

Urban Transformations in Brazilian Metropolises: reflections and results of a networking comparative research

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Observatório das Metrôpoles is a networking research group associated with the investigation of the metropolitan dimension of urbanization in contemporary Brazil. The title of our recently concluded five-year programme – **Metropolises: territory, social cohesion and democratic governance** – expresses our understanding about the dilemmas presented in Brazilian urban-metropolitan reality, concerning on the one hand to the challenges of national development and on the other hand the new relations among economy, society and territory arising from the transformations in the capitalist system that emerged from the second half of the 1970's. In the last two years, we focused on carrying out the goals of transforming the wealth of information and analyses into a comparative synthesis. To this end we sought preliminarily to build a theoretical-methodological strategy that we present in this communication. Such strategy was embodied in the choice of the “socio-spatial dimension of exclusion/integration in metropolises” as the goal of our comparative analysis, that is, in the construction of the issues for the joint research and in the construction of an empirical model to be applied over fourteen urban agglomerates in Brazilian urban network that have metropolitan functions in nowadays.

The panel proposed aims to present the results of the effort on this comparative analysis. We chose to elect the society-territory dimension as the focus of the comparative analysis. This choice was axiologically oriented by reasons relating to the experience of the *Observatório das Metrôpoles*, such as the fact of considering social inequalities the key topic in the academic and political agendas at the moment we developed our Research Programme.

Despite having conducted our research on a national scale, therefore assuming a unity between the major cities analyzed, we believe to have intuitively adopted a strategy close to the one identified as variation-discovery on the classical Charles Tilly's work “Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons”. By one side, due to the significant differences arising from the regional and urban structural heterogeneity of our historical formation, we have got cases that are distinct enough to justify a comparatively review about tendencies of convergence/divergence and homogenization/differentiation in the social organization of the territories as well as to find out which instance (among the chosen instances) contributes to the formation of the local dynamics of urban transformation. On the other side we assumed the hypothesis according to which the fourteen examined cases are part of a unified system – the Brazilian urban network –underwent the same dynamics of transformation which operates on the macro scale.

If the use of the variation-finding model seems appropriate to our comparative purposes – because it allows to overcome the limits of non-historical explanations of urban transformations – it creates the risk of empiricists non-theoretical narratives by the absence of a general theory that explain the changes observed in concrete cases. Due to this it became necessary the construction of a theoretical model that allow us to describe and interpret the studied cases as a result of national/global forces in interaction with local forces. In order to achieve that goal, our research adopted a set of hypotheses over the relation between the metropolises urban order and the peripheral and associated pattern of the Brazilian's capitalist system

development, inspired on the classical socio-economic discussion about the theories of dependence. We understand it as a set of attributes – economic, social and political – which structure, organize and delimit the dynamics of the process of capital accumulation, and the economic and social relations that underlie it and exist in a given national State (space) in a specific historical period. The first defining attribute of a pattern of capitalist development (which precedes all other attributes since it expresses and delimits them at the same time) is the configuration of the so-called block of power in a given historical period and its capacity of direction/association with the double movement of mercantilization and social protection identified by Karl Polanyi. By “urban order” we understand the connections between the ecological/demographic dimension and the social dimension that articulate the metropolization process and its patterns of expansion along with the social structure and the mechanisms of social reproduction and domination that support the peripheral pattern of the Brazilian’s capitalism.

We get it started on the following questions: What are the impacts on the metropolises caused by the changes in Brazil over the last 30 years? In this period, the Brazilian’s peripheral and associated pattern of development crosses three main cycles: the stagnation of the industrialization by importation substitution model in the 1980s, the neoliberal experiment in the 1990s and the neo-developmentalism experiment in the 2000s. Can we identify signs of transformations in the urban order? How to conceptualize this period in order to reflect upon urban transformations?

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