolved around the valorization of the icons of a supposed "civilization". The second half of the twentieth century, still tributary from this perspective, sought to value, in various aspects, the elitist tradition of the city. Books, magazines, guides, albums and audiovisual productions⁴, to a greater or lesser extent, reproduced this

³ Consisting of about 3.5 thousand buildings, it occupies an area of approximately 250 hectares. It was approved by the National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage, IPHAN, in 1974. Cf. SELBACH, 2009, p. 23.

⁴ From the second half of the twentieth century, the editorial production on the city of São Luís – and its 'historic' center was amplified, especially with the listing of the city by the Institute of National Historical and Artistic Heritage, IPHAN, in 1974. In view of this, events emerged that sought to value this space and several materials were produced for this purpose, such as tourist and sentimental guides, photo albums, postcards and newsreels, which met the interests of valuing these spaces with great success.

perspective, through metonyms that saw the totality of the city, being represented – according to a political project – by its old center, whose definition was "the most beautiful and complete architectural ensemble of colonial Brazil". And to the peripheries... what remained was silence and the unsaid!

In view of the many zones of opacities of the unsaid, it is therefore up to the historians of the city, according to the contributions of Maria Stella Bresciani (2002), to elaborate historical paths on the political and philosophical ideas that guided the construction and interventions in urban spaces, in order to understand the multiple dynamics of the city.

2 WHAT DEFINES A CITY?

What is a city? Until the moment when the question is asked of us, we usually define it in the most varied ways without, however, having greater precision in its meanings. Because it is an imprecise concept and used by almost all human beings, we tend not to problematize it and ignore the multiple nuances involved in its conceptualization. The Michaelis dictionary defines city in the following ways: a) an agglomeration of people in a geographical area, in which social, economic, industrial, commercial, cultural, administrative and political activities are developed; b) a group of inhabitants of the same geographical area; c) a shopping center; d) the oldest or most central location of a given urban agglomeration; e) municipal headquarters, where administrative activities are concentrated; f) hectic, dynamic life.

We are interested in scrutinizing items *a* and *d*, whose definitions converge with most definitions of the *latu sensu* type of city. From the economic and social point of view, the first definition is associated with a human agglomeration, in which social, economic, industrial, commercial, cultural and administrative activities are developed; Such a concept is tempting, due to its approximation with the image of European cities, originating from the urban and commercial revolution, at the beginning of the second millennium of the Christian era. However, the cities of the new world, which emerged from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards, followed a different trajectory and followed European aspects and indigenous elements, as well as enslaved groups, brought to America. Due to this trajectory of centuries, of our urban agglomerations, a definition that takes into account only aspects of their European ancestry is quite limited.

Item *d*) refers us to the historical dimension, which demarcates the spaces of political and social valorization. With the broad use of this concept, São Luís is transformed into a

"historic city", whose definition aimed, according to Rossini Corrêa (1993), to preserve the historical aspect and tradition, through the uses and disuses of the myth of Athens, by an intellectual elite and linked to agro-export and its architectural and urban complex, arising from this context.

Michel de Certeau (2003) points out that the city serves interests, sometimes unconfessable, that fulfill the role of conforming everyone, in an urban model, in which the clash of perspectives, looks and fragments, end up converging in the same physical space, marked by tensions and clashes, concealed in the traditional definitions of city. In the face of these not always peaceful convergences, what Certeau called "stubbornness and insistent traditions" are diluted in countless elements – always alive and present in the urban space, marked by intense transformations.

These "stubbornness", which certain groups make use of, here and there, clash with the modern norms of urbanism (new public environment) represent the synthesis of the various values that converge in the city. These questions were addressed by Pierre Nora (1993), who called them the "problematic of places", in which history, with its universalist perspective and at the same time, vocalizing the interests of those who write it – and govern it – confront the memory of those who live and make the city. Memory is always lived and woven by living groups; it is in permanent evolution and open to the dialectic of remembrance and oblivion; unaware of its successive deformations – or stubbornness – are unconscious. In view of this, the study of cities and their compartmentalizations (explicit and implicit) is marked by ambiguity, located at the crossroads, between the material, symbolic and functional dimensions, in which the most diverse relationships woven in space are anchored, condensed and expressed, especially in moments of transformation and imposition of new ways of living, live and move around the city.

This imposition of ways and ideas of the city is related to a certain "curiosity for the places where memory crystallizes" (Nora, 1993, p. 1) voiced by a group of interpreters of the city – journalists, writers, intellectuals, who recommended to their readers, through poetic, tourist and sentimental guides⁵, the correct ways to walk through the city. On the other hand, these same albums, guides and texts neglected the peripheries, which should be avoided

⁵ These editorial, artistic and imagery productions, whose target audience was the local elite, fulfilled the function of creating and fixing the traditional images of the historic city. Among them, we can mention the productions of Gaudêncio Cunha, the photos of the Teixeira Typography, through the albums of 1923 and the one produced by the journalist Miécio Jorge, in 1950 to the tourist guides of Astolfo Serra (1963), Domingos Vieira Filho (1975) and Jomar Moraes (1989). The newsreels produced by the National Agency, in addition to the Amaral Netto program, recorded on the streets of São Luís, in 1978.

and seen as the space of alterity, confrontation, the unsaid and the contestation – sometimes unpleasant – of the positions contained in the narratives of the official/traditional/sentimental urban space.

The narratives of the official/traditional urban space of São Luís, throughout the twentieth century, were widely defended by journalistic and literary texts, iconographic productions, in which the urban space and its houses of stone and lime were the central topic. Almost all of these editorial, artistic and imagery productions sought to recreate a very delimited urban space of São Luís, confirmed to a tiny portion of the city: the neighborhood of Praia Grande (also called the Historic Center, whose *historical name* suggests a possible "absence" of history from the other regions. To the other regions, neighborhoods and, more recently, to the invasions, there was invisibility – or insistent stubbornness.

In view of these, it is necessary that other historical truths, as observed by José Carlos Reis (2005) be laid bare, in addition to those related to the city of stone and lime and tradition. And what would be the "truths" from the urban point of view, which would be reproduced by the writing of the city's history? And what interests did this writing serve and serve? Our proposal is precisely to raise questions related to the city, its history and the political uses of its urban trajectory. This is our "principle of choice", according to Reis, in dealing with the issue of the city and its multiple territories. And, for this, it is necessary to make a new writing of the history of the periphery – and of its subjects and spaces made invisible by traditional narratives. It is up to this new writing to interpret the city having as one of its premises, which alerted Reis and his "understanding that historical knowledge is a "reflection", a "meditation" on human living in time" (2005, p. 336) – and in the city.

3 THE MEANINGS OF THE URBAN HISTORY OF SÃO LUÍS

The text by the Italian historian Remo Bodei (2002) presents us with a fundamental question for historiographical making: "what is the meaning of history?" And he goes on to question: "what are the assumptions that anchor the explanatory intention of history?" With regard to urban history – the focus of this text: what are the meanings, uses and interpretations that our writing confers to the city? It is up to the new approaches to urban history to explain the trajectory of the city, focusing on the peripheries – and, of course, their relations with the center, with the poles that induce the city's norms. The most appropriate itinerary for this purpose lies in accessing the memories contained in its spaces of sociability, since "it is in the city that history is exhibited, it is in it that history is built, in the space and in

the public building; in these spaces, possibilities of action are established by the collective presence of social actors" (Bresciani, 2003, p 30).

Urban history, since its advent in the nineteenth century, is an interdisciplinary field, where dialogue with various other types of knowledge contributed to its development. With regard to the craft of historians, it is up to us, according to the observation of Maria Stella Bresciani (2002), to elaborate historical paths on the political and philosophical ideas that guided the construction and interventions in urban spaces, in order to understand the multiple dynamics of the city, from a historiographical point of view. In this regard, Luís Octávio da Silva (2002) observes that "relevant contributions have emerged, in which the urban appears as an element of historical interpretation" (Silva, 2002, p. 76) on the role of cities in capitalist development, for example.

According to Bernardo Secchi (2009) "the history of the twentieth century is rich in pre-established bifurcations, abandoned paths and unforeseen ruptures. Urban studies go further, by considering that a street, an avenue, a square, a building are not able, by themselves, to induce profound changes in the urban space; Only the interaction of these spaces, with human dynamics, with their struggles and tensions, can promote more complex and instigating historical processes.

The city, in this way, fulfills the function of catalyst of the memories contained in its spaces of sociability, streets, monuments; in the relationships of its actors, in which ample possibilities are established. The city, according to Secchi (2009), is always the result of a process with multiple variants. And the product of this equation cannot be attributed to just one thing, be it state induction or the ways in which communities react to these phenomena.

Reflection on the fragments of the past is fundamental. Cultural and popular history – that is, with the popular strata as an object – has as its motto to abolish urban restrictions or ethnocentrism and stigmas between the popular regions of the city, based on the analysis of the relations of power and domination and/or negotiation between popular culture and the dominant culture, from the prism of the occupation and uses of urban space. Popular history, a theme raised by Chartier (2007) has the potential to scrutinize elements submerged in the sea of official history. Without neglecting or abolishing traditional subjects and approaches – useful to the extent that it is necessary to establish relations, many comparative, between the center and the periphery – it is necessary to overcome possible ethnocentric or reductionist approaches to the urban question, based on the treatment of the cultures of the periphery, as a coherent set of symbolic systems, which is ordered according to a logic implicitly

imposed by the centers of cultural and political power. This itinerary has the tools to address the relations of domination and the intense inequalities of the social world, through the intricate process of tensions, in respect to the dominate culture.

From these relationships, it is possible to unravel the thread of the urban history of São Luís and its popular neighborhoods - areas seen as "non-historical". The many transformations of the urban fabric, designed and applied in the late 1960s, intended to create an urban model, in which the elite, with their political projects, made use of a set of instruments to standardize a new space; Such norms had as their goal, the conformation of the subjects, victims of the displacements, of the removals that would form the new neighborhoods, giving them a certain degree of participation in the "progress", in this city in constant evolution, even if in a subordinate way.

The understanding that progress had the properties of solving social problems was prevalent throughout the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, Maranhão and its capital – which was the epicenter of this process – experienced what would come to be called the "Maranhão miracle", that is, the culmination of a set of actions to modernize the institutions – whose one of the focuses was the urban planning of São Luís. One of the strongest imagetic representations of this period was presented in the newsreel "The Miracle of Maranhão", directed by Romanian filmmaker Isaac Rosenberg⁶. The images, as they reinforced the epithet of historic city, sought to link São Luís to the signs of modernity – the bridge, the port, the dam, electricity – they could transform the urban space into a land of progress. Although the city is represented in an avant-garde way, the unspoken become evident, due to the silencing of a real city. In his first few seconds, the announcer says: "... and the miracle happened... machines have arrived to accelerate progress; a young team, led by young people, came to provide better days for the people of Maranhão" (O Milagre do Maranhão, 1970).

In this context of forced modernization, the city, in the process of recreation by the elite, represents the difficulty of "aging" and the preservation of its pasts. These new spaces, due to their iconoclastic nature, have a conflicting relationship with the past, in which the "old" has its space symbolically delimited. It is up to historical knowledge to scrutinize the interests at stake about the construction of the urban history of the city. The basic text "The invention

⁶ The newsreel "The Miracle of Maranhão" (1970) was directed by the Romanian filmmaker, based in Brazil since the 1930s, Isaac Rosenberg. The short film is part of the series "Coisas do Brasil", whose intention was to exalt the achievements of the military governments and the achievements of the José Sarney government (1966-1970).

of everyday life" by Michel de Certeau, indicates that historical knowledge has the complex task of summoning the past, through the study of urban practices and has as its starting point, two perspectives: a) one that privileges the analysis and observation of the physical elements of the city – its urban design, its architecture, its topography, flow of displacements – seen as material and administrative impositions in the territory, that is, in the periphery; b) the second perspective focuses on a socio-ethnographic analytical model of everyday life. These two perspectives, if worked in a watertight way and not associated, can cause confusion in the analysis of the urban process. On the one hand, there is the constant lamentation of the infrastructural limitations in the urban environment studied and, on the other hand, there is the disproportionate emphasis on the dimensions of everyday relationships, displaced from the larger structures that impose their existence.

In order to solve this dilemma, Certeau (2002) suggests that the method to be chosen should be the convergence between points of view, which contribute to the delimitation of the relations between objects and their links, between the private and public; "this is one of the conditions of possibility of daily life in the urban space, which decisively shapes the notion of neighborhood" (Certeau, 2002, p. 38).

The process of unfinished urbanization that Brazil has gone through – especially in its less dynamic regions – has been slower. "Without the possibility of contestation, this process is the engine of transformations in society" (Lefebvre, 2013, p. 54) where its effects, whether reduced or maximized, have led to a series of influences – economic, social, cultural – with which the most varied people have to live with these influences, adapt. Such adaptation to the urban and modern space, often mediated by violence, marked the experience of many subjects, especially São Luís in the 1960s and 70s. This process produced a series of memories, collective and/or individual, which, according to Roger Chartier (2007), confer a more powerful presence to the past than that established in history books.

An urban phenomenon – imposed from outside – is strongly influenced by the characteristics of the place in which it unfolds. The construction of a dam, for example, has limited influences on the transport and movement of people; But when it becomes a sign of progress and a link between the new and old city, the population configures this space, through political and symbolic purposes, whose meanings attributed by the population go beyond its merely utilitarian sense. For Milton Santos (1993), the intensification of this phenomenon occurred in the wake of the military coup of 1964, which created the conditions for a rapid integration of the country, into an internationalization movement that appeared to

be irresistible (Santos, 1993, p. 36).

During the 1970s, the capitalist system sought to constitute and expand "circuits of exchange, networks that allow transfers" (Lefebvre, 2013, p. 57) not only of money, but of equipment, people and knowledge and, above all, symbolic capital that would legitimize the urban transformations, planned in cities such as São Luís, which in the 1970s, with its 350 years, was already experiencing the effects of unequal and excluding urban growth. These actions sought to encourage economic development – even if exclusionary and aimed at serving a rapidly expanding consumer market. This technocratic and authoritarian growth model produced, even if in a limited and incomplete way, results, especially with the increase of a middle class, rocked by the maintenance of economic growth, between the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, this same model "maintained large population contingents, without access to basic social and civil rights, such as labor legislation, social security, housing, and sanitation" (Maricato, 2013, p. 21).

Avant-garde urban interventions, whose mission is to transform aspects of the city – such as the bridge, the highway, the port, the working-class neighborhood, contribute to the construction of what Michel de Certeau (2003) in the text "The Invention of Everyday Life: Arts of Making" called the "utopian city". This avant-garde space, of clashes between memory and the future, is crossed, from the urbanist point of view, by three elements, such as: the production of its own space; the establishment of a "no time" to replace and undermine the resistance and stubbornness arising from traditions; and finally, the attempt to create an anonymous "universal subject" integrated into the city, albeit in a peripheral way. Such elements marked, to a lesser or greater extent, the process of urban modernization, which São Luís went through, and especially the village of Anjo da Guarda, as a model "working-class neighborhood".

Disorganized urban expansion and the struggle for public services in peripheral areas marked this period. This was a time of changes in local governance, which influenced modern São Luís. In this way, the urban transformations of the city obey a history, organized by the political forces that control it and make the urban space meet their interests. On this point, the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre mentioned that "the city is the work of a history, that is, of well-defined people and groups that carry out this work in historical conditions" (Lefebvre, 2013, p. 13). According to Flávio Villaça (2001), a large part of the low-income strata began to occupy geographic regions stigmatized by the strata with higher purchasing power. The phenomenon of spontaneous occupation, generically called "invasions", provided the

formation of an infinity of communities in the interior of the island.

The path traced by the city – outlined by its leading forces – is part of a historical tradition, where the right to the city was neglected, in favor of a sanitized city that sought to make poverty invisible. During the nineteenth century, in the absence of a territorially extensive city, a large part of the population – especially enslaved individuals, was imposed a series of legal regulations, which hindered their citizenship status. With the decline of slavery (but not poverty) inflicted on the "brown" majority of the city, the curtailment of the right to the city became the rule, through codes of posture and police determinations, which considered the suburb as the habitat of these individuals, in a "tradition" originating in the nineteenth century.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The urban history of São Luís is marked by the appreciation of the foundational nucleus, founded in the seventeenth century, whose neighborhood of Praia Grande was the greatest symbol of this space, which met the demands of export farming and housed the local elite. In the twentieth century, the reading of the city maintained its elitist tradition, without significant ruptures, in which the prevalence of historical interpretation and the identity of the city still linked it primarily to its foundational core – seen as the urban space that would represent the city as a whole.

From the 1960s and 1970s onwards, they were marked by the emergence of plans for the reformulation of the city, which had as a backdrop the integration of the city into national and international capitalist flows. It was up to the city leaders to lead this process of transformation and creation of various elements that are part of the city's structure, such as the Ring Road, the Embankment and the Bacanga Dam, in addition to the construction of popular houses via the BNH and the paving of the interior of the island. In the face of these impositions, the peripheral territories, inserted in a subordinate and limited way in the process of modernization of the city, produced a number of clashes, especially related to the right to the city and access to public services.

Urban history, from this point of view, is responsible for addressing more appropriately the meanings, uses and interpretations of societies – both those who control it and those who just live in it. However, as detailed above, it is up to the interpreters of urban history to focus on the broader dimensions of the city, especially the spatial, cultural and political relations, its disputes and tensions, especially the peripheries and their relations with the center. To

explain the trajectory of the city, it is essential to access the memories contained in its spaces of sociability, where history is exhibited and constructed, since the city, (Secchi, 2009), is the result of a process with multiple variants.

To this end, Michel de Certeau indicates that the task of summoning the urban past starts from two points; the first is related to the analysis and observation of the physical elements of the city – its urban design, its architecture, its topography, the flow of displacements – considered as material and administrative impositions on the territory, impossible to be neglected in the analysis of urban space; The second starting point focuses on the analysis of the daily life of communities. These points of view, if worked together, can contribute to the in-depth interpretation of the city.

Therefore, the city of the avant-garde, of the utopia of progress, of peripheral modernization and of urban transformation is a market for clashes between memory (tradition, stubbornness and insistence) and the future, seen as a space "not time" to replace and undermine traditions, whose ideal subject is seen as "universal" anonymous and integrated into the city, even if in a peripheral way – permeated by shocks and tensions. Such elements marked, to a lesser or greater extent, the process of urban modernization that São Luís went through, and especially the village of Anjo da Guarda, as a model "working-class neighborhood".

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