

**“THE PERIPHERY IS THE PERIPHERY EVERYWHERE”:
CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN URBAN PERIPHERIES**

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*“Periferia é periferia em qualquer lugar”:
produção cultural em periferias urbanas*

*“La periferia es la periferia en todas partes”:
Producción cultural en las periferias urbanas.*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE DOSSIER

This dossier’s title was taken from the song “Brasília Periferia,” composed by Gog, a pioneering rapper and a reference point for Brazil’s hip hop movement. The song was released in 1994 on the *Dia a Dia da Periferia* album and the phrase became common in Brazilian peripheries, especially Racionais MC’s used it in the song “Periferia é Periferia,” which appears on their 1997 album, *Sobrevivendo no Inferno*. For us, this phrase does disregard the differences between historical and social contexts, proposing that all peripheries are the same. Rather, it identifies a global phenomenon resulting from the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production. This creates peripheries even in the center of capitalism, which itself is reproduced via precarity and the super-exploitation of the world’s working class. To us, the phrase highlights that there are common experiences to be found in the formation of peripheral subjects throughout the world (D’Andrea 2022).

In their work *Theory from the South*, Jean and John Comaroff argue that the material, political, social, and moral effects of the rise and expansion of neoliberalism are felt more intensely in the Global South than in the Global North. The former reveals the future of the latter within a generalized process of precarization of the world of work and the dismantling of systems of social protection. According to the Comaroffs, it becomes even more necessary to consider the South not only as a place of tradition, or of the production of raw research data, or as a reservoir of pre-capitalist social practices and values, but as a terrain upon which another modernity is being erected. They pose the following question: “What if we posit that, in the present moment, it is the global south that affords a privileged insight into the workings of the world at large?” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012: 1)

The Comaroffs follow this line of argument in that they question not only the North-South hierarchy in the production of scientific knowledge, but also critique the North-South divide itself as a flawed premise for understanding global flows and dynamics in the historical process of capitalist modernization and, in particular, in the context of neoliberal capitalism. In their own words:

What we suggest, in addition, is that contemporary world-historical processes are disrupting received geographies of core and periphery, relocating southward — and, of course, eastward as well — some of the most innovative and energetic modes of producing values. And, as importantly, part or full ownership of them. Which is one of the things that makes contemporary capitalism distinctive, thus to alter the lines of global modernity *tout court*. (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012: 7)

Following other paths, Ananya Roy has deepened the idea of the need to study urban peripheries from the perspective of the Global South, which represents an ontological and topological rupture for urbanism, redefining the understanding of spaces and subaltern subjects (Roy 2011). Expanding on this argument, we affirm that it is in the world's urban peripheries, where the contradictions of capitalism are most radical, that theoretical and methodological perspectives, worldviews, political actions, and imaginaries of the future that seek to analyze and confront capitalism are also produced. We understand the periphery not as a geographically fixed concept, defined by economically and spatially delimited borders, but as a dynamic phenomenon with strong symbolic connotations. We also believe that it is a political resource for diverse socio-cultural movements. The divisions between North and South, Center and Periphery have a structural and structuring economic basis. They are also complex, however, and are not limited to inequalities in terms of the distribution of income and resources.

Urban planner Xuefei Ren (2021) has identified a peripheral turn in global urban studies. For Ren, this represents a critical stance towards the model proposed by the Chicago School of Sociology at the beginning of the 20th century. For the first generation of the Chicago School, the center dominated the periphery, as the most important urban activities gravitated around the center. This model was thrown into question beginning in the 1990s (we'd argue even much earlier with the development of phenomena such as the Black Power movement in the U.S. ghettos in the late 1960s).

According to Ren, four different meanings of the term “periphery” appear in urban studies worldwide:

- 1) Peripheral areas, such as those on the outskirts of large cities, or in small towns and isolated rural areas;
- 2) The global south;
- 3) The periphery of urban theory, or of theory from the margins, produced in territories located outside of North America and Western Europe;
- 4) A metaphor referring to marginalized populations and their precarious living conditions.

Based on Ren's classification, we affirm that the notion of periphery is polysemic, carrying political, symbolic, cultural, and epistemological meanings. Ananya Roy proposes that the periphery is a space of creation and a way of doing theory (Roy 2011). As researchers from the Global South, we insist that are not simply agents of the primitive accumulation of data to be conceptually analyzed in the Global North, in a division of labor in which empiricism falls to us and theory to them.

Researching urban peripheries, therefore, is not about a colonialist desire for the exotic, for the collection of strange and surprising practices produced by the “Other.” Urban peripheries are today the center of capitalist expansion, where contemporary dystopias and utopias concentrate. Understanding the contemporary world, its contradictions, dangers, and possibilities for the future requires careful observation of what happens in urban peripheries, particularly (but not only) those in the Global South.

Since the 1990s, philosopher Paulo Arantes (2023) has critically discussed the notion of the “Brazilianization” of the world, an irony that inverts the myth that Brazil is the country of the future. Brazil’s obscene social inequality; the confinement of its upper classes in elite ghettos; the trivialization of the extermination of its poorest citizens, especially Black and Indigenous peoples; the lack of access to basic rights; the precariousness of social and labor rights; the dismantling of public social assistance institutions; the brutal financialization of the economy; the association between citizenship and consumption; the growth of favelas in cities; the predominance of informal work, of violent and militarized social control, of racism and xenophobia that stigmatize the populations of working-class neighborhoods in different parts of the globe; the prevalence of ultra-individualistic banditry; the growth of church-businesses capable of disseminating the spirit of neoliberalism; and a violent conservatism that turns against minorities and takes the form of a holy war of Good against Evil... These are only some of the characteristics that are advancing from the peripheries to the center of global capitalism. Urban unease reflects social disintegration that stems from the current stage of the global mode of production.

Following the same line of reasoning, geographer Thiago Canettieri (2020) states that the decomposition of the labor society has allowed for the emergence of a new social configuration based on peripheralization. This condition is marked by violence and precariousness. It is subject to intense regimes of exploitation and the total subsumption of life. It is integrated by exclusion. These are distinctive traits of social forms that have always been present in peripheries of across the world and throughout history.

They have, however, been most determinedly visible in, and globally associated with, peripheral countries — countries which the liberal capitalism of the Cold War era promised to “develop”. With the unfolding of the current crisis of capital and the collapse of modernization, the bright promise of a global “developed” future is collapsing into a reality of the world as periphery. The periphery form is, therefore, the way in which the decline of a society — indeed, of a global civilization founded on racist colonialism — is managed. The universalization of the periphery form is the world becoming periphery.

Social domination through precarization impacts the formation of subjectivities, discouraging class solidarity and fueling diffuse social fears and resentments. These, in turn, are susceptible to capture by hate speech, conspiracy theories, and scientific denialism. Furthermore, gentrification ambiguously emerges in peripheral territories as the only possible “alternative”

presented by neoliberal capitalism. It is constructed through threats of expulsion and the loss of points of reference for populations rooted in a peripheral territories, especially the most impoverished, racialized, and discriminated populations.

These reflections are necessary for our understanding of the grave historical moment in which we live. However, they also lack what Didi-Huberman (2009) calls “the survival of fireflies”. In this pre-apocalyptic scenario, we must look for the small glimmers, the flashes that allow us to glimpse escapes, to imagine alternative futures that animate social struggle and combat the conformism that results from absolute pessimism. As Fredric Jameson (2021) states, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, because utopian imagination is in decline in our times.

Exploring the art and culture produced in urban peripheries is a way of searching for those fireflies, those fragile lights that subtly illuminate the gloom, that are capable of showing that the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production always create openings for its replacement by a more just and happy way of life.

The dream of making a living from art and culture is present in urban peripheries. In Brazil, this dreamt-of work rarely becomes a means of livelihood for the working class. It contrasts sharply with the precarious occupations available to this class, whose time is always stolen by super-exploitation and the fragility of labor rights. According to data from the Continuous Monthly National Household Sample 2022 Survey (PNAD Contínua), released by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in March 2026, 37.5% of the Brazilian working class is currently engaged in informal labor, without any protection of workers’ rights. Even among workers with formal employment contracts, who are protected by the CLT (Consolidated Labor Laws), the 6x1 schedule (six days of work, one day off per week, totaling 44 hours of work per week reduces the working class’s free time and undermines the right to a dignified life. This is especially the case when the hours spent commuting between home and workplace are added. In the countries of the Global North, although neither the relationship between formal and informal work nor the labor laws are the same as in Brazil, peripheries also concentrate higher rates of unemployment, precariousness, and poverty. Some working-class neighborhoods are also territories with a significant presence of post-colonial migration, to the point of inaugurating the racial debates regarding issues historically seen as “social” in Europe (Fassin & Fassin 2006). The very term used in French to name peripheries violently contains the concept of exclusion. Thus, “banlieue” literally means “place of banishment”. This is a term used to label those areas outside the perimeter of the privileges of the official city of Paris. It is notable that the term, although widely used today, first appears in the 17th and 18th centuries, with the consolidation of the increasingly autocratic French court.¹ In this aspect, once again, the peripheries of capitalism’s center are

1 According to Ferro (1996: 703).

similar to the peripheries of its peripheries: in both poverty and racial discrimination not only coexist (Fernandes 2021), they are co-constituted.

In the Brazilian context, taking Rio de Janeiro as a reference, we must distinguish between favelas, suburbs, and peripheries. “Suburb” is the term used to designate certain working-class neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro and other Brazilian cities. It should not be confused with “favela”, even though favelas exist within suburbs. The category *suburb* is ambiguous. On a negative and stigmatizing note, it is associated with bad taste and poverty, leading to the accusatory label “suburbanite.” On a positive note, the suburb is seen as the cradle of football, samba, popular religious festivals, street carnivals; It is a place of more supportive, less impersonal sociability that sustains the affective memory and social bonds of the urban working classes. (Facina and Melo 2026)

In the favelas, the most striking characteristic is the instability of land and real estate ownership. Many favelas have been eliminated and their inhabitants expelled or relocated to other parts of the city during different historical periods (Valladares 2015). Samba tells this story in songs like “Saudosa Maloca”, composed by Adoniran Barbosa from São Paulo in 1951, or “Opinião”, written by Zé Kéti from Rio de Janeiro in 1964. The favelas are also zones of exception, where laws are frequently not applied and the very rule of law is called into question. There is no death penalty in Brazil, for example. But in the favelas, people are commonly be judged and executed by criminal courts or summarily executed by the police.

The term “periphery” is a more general category. Its use to designate distinct realities such as favelas, *banlieues*, *quartiers populaires*, *villas miseria*, *bidonvilles*, and suburbs is explained by its greater universalization due to global cultural phenomena such as hip hop and its use in urban studies. Today, the periphery is a globally recognized sign representing a common experience for the working classes who inhabit large cities. In the case of Rio de Janeiro, the term is also used to designate the metropolitan region furthest from the city center, characterized by precarious public transport and difficult urban mobility. It is not uncommon for a worker living in Rio’s Baixada Fluminense to spend four hours of their day commuting between home and workplace.

In this scenario, the dream job of making a living from creative work with art and culture becomes an achievable utopia and, at the same time, an indicator of the working class’s unease with the world of work shaped by neoliberal psychopolitics based on performance, competitiveness, individualism, and consumerism (Han 2020).

In a study of cultural collectives in the urban peripheries of Rio de Janeiro and Paris — specifically Saint-Denis and Stains — (Capanema and Facina 2025) conducted between 2024 and 2026, we perceived tangible parallels between the practices of cultural production in these territories and we sought to understand the possible confluences between different peripheral conditions (Santos 2023). In the peripheries of Rio and Paris, working with art and culture is

an expression of what Denis Merklen calls “politicity” (Merklen 2013, 2023).² The dozens of small, medium, and large collectives we studied are engaged in distinct activities — visual arts, music, theater, literature and reading, carnival, etc. — but all address political issues arising from popular demands. Making art is inseparable from confronting racism and LGBTphobia, from advocating for gender equality and the inclusion of people with disabilities, from fighting against mental asylums, from affirming the right to the city, from supporting the taxation of the rich and the end of the 6x1 work schedule, from demanding housing and agrarian reform, from uniting with the struggles of indigenous peoples, from proposing a popular democracy and urgently confronting the climate crisis. In our research, we found that all the major political causes of our time have become raw material for the cultural creations of the collectives operating in urban peripheries. As pointed out by Sandra de Sá Carneiro (2023), they are contemporary forms of social movement, to some extent occupying the place of parties, unions, and grassroots ecclesial communities of the past. Unlike these earlier forms, however, artistic collectives provide a utopian horizon of meaningful work through militant activity itself. This ceases to be a means and becomes an end, a way of earning a living with dignity, pleasure, and individual and collective self-realization. These artists see culture as work, as a way to guarantee sustenance: the material production and reproduction of life itself

The periphery — a symbol of a shared experience for the urban working class — creates a language that is universal, at least in part. This language manifests itself in the multiple creativities present in these territories. In the sense proposed by Didi-Huberman (2009), these function like fireflies, lighting the darkness cast by fascism and the neoliberal hegemony that transforms everything into immediate consumption and ultra-alienated labor, diminishing the working class’s capacity to dream.

These fireflies help us glimpse other possible worlds, but not easily. The main problem is unstable funding, which is subject to the decisions of public authorities, both local and national. Our fieldwork has shown how the intermittent and bureaucratic logics of funding opportunities undermine activities and harm cultural creation. The fireflies of culture are thus constantly under threat of elimination, as Pasolini lamented, citing the death of popular culture in Italy related to the expansion of consumer society after the country’s industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s and to the “normalization” of fascism.³

Nevertheless, researchers and interested laypeople can see that immense and vibrant creativity is present in the world’s urban peripheries. It is impossible to think about cities —

2 In his research on activists in urban peripheries in France (including cultural activists), sociologist Denis Merklen uses the term “politicity” (*politicité*) to precisely do three things: 1. Emphasize that activists are political actors, since social life has a political dimension; 2. Emphasize that political practices vary according to social classes, groups, and categories; 3. Observe politics, its practices, its modes of socialization, and its forms of organization that transform over time. (Merklen 2023)

3 “The Power Vacuum in Italy” by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1976) was originally published in the newspaper “Corriere della Sera” on February 1, 1975, and was later included in the book *Scritti corsari*, published in May 1975, where it appears under the title “L’articolo delle lucciole”.

either in the center or periphery of capitalism — without analyzing this effervescence. Forms of “culture from below” often succeed in imposing themselves on dominant or hegemonic cultures (Capanema et al. 2020). This fact offers valuable insights into utopian possibilities. As Paulo Freire (2011) remarks, viable novelties allow us to confront the apocalypse and postpone the end of the world (Krenak 2019), as well as reflect on the dilemmas and impasses of both the current world and the world to come (the climate crisis, information crisis, denialism, new forms of fascism, social fracture) (Fassin 2022). Studies on creative dynamics in the peripheries — spaces of resistance, survival, and constant innovation — can underpin and strengthen public policies that engage with this production.

In this dossier, we have gathered works that contribute to broadening our horizons in terms of the theoretical and methodological problematization of cultural production in urban peripheries, based on empirical data. We hope that the following articles will stimulate theoretical and methodological innovations that address the complexity of the topic at hand and, above all, support comparative research. Comparative studies in history already constitute a vast field of exploration. Belgian historian Marcel Detienne (2009) invites us to “compare the incomparable,” that is, different societies and worlds, placing common dynamics and concerns at the center of these investigations. For Detienne, there is an ethical value in making comparisons, which invites us to put the society to which we belong into perspective. Regarding culture comparisons, the *Transatlantic Cultures* project demonstrates the importance of the transnational dimension of different creative processes. It analyzes the circulation of ideas, aesthetics, products and cultural forms from the north to the south of the Atlantic on a broad scale. This makes it possible to re-examine the hierarchies and temporalities of history itself (Compagnon et al. 2017).

Anthropologist Fredrik Barth emphasizes that comparative research in anthropology is not similar to comparative anatomy (and we can say the same for the social sciences in general). It is not easy to define the unit to be compared (culture, society, etc.). It is therefore advisable to avoid conceptualizations that reify descriptions of cultures and societies as unitary and distinct elements for purposes of comparison. Diversity and difference should not be erased, as it is possible to conceptually transform them into a field of variability. This, in turn, allows for the construction of analytical descriptions that take into account the dimensions of variation, identifying co-variations that may have interdependent or interconnected characteristics. (Barth 2010)

In Barth’s own words,

My view is that we should not think of comparative method as a procedure whereby we compare separately constituted descriptions of two or more cases: we should engage comparison as actively as possible in the analysis of each separate case. Thereby we escape the twin liabilities of reifying our descriptions of social and cultural forms and of comparing those descriptions only, rather than primary materials. We achieve a more versatile, and penetrating, method of comparison by giving careful attention to - indeed seeking out - diversity and variation in our primary materials, whether obtained through fieldwork or by other means. Such across diversity allows us to establish dimensions of variation, thereby establishing the

comparison of our very description of the phenomena we study. The resulting analyzes can be used in further analytical work from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, but may be particularly useful for building models of processes. (Barth, 88-9)

In the case of cultural production in urban peripheries, comparative research can help address global problems, making visible the myriad hopeful actions that are signaling that “another world is possible,” in the words of the slogan of the World Social Forum, which recently celebrated its 25th anniversary in Porto Alegre.

Finally, an important element for understanding the centrality of studies on urban peripheries in Brazil today is the expansion of access to higher education, resulting from the increase in public university enrollment and the affirmative action policies promoted by the Lula and Dilma governments (2003-2016). The sociological profile of Brazilian students has changed, resulting in a growing number of researchers from peripheral territories interested in addressing urban peripheries in their work, bringing new perspectives and new problems to the field of anthropology. Up to the 1990s, research into urban peripheries focused primarily on armed violence, politics, and housing issues. From the 2000s onwards art, culture, and communication have gained prominence in the scientific production of researchers from Brazilian suburbs, favelas, and peripheries. Many of these new academics are themselves artists, cultural producers, activists in popular communication, or cultural activists. Their approaches combine reflection and practice, scientific research and intervention in the territories that they themselves inhabit. The present dossier offers a glimpse into the thematic, regional, theoretical, and methodological diversity of this field, as renewed by this new generation.

Enjoy your reading!

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