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AS CIDADES DO SUL GLOBAL COMO REFERÊNCIAS GLOBAIS DO COLAPSO  
THE CITIES OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH AS GLOBAL REFERENCES OF COLLAPSE  
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## Abstract

The widespread collapse of modernisation places the cities of the Global South as explanatory references of the urbanisation process worldwide. In this essay, based on a theoretical reflection built with an extensive literature review on critical social theory, we intend to discuss such a process. We explore how these cities have been transformed into references as well as objects of reflection on the processes taking place in the cities of the Global North, constituting a new parameter of the current social production of space, suggesting the idea of the peripheral condition as a result of the crisis of capital. In the sequence, we present the causes and consequences of this process, which lead to the reconfiguration of the pattern of the relationship between the centre and periphery. Faced with this situation, we see that the periphery has become the index of the current critical reproduction of capital. Here we develop the argument of the Global South as a reference of the world, an index of the phenomenon of collapse we are experiencing.

**Keywords:** Peripheral condition, Crisis of capital, Collapse of modernisation

## 1 Introduction

This text is a short essay intended to open a discussion. In broad outline, we aim to present the process by which the cities of the Global South have become a reference for the future of all cities, and not because of their potential or inventiveness. It is a negative model in the dialectical sense of the term. The South heralds

the world's future and reveals a high degree of social disintegration in modern standards. Thus, we approach the problem based on a broad literature review, seeking to highlight that, for different theorists, the cities of the Global South have become the reference of planetary urbanisation, precisely because it is there that the effects of the collapse of capital are synthesised and expressed. Our argument builds on a critical reading of Marx, which exposes an imminent crisis of the capital responsible for, in its development, producing the conditions for its desubstantiation. The imposition of the labour society without its full development has always been present in the cities of the South and is now becoming more widespread.

For instance, Rem Koolhaas (2001, p. 625), the star architect, once wrote: "Lagos is a paradigm of the future for all cities.". In particular, the cities of the peripheral countries, colonised at the time of first capitalism, came to inform the urban forms that began to appear in the towns of central capitalism. As the Italian urbanist Bernardo Secchi (2013, p. 34, our translation) wrote: "Some cities in Central and South America have become a clear representation of the result of processes of distinction and social exclusion/inclusion"<sup>1</sup> that occur worldwide and, the urbanist adds, the future of Europe "[...] may be hidden there". In the same direction, the English geographer Stephen Graham (2010, pp. 16-17) has noticed that "explicitly colonial models" developed and perfected in the streets of the Global South now emerge "in the metropolitan cores of Europe and North America.". Mike Davis (2004, p. 7) also identified this trend. He stated that favelas, such characteristic expressions of the urbanisation of peripheral countries, "however deadly and insecure, have a brilliant future.". After all, according to the United Nations Urban Observatory report cited by the author, by 2040, at least half of the world's urban growth will occur in favela-like forms.

The urbanist Agostino Petrillo (2021, p. 12, our translation), in a recent text, notes that the periphery is no longer what it used to be: its own forms now manifest themselves elsewhere. According to the author, the "periphery has grown and attacked established centres"<sup>2</sup>. Even Germany, the pearl of the European Union's development, is caught up in "processes of peripheralisation", indicating the situation of deteriorating living conditions, the scarcity of employment and its precariousness, and the decline of the political participation of individuals in historically created institutional structures, resulting in a marginalised mass (Bernt and Liebmann, 2013). Türcke (2005, p. 78, our translation) reveals that, at this point, it is "the Third World that serves as a model for the First". The result is as described by Robert Kurz (1991, p. 16, our translation): "The future of Germany is possibly Berlin's beirutisation."<sup>3</sup>.

In a text on the analytic of coloniality and decoloniality in architecture, Leo Name (2021, p. 5, our translation) notes: "theories and references to cities, landscapes, architectures, technologies, languages and styles are located elsewhere, mainly part of Europe and the United States", that is, in the North. However, given the quotes collected in the previous paragraph, we can suggest that perhaps the signals are mixed. There has long been a perception that the cities of the South are references for the urbanisation that is taking place in the Global North – a perception that apparently first came from intellectuals who are not affiliated with the so-called decolonial turn. It is about taking the South as a name to think about the diagnosis of collapse.

Clearly, the movement by which theorists of the Global North take on South references to understand their cities does not come from any enlightened epiphany but from the effectiveness of a process that imposes itself planetarily – although it does not occur objectively on a world scale all at once. The process we are now analysing can only be glimpsed as a trend, even though, it is not a continuous trend but discontinuous in time and space, with different counteracting forces holding it back. We believe that it is possible to understand this process that has been forming and consolidating worldwide – a process that we call the "becoming-periphery of the world" (Canettieri, 2020).

The peripheralisation can no longer be hidden. Enzensberger (1994) presents a collection of newspaper headlines describing catastrophic situations: "Third world reports, as you can read them every day at breakfast". The essayist, nonetheless, reveals his exposure gambit. "Only the place names are changed. In fact, the settings where they occur are not Luanda and Colombia, Monrovia, and Sri Lanka, but Rome, Frankfurt, Berlin and Athens." Not even the global capitalist media can stop announcing the generalisation of peripheralisation, such as the alarming increase of poverty in the United States, resulting in the explosion of the homelessness<sup>4</sup>; the return of the slums of the Victorian era in London<sup>5</sup>; or the emergence of precarious encampments in the heart of Paris<sup>6</sup>.

The countries subjected to the barbarism of colonisation received the systemic chaos generated by the foundation of the modern commodity-producing system. Not by chance, this side of the Atlantic was, according to Paulo Arantes (2014, p. 304, our translation), conceived as a business, "not just any business, but the most violent and profitable link in the production chain of Primitive Accumulation" – the social barbarism, based on naked violence, prevented the formation of a society along the lines of the colonisers, who saw themselves as animated by the spirit of progress and by the universal representatives of civilisation.

The peripheries – and the peripheries of peripheral countries – were formed as spaces produced by the logic of externalisation (Lessenich, 2016) of the social anomie resulting from the internal contradictions of the expanded reproduction of capital. However, with a world of limited extensions to externalisation, they could not perpetuate indefinitely. Maintained the contradictory dynamic of the valorisation of value, it did not take long for the irrationalities of the system to spring up in the dynamic centre. In this way, it could be said: the peripheral condition has become universalised (Canettieri, 2020) and with this, "the organic centre of the system begins to peripheralise"<sup>7</sup> (Arantes, 2019, s. p., our translation). This situation forces a perception's reconfiguration of the relationship between centre and periphery. They no longer are separate and antagonistic spheres but form a kind of negative continuum wrapped up by the sign of the complete peripheralisation of society.

## **2 The cities of the Global South as references of the collapse**

Strangely (or not), the cities of the Global South are taken as references for interpreting European and North American urbanisation at precisely the moment when, as Donzelot (1999, p. 7, our translation) has noted, "the city no longer produces society"<sup>8</sup>. The increase in violence and its counterpart, punitive-prison management; the precarisation of labour and forms of housing; deteriorated civic inclusion; profound segregation and a damaged urban life are characteristics that were believed, for a long time, to be exclusive to the countries of the South. But, as we have seen, they have gradually become a key to interpreting planetary urbanisation. If the flattening of differences in urban life was denounced under the unsustainable weight of modernity for a long time, its collapse leads to homogenisation by a new condition: the peripheral condition (Canettieri, 2020).

Here, it is worth referring to the interpretation of Bruno Lamas (2007) on the constitution of the modern city. For the author, supported by the critique of the value-dissociation, the urbanisation resulting from the industrial process relates to the ceaseless search of the value to affect its self-worth. The abstract subject, *das Kapital*, is what guide and preside over the process of urbanisation now transmuted into the gigantic "mechanical monster whose body fills whole factories, and whose demonic power, at first hidden by the slow and measured motions of its gigantic members, finally bursts forth in the fast and feverish whirl of its countless working organs" (Marx, 1982, p. 503). Thus, the society resulting from the social metaphysics of the valorisation of value, which reproduces itself from the objectification of abstract wealth in commodities, gives the forms of the human organisation its dynamics – urbanisation is within this register.

Though, the crisis reconfigures this picture. As Marx shows in his *Critique of Political Economy*, capital is a form of blind agency that carries the need for its own dissolution within its valorisation impulse. The irrational quest for valorisation turns into collapse. It is no longer unreasonable to perceive the crisis. It manifests itself in different forms, among them the crisis in the cities and the cities' crisis. The desubstantiation of historically specific forms of social mediation, their dissolution, takes with it the same criteria of validity that allowed the promise of emancipation proper to cities, as the proverb of the lower Middle Ages would have it: "The air of the city liberates". Cities, whose growth, and organisation were guided by the valorisation of value, are now spaces of collapse. The smell of rust pervades the air, the labour society undergoes a historical meltdown, and the promises of emancipation are nothing but an evanescent horizon.

In truth, however, the modern city in its peripheral manifestation never inspired freedom. Created from the extension of colonisation, in Global South, the city has not formed society at all, but a collection of dismantled society, held together by the violent and brutal pressure that pummels bodies and puts them to work even when there is no more employment. The city of coloniality is an example of the regime of exception. As the oppressed well know, the exception is the rule. This characteristic of the cities of the Global South, namely, the manifestation of societal disintegration, is what makes them a reference point for the countries of the Global North. After all, in them, the collapse of the capitalist society is already more developed. As Robert Kurz (1991) points out, the collapse of the modern commodity-producing system advances from the periphery towards the centre. It is, therefore, in the peripheral condition that the current stage of the unfolding of the internal contradictions of capital is most clearly exposed - and for this reason, the peripheries can be taken as synthetic explanatory units. It is an inflexion of the planetarisation of capital. For a long time, the planetarisation of capital seemed to emanate as waves of modernisation radiating from the centres towards the peripheries. Now, the precarious situation is advancing, like a siege, from the peripheries towards the centres.

## **3 Autopsy of the collapse**

The collapse of value is already manifest, and this is not speculation. It is necessary to perform an autopsy of value and put its body under analysis to understand such a process. Although already lifeless, it guides the

efforts of a planetary society in collapse<sup>9</sup>. The autopsy reveals the causes of the ruin. The first to identify this situation was Karl Marx (1982). By detecting the internal contradiction that drives the modern commodity-producing system, Marx unveiled "capital's secret". In the 19th century, the German observed that capital is like the absolute spirit in the process: an automatic and tautological movement, oriented by an end in itself. In its course, which leaps from form to form without ever getting lost in the tortuous paths, "the money-commodity-money cycle (M-C-M) starts from the extreme of money and returns, finally, to the same extreme". And so, the vicious circle can start all over again. The only goal, Marx asserts, is the self-referential accumulation of more-of-the-same. Capitalism is, of course, an ever-expansive system - a patent contradiction in today's world, where the urge to expand into infinity clashes with the limits of the finite resources of an already exhausted world. Though, this is an external limit to the logic of capital that is not the least of our concerns in understanding the collapse. There is, in addition to this, another limit, which is expressed in combination with the previous one: it is an internal and absolute limit of value (Kurz, 2014). In its dynamics of expanded reproduction, capital places barriers and limitations to its continuity (Marx, 1973).

In his discovery of surplus-value and the exploitation of labour under capital, Marx believes that there are only two possibilities for the expansion of the value base in the system. The first strategy is what the author calls absolute surplus value. He thus refers to the addition of the working day and therefore the growth of surplus labour time, while necessary labour time – the portion of the working day that corresponds to the reproduction costs of the worker himself – remains unchanged. However, such a stratagem has an objective limit: the working day cannot be extended to limits that would make exploitation impossible the following day. Therefore, the second way out is what Marx identifies as the real universalising tendency of capital: relative surplus-value. The leaps in labour productivity brought about by technological development and the productive application of science compress necessary working time. In a shorter period, the worker produces enough for his own reproduction and thus expands the surplus working time. But this dynamic reveals the internal contradiction of capital: while the productive forces are developed to increase labour productivity and thus expand the surplus labour time, living labour is eliminated from the production circuits. Since labour, as Marx writes, is the substance of value, this process of expansion is simultaneously a process of desubstantiation. This trend – which Marx predicted in the 19th century – reached unprecedented proportions with the Fourth Industrial Revolution, with microelectronics, robotics, computer programming and the generalisation of automation.

The expansion of capital is an intrinsic necessity of this tautological social form. Nevertheless, this expansion can only occur historically and, as it advances, its very development places an immanent and absolute limit [Schranke] on its reproduction (Kurz, 2018). There is a contradictory relationship between the expansion of exploitation and the expansion of the production of surplus-value. Karl Marx, in the third book of *Das Kapital*, writes:

Moreover, it has already been demonstrated – and this constitutes the real secret of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall – that the manipulations to produce relative surplus-value amount, on the whole, to transforming as much as possible of a certain quantity of labour into surplus-value, on the one hand, and employing as little labour as possible in proportion to the invested capital, on the other, so that the same reasons which permit raising the intensity of exploitation rule out exploiting the same quantity of labour as before by the same capital. These are the counteracting tendencies, which, while effecting a rise in the rate of surplus-value, also tend to decrease the mass of surplus-value, hence the rate of profit produced by a certain capital (Marx, 1999, p. 165).

In this way, capital, in order to continue accumulating, must broaden the base of exploitation of relative surplus-value whose development implies the elimination of immediate productive labour-power. We can no longer understand the accumulation process as infinite. There is a historical processuality that places a historical and absolute limit to the process of expanded reproduction of capital. With the historical development of the expansion of capital, its reproduction process encounters obstacles that prevent it from absorbing new productive labour and thus makes part of the working population superfluous.

We have, hence, the production in growing scales of a mass of unemployable people. As Marx identified, it is no longer a matter of relative overpopulation, but now is an issue of remnants who structurally can no longer be included. The effects of this situation are manifold and strike at the core of the modern commodity-producing system since labour is not a mere abstraction. Its existence is, as Marx shows, properly social, which means recognising that it plays a role in social mediation. The social existence of individuals can only be realised through the commodity form, even if the only commodity available is one's own labour. With the sale of this commodity, the individual goes to the market to acquire the other commodities necessary for his

material reproduction. In this way, society is enchained by the production, circulation, exchange, and consumption of commodities.

However, with the inherent contradiction of capital, this historically specific form of mediation is damaged and, as the collapse progresses, the bond of labour goes into decline and can no longer perform the function of amalgamating society. In its moment of formation, capital managed to establish itself as a total social fact. It thus turned everyone into a monetary subject - the material reproduction of life is only possible to the extent that it is conditional on the mobilisation of money. Yet, in its contradictory development process, capitalism has destroyed the objective conditions for the realisation of monetised existence. The result is the production of a strange condition: "monetary subjects without money" (Kurz, 1991).

This situation was not unknown to peripheral life. On the contrary, because of these territories' specific social and economic formation from a subaltern hitch in the planetarization of capital, a good part of the population lacks the money to realise themselves as recognised subjects in this social form effectively. What is interesting to note is that this collapse of modernization was already inscribed in peripheral life since the beginning. But in its contradictory ballet, this already collapsed way of life of the periphery is no longer its exclusivity. Now it also extends to the centre. This spreading peripheral condition is then a consequence of the unfolding contradictions of capital. Instead of socialisation through labour, regressive forms of "catastrophic desocialisation" (Kurz, 2014), which were already underway in the peripheral areas, have come into expansion. The collapse of the labour society does not bring social forms of emancipation but leads to widespread social degradation. Potentially, all individuals become unnecessary for capital accumulation, which, once automated, produces a huge collection of commodities without implying value accumulation and can only reproduce itself in the fetishised, externalised form of fictitious capital.

#### **4 South and North in the mirror of collapse**

Collapse forces a reordering of the definitions of centre and periphery, of Global South and Global North. The internal crisis of capital, which leads to its own dissolution without meaning its destitution, leads to the redefinition of the old explanatory categories. To understand the collapse, it is necessary to understand its effects on society. Thus, during the time of the formation of the labour society, social conflict was described as the key to integration. Alain Touraine (1991) states that such integration, although conflictual, created a common ground: labour. Class consciousness and the grammar of political action were formed on this terrain. In the current conjuncture of the unequivocal presence of the crisis, however, the excluded can no longer be integrated. Touraine (1991) notes, therefore, that the machine of urban integration, which for a while led over the symbolic management of politics for much of the twentieth century, has broken down. The deconstruction of the labour society places the peripheral societies as the explanatory model of this fracture. The peripheries have never been lucky enough to be fully integrated - or, more precisely, have always been subject to negative integration (Arantes, 2004).

Lefebvre (2000) employs the expression bureaucratic society of directed consumption to refer to the post-war reality in European countries. The form of organisation of European capitalism in the second half of the twentieth century allowed the development, not without its own contradictions, of a regime of accumulation based on integration through labour in which workers were effectively integrated. As we have tried to argue, this expression of capitalism was limited in time and space. Not even in the post-war period was this integration guaranteed in the peripheral countries. In fact, the condition of possibility for the existence of this form of organisation in the central countries was the exploitation of the peripheries. But as the contradiction of capital develops, the bureaucratic society of directed consumption ceases to exist and gives way to a form characteristic of the peripheries: the security society of managed collapse (Canettieri, 2020).

According to Marildo Menegat (2021, s. p., our translation), it became clear that the backwardness that characterised the illustrated interpretation of the peripheral countries was not the backwardness of past forms in the evolutionary line, but a specificity that merged, in a single reality, "what was worst in capitalism, without ever having participated in its (weak) civilising process". After all, the critical theory discovered that behind the cloths of civilising enlightenment, there was barbarism - for a while, the West was able to externalise it to the peripheries. Now it is no longer possible. The reality of the periphery presents the tendential movement of the concrete totality of the crisis. "In the collapse of the periphery lies the truth of capitalism" (Menegat, 2021, s.p., our translation). It is not for less that, to speak of the "erosion of politics and society", Ulrich Beck (2000, p. 82) refers to the "brazilianisation of the West". It is the periphery, it is the Global South that provides the criteria for understanding the world.

With the collapse, the peripheral condition becomes indicative of the horizon of expectations of the whole world. Thus, writes Hochuli (2021, s.p.), "Global South and North are therefore no longer avatars of past and present, with the former slowly catching up to the latter, but now seem to exist in the same temporality", in a

suffocating presentism that deflates expectations regarding the future (Arantes, 2014). The scenario today is the opposite of what the ideology of the end of history conceived: it was expected that the South would gradually come to resemble the North, driven by its pacification and its development<sup>10</sup>. However, it is the countries of central capitalism that, with the development of the crisis of capital, start to resemble more and more the societies of peripheral capitalism and their incomplete social forms. After all, a good part of the autochthonous social forms was destroyed for the commodity logic to be imposed although always in tatters, since the constant violent super-exploitation coming from this integration of disintegration has always been a necessity of the world-system.

The periphery becomes a prism capable of reflecting the world, "[...] often being a privileged symptom, if we may so speak, of the acute crisis that the capitalist system is going through in all its dimensions" (Arantes, 2019, s.p., our translation)<sup>11</sup>. More and more, these symptoms appear in a generalised way throughout the social body because there is a becoming-periphery of the world. It is necessary to expose the paradoxical state to try to apprehend reality. The categories centre-periphery are relational, but here we want to argue and take to its ultimate consequences the puzzling character of the peripheralisation of the world. It is precisely the making everything peripheral that reveals the moment of truth of the social forms of capital in a crisis. This collapse, which has always existed in the peripheries, inscribed at their core, has become explicit once it hits the centre.

What we want to suggest may seem counterintuitive: the core of the survival of capital in crisis lies in the spread of the peripheral condition. The periphery metamorphoses, occupying the position that the centre normally occupied: the centre was the horizon of expectation of the peripheries, which longed to reach its level. The point now is the inverse: the periphery, marked by precariousness, seems to indicate the near future of the centre. It is not the peripheries that are lagging, always running behind history, but, on the contrary, not only that firstly experience the social processes, but indicate those that constitute the core of the critical reproduction of capital (Canettieri, 2020). That is why the reference for understanding the collapse is the South.

## 5 Final considerations

The development of capitalism is the development of its internal contradictions that become more generalised. Henri Lefebvre (2000) knew that it was not just a matter of the contradiction between capital and labour in the factory, as much of Marxism thought – and still thinks. The contradictions are now in the whole social space, increasingly generalised. The main one, from our perspective, is the generalisation of precarity, the result of the dissolution of the world of labour as we knew it. The development of the productive forces might well provide material comfort for all, yet it increases the count of those supernumeraries, who perish from the crassest necessity. The periphery-form stretches out and covers the whole world with its shadow, for that is the very form of the capitalist production of space in its critical moment.

The advanced state of putrefaction of social forms leads to catastrophic desocialisation even in the so-called core countries. As the material conditions of life sink into the depths of modern civilisation, punitive power and violence are on the rise and exponentially increasing. A managerial paradigm of exception is formed from there. Exceptionary expedients become routine. The regime of urgency established by the new world time explains and justifies violence as a form of administration of the world as barbarism. It is under these conditions that the cities of the Global South have become references as well as objects of reflection regarding the processes taking place in the cities of the Global North, constituting a new parameter of the current social production of space, suggesting the idea of a peripheral condition as a result of the crisis of capital that is becoming more widespread.

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<sup>1</sup> From the original in Italian: "Alcune città del Centro e Sud America sono divenute rappresentazione chiara del risultato di processi di distinzione e di esclusione/inclusione sociale".

<sup>2</sup> From the original in Italian: "La periferia cresceva, aggrediva i centri consolidati".



[3](#) From the original in German: "Deutschelands Zukunft ist womöglich die Beirutisierung Berlins".

[4](#) See The Guardian, 31 May 2017: Homelessness jumps to record-breaking level.

[5](#) See The Guardian, 16 January 2018: The Victorian slums are back.

[6](#) See Le Monde, 19 October 2017: Ces 570 bidonvilles que la France ne veut pas voir.

[7](#) From original in French: "le centre organique du système qui a également commencé à se périphériser".

[8](#) From original in French: "la ville ne produit plus de société".

[9](#) Legend has it that the knight Rodrigo Diaz, El Cid, was feared by the Moors for having commanded a large army during the early years of the 11th century. In 1094, he took the city of Valencia, where he became the ruler. In 1099, El Cid died in bed in his castle. The Moors became confident with the news and raised siege against Valencia. His wife had the armour put on the corpse, tied his body to his horse and clamped the sword on his lifeless arm. The dead man rode against the Moorish army, which fled on sighting the image of the knight, and was pursued and defeated by the army of Valencia (Coelho, 2010). In our case, the value occupies the place of Rodrigo Díaz - it is already something desubstantialised - and yet it still goes on organising social life, with devotees following him. A society that follows its deceased paladin on horseback will not have the same luck as the Valencian troops.

[10](#) It is no coincidence that these terms appear together. These are not the ravings of a social critic - one need only recall Robert McNamara (1968, p. 151), who served as US Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War and then served for more than ten years as President of the World Bank, where he was responsible for designing aid and support programs for developing countries. In his own words: "When the privileged are few, and the desperate poor are many, and when the gap between the two groups deepens rather than narrows, it is only a matter of time before a choice must be made between the political costs of reform and the political costs of rebellion. For this reason, the implementation of policies specifically aimed at reducing the misery of the poorest 40% of the population in developing countries is advisable not only as a matter of principle, but also of prudence. Social justice is not simply a moral imperative; it is also a political imperative. To show indifference to this social frustration is the same as encouraging its growth".

[11](#) From the original in French: "étant souvent un symptôme privilégié, si nous pouvons parler ainsi, de la crise aiguë que traverse le système capitaliste dans toutes ses dimensions".