

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

On cultural paradoxes: culture, agency, identity, representation, and the survival of peripheral subjects in the “Era of the Periphery”

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the transformations, tensions, and paradoxes that shape the cultural production of São Paulo’s urban peripheries between 2016 and 2024. Drawing on ethnographic scenes and testimonies from diverse cultural agents, it examines how disputes over visibility, conflicts surrounding funding programs, ambivalent relations with the State, and the increasing commodification of peripheral identity have reconfigured practices and discourses within what has been called the “Era da Perifa.” I argue that the pedagogical, aesthetic, and political project that characterized Marginal/Peripheral Literature and cultural collectives in previous decades has, in recent years, undergone a process of reordering. This shift is evidenced by the incorporation of entrepreneurial logics, dependence on public and private funding mechanisms, and the emergence of internal hierarchies previously rendered invisible. Engaging with authors such as Hall, Abu-Lughod, Ortner, Giddens, Reyes, Comaroff, and Wacquant, I contend that the concept of culture — often mobilized as a positive and unquestionable value — must be critically examined in its political, economic, and subjective dimensions. I argue that, although peripheral identity is now valued as a cultural brand, it remains profoundly shaped by precarization, structural racism, and everyday struggles for survival. Thus, the article seeks to understand the limits and possibilities of agency for peripheral cultural producers, highlighting tensions between recognition and capture, resistance and assimilation, community and market.

Keywords: Urban Peripheries; Cultural Production; Agency; Identity; Neoliberalism.

Dos paradoxos culturais: cultura, agência, identidade, representatividade e sobrevivência dos sujeitos periféricos no “Era da Periferia”

Resumo:

Este artigo analisa as transformações, tensões e paradoxos que marcam a produção cultural das periferias de São Paulo entre 2016 e 2024. A partir de cenas etnográficas e depoimentos de diferentes agentes culturais, examinamos como disputas por visibilidade, conflitos em torno de editais, relações ambíguas com o Estado e a crescente mercantilização da identidade periférica reconfiguram práticas e discursos no interior da chamada “Era da Perifa”. Argumento que o projeto pedagógico, estético e político que caracterizou a Literatura Marginal/Periférica e os coletivos culturais nas décadas anteriores passa, no período recente, por um processo de reordenamento, evidenciado pela incorporação de lógicas empreendedoras, pela dependência de mecanismos de fomento público e privado e pela emergência de hierarquias internas antes invisibilizadas. Dialogando com autores como Hall, Abu-Lughod, Ortner, Giddens, Reyes, Comaroff e Wacquant, sustento que o conceito de cultura, frequentemente mobilizado como valor positivo e incontestável, deve ser problematizado em suas dimensões políticas, econômicas e subjetivas. Aponto que, embora a identidade periférica seja hoje valorizada como marca cultural, permanece profundamente atravessada pela precarização, pelo racismo estrutural e pela luta cotidiana pela sobrevivência. Assim, o artigo busca compreender os limites e possibilidades da agência desses produtores culturais, destacando as tensões entre reconhecimento e captura, resistência e assimilação, comunidade e mercado.

Palavras-chave: Periferias Urbanas; Produção Cultural; Agência; Identidade; Neoliberalismo.

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INTRODUCTION

Between 2016 and 2024, I followed events related to different actors in cultural production from the peripheries, including occurrences experienced by my key interlocutors at the time. I connected these to my research trajectory, which comprises three undergraduate research projects (2016–2018), an undergraduate thesis (2019), and a master’s degree (2020–2024). These stages now culminate in an ongoing PhD. I also related these experiences to the questions that grew denser over time, particularly in light of the rearrangements, contrasts, and new directions of the so-called pedagogical, aesthetic, and political project (Nascimento 2009) that emerged from the cultural productions of São Paulo’s peripheries. These cases drew attention by exposing deep tensions: disputes over funding, previously invisible internal fractures, a heterogeneity of interests, discourses, and modes of action, as well as the growing gap between the concrete multiplicity of agents and the idea of a supposed “peripheral unity” — a unity increasingly captured by the social imaginary through the popularization of the adjective “periphery” as a cultural, intellectual, and commercial brand. This is a phenomenon that Reyes (2013) critically and precisely described as the “era of the periphery.”

In this article, I reflect on these issues in light of my master’s thesis (Santos 2024), articulating them with testimonies gathered over the years and formulations developed in a previous text (Santos 2022), in which I discussed the relationship between peripheral cultural production

1 Here, the reference to the “Era da Perifa” draws on the analysis developed by Reyes (2013), who expressed concern regarding both the academic and cultural-market eagerness to celebrate the identities, forms of representation, and potentials of peripheral communities across Latin America, as well as the co-optation of these dynamics by the status quo, while long-standing and persistent structural problems remain pressing and unresolved. For further discussion, see Reyes (2013).

and what many call “the system.” My interest lies less in reconstructing chronologies than in exploring how these seemingly dispersed events illuminate disputes over culture, agency, identity, representation, and survival within the context of the “Era da Perifa” [Periphery Era] — a term borrowed from Reyes (2013). To situate the debate, I divide the article into five parts: first, I present five situations experienced in the daily life of cultural production in the peripheries; second, I develop a discussion on paradoxes, ambiguities, antagonisms, and symbolic disputes in peripheral cultural practice, where I place the term “culture” under suspicion through a critical reading; third, I discuss the relationship between the cultural policies of the Workers’ Party (PT) governments, the peripheries, and neoliberalism; fourth, I offer some notes on identity, representation, agency, structure, and survival in the peripheral context; and finally, I conclude with a synthesis of the main themes discussed.

Yet, before any formal delimitation, one must recognize that certain experiences precede and exceed “the field. There are paths we do not entirely choose, but which traverse us in such a way that they end up haunting — and illuminating — our research questions. I do not recount an origin here to legitimize it as a method; I recount only the discomfort of seeing, throughout my academic training, certain experiences insistently returning as theoretical specters. I grew up in Grajaú — on the far southern outskirts of São Paulo — at the fold between precariousness and desire. I come from a mixed-race, Northeastern family that, with silent effort, kept faith in schooling alive; I had a sparse circulation through culture until my brother opened cracks through which music, politics, and literature entered. Then came punk, anarchism, street-corner meetings, and rap circles — worlds that taught one how to think long before any academic methodology manual. These spaces did not just give me an identity, but a grammar: a way of naming violence, the State, inequality, race, and possibilities for the future.

When I arrived at the university, I realized this repertoire was not neutral: it strained expectations about who I “should” be, where I “seemed” to come from, and what kind of reading would befit me. Every semester in academia, a curious gesture reappeared — sometimes solidary, sometimes doubtful — asking if I was “really from the periphery.” Over time, I understood that such a question was not about me, but about the symbolic disputes surrounding the production of knowledge: who can speak, who must prove themselves, who needs to explain their presence. By revisiting these layers now, I do not seek to consecrate a “standpoint” (*posição de fala*), but to recognize how this minefield of expectations and projections became ethnographic material — part of the analytical problem, rather than just my biography.

What I am composing here, therefore, is not memory, but method: this crossing has been converted into a lens, a suspicion, a discipline of the gaze. It is what draws me to punk and rap lyrics as affective and political archives of the city; it is what sharpens my attention to the zones of friction between practice and discourse, between desire and structure. If my writing has a starting point, it is not a place, but a persistent restlessness — the sense that the worlds that formed me continue to return questions that theory, on its own, cannot silence.

FIVE SCENES ON CULTURAL PRODUCTION FROM THE PERIPHERIES

Regarding the tensions presented here, I believe they must be analyzed by considering the weight of the disputes that constitute the context of this article (whether these are political or semantic — and frequently both at once). That said, I will introduce facts reported to me by my interlocutors, as well as others I have followed — be it through public discussions in newspapers and social media, or firsthand while in the field.

SCENE ONE: “NÓIS POR NÓIS”? [“US FOR US?”]

The first of these ethnographic situations, reported to me informally by an interlocutor, concerned a disagreement between several collectives over who would perform on the main stage of São Paulo’s *Virada Cultural* in 2014. According to this interlocutor, the central issue revolved around the massive number of peripheral collectives and the limited space of the event. In one of the meetings held to resolve the matter, a proposal was made: collectives that already had scheduled programming with the SESC São Paulo network would not perform on the *Virada Cultural* main stages, and vice versa. The entanglement (*imbróglio*) escalated when “the old-school crowd” (*um pessoal das antigas*) claimed the right to be in both spaces, arguing that they were the ones who had blazed the trail for these venues and established certain circuits, unlike the newer collectives. This situation explicitly denotes a hierarchy — one consistently denied or discursively concealed by various actors in this scene — challenging their own discourses and slogans such as “É nós por nós” [It’s us for us] and “Nós é ponte e atravessa qualquer rio!”² [We are the bridge and we cross any river!]. Furthermore, it demonstrates the existence and exercise of disputes based on meritocratic logics regarding visibility in the cultural field and the sharing of financial gains, since both the *Virada Cultural* and SESC provide payment to contracted artists.

SCENE TWO: PERIPHERIES AGAINST THE COUP AND FERNANDO HADDAD’S RE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Another situation, recounted in an interview conducted in 2017, portrays the relationship between the São Paulo municipal government — during the administration of Fernando Haddad

2 “Nós por nós” [Us for Us] is an expression that became popular in the peripheral neighborhoods of São Paulo in the late 1990s. Emerging from the vocabulary of Brazilian Rap/Hip Hop, it became a recurring slogan within the cultural scene of São Paulo’s peripheries, appearing in poems, short stories, chronicles, novels, song lyrics, and other cultural productions associated with this milieu. Broadly speaking, the phrase conveys the idea that only unity among “us” (the people of the peripheries) can transform our reality, since no external actor has been capable of doing so. It thus constitutes a direct reference to state abandonment and the absence of effective intervention by other institutions of power, while simultaneously affirming practices of self-organization. Similarly, the phrase “Nós é ponte que atravessa qualquer rio” (“We are the bridge and we cross any river”), by the poet Marco Pezão, expresses unity and collective strength within a community — particularly peripheral communities — when they come together to confront challenges. The metaphor of the bridge underscores the power of the collective (“nós”[us]) as that which enables the crossing and overcoming of “rivers,” that is, social, economic, and cultural obstacles.

(PT, 2012–2016) — and a collective that was part of my research at the time. This collective, politically identified with the Left, had always prized its autonomy from institutional politics, even under a progressive administration. In 2016, the Workers’ Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) called upon individuals, collectives, and cultural movements from São Paulo’s peripheries to sign a letter of support for then-President Dilma Rousseff (PT, 2010–2016), titled “Peripheries Against the Coup.” The collective in question decided not to sign the letter, as they did not support any institutional political party, leaving it up to its members to decide whether to sign individually.

Later in 2016, the situation repeated itself when the collective refused to sign a letter of support from cultural movements for Haddad’s re-election. According to the interviewee, that same year, the collective had its projects rejected by the VAI³ program and was excluded from another program it had actually helped create. This situation demonstrates that, even within the progressive field, culture is perceived as something to be mobilized according to party interests rather than the public interest. In the same interview, the interlocutor stated that, besides their benefits, government grants (*editais*) created a sense of “complacency” (*comodidade*) among collectives — who cease production when they are not selected — and fostered a competition for funding that was, in theory, forbidden among them. This last statement was corroborated by other interviewees during my undergraduate research (2016–2019) and my master’s degree (2020–2024).

SCENE THREE: THE “MANAGER-MAYOR” VERSUS PERIPHERAL CULTURAL PRODUCERS

Another situation I followed via social media was the friction between peripheral cultural producers and Mayor João Dória (PSDB, 2017–2018), who took office by creating a massive uproar within this group. While still campaigning, Dória had made blustering promises to move the *Virada Cultural* out of downtown São Paulo and claimed that “the *pancadões* [funk parties] in the periphery are a cancer destroying society”⁴ — a stance contrary to the previous administration. Haddad had not only built a direct dialogue with peripheral producers but also promoted various projects, passed laws for peripheral cultural production, expanded the VAI program, and sanctioned the Law for the Promotion of the Peripheries (*Lei de Fomento às Periferias*).

Dória, in turn, implemented a “sanitationist” policy (*política higienista*), involving the repression of the *Cracolândia* population, the removal of graffiti (*grafite* and *pichação*) from public spaces, and the freezing of funds for culture, especially for the peripheries. This further strained his relationship with cultural collectives, who, in May 2017, occupied the Municipal Secretariat of Culture. They demanded the unfreezing of funds and the resignation

3 “The Program for the Valorization of Cultural Initiatives (Programa para a Valorização de Iniciativas Culturais – VAI) was established by Law No. 13,540 and regulated by Decree No. 43,823/2003, with the purpose of providing financial support, through subsidies, to artistic and cultural activities, particularly those led by low-income youth and by residents of areas within the Municipality lacking cultural resources and infrastructure.” For further information, see: <https://programavai.blogspot.com/p/sobre-o-vai.html>. Accessed November 22, 2025.

4 “Dória transfers the Virada Cultural to Interlagos and says that São Paulo is a ‘living dump.’” (Domingos 2016).

of then-Secretary of Culture, André Sturm, who days earlier had threatened a peripheral cultural agent, saying, “I’ll break your face”⁵.

The clash between peripheral producers and the Dória administration generated peculiar situations. One of these was the campaign in defense of Sturm, in which several of the city’s cultural producers expressed solidarity through video testimonials, praising his career while casting criticism at “privileged groups who refuse to relinquish their privileges” — a reference to peripheral cultural collectives, as expressed in the remarks of political scientist Christian Lohbauer⁶. These videos featured a gray background, suggesting they were filmed in the same location, and most testimonials came from established producers in the São Paulo circuit or those linked to “high culture.”

Amidst these testimonials were two discordant figures — not just aesthetically, but primarily in terms of their origins. They were two Black, peripheral cultural producers and rappers from the *Casa Hip Hop Sul*. One of them, Eazy Jay, insisted on the need for dialogue and the importance of the periphery spreading its culture, praising Sturm’s commitment. It was notable that he seemed to be reading his statement. According to Eazy Jay, “Our culture must be spread, and as long as we stay in confrontation, it [culture] remains stagnant... This depends on us.” At the time, I noticed no repercussion on social media or among my research interlocutors. Only the *Agenda Preta* portal published a critical piece on the subject — titled “*Por que todos os vídeos em apoio ao Sturm são iguais?*” [Why are all the videos in support of Sturm the same?]⁷ — even highlighting the element that seemed to unsettle and destabilize expectations regarding the alliances and conflicts anticipated from the municipal government’s actions at that moment: the presence of two Black cultural producers from the peripheries there, defending a representative of the “system” — especially one not aligned with progressive parties⁸.

SCENE FOUR: THE ARREST OF THE GRAFFITI/VISUAL ARTIST

Parallel to the aforementioned tension, another situation involving the “manager-mayor” João Dória deserves attention: the arrest of the graffiti/visual artist Mauro⁹, one of the founders of the cultural collective Imagem (Toledo 2017) and creator of the visual/urban

5 “‘I’ll break your face,’ says Dória’s Secretary of Culture to activist.” (“Vou quebrar (...)” 2017).

6 Christian Lohbauer is a political scientist and professor at the University of São Paulo (USP). He was the vice-presidential candidate for the Partido Novo in 2018 and one of its founders, remaining affiliated with the party until his disaffiliation in 2021. During the Bolsonaro administration, he publicly supported the government’s environmental policies. He currently serves as president of CropLife Brasil, an organization representing agribusiness companies in the agrochemical and genetically modified seeds sectors in Brazil. For further information, see “‘Queremos mostrar (...)’” (2020).

7 “Por que todos (...)” (2017).

8 The article cited is currently unavailable at its original URL. Attempts to recover the content via digital archiving tools (Wayback Machine) were unsuccessful. However, the publication record remains partially verifiable through lingering social media posts (Facebook), where the headline and title are still visible, even though the external link to the full content has been deactivated.

9 “Grafiteiro é detido em SP após apagar tinta sobre sua obra” (Toledo 2017).

intervention “Veracidade”¹⁰. During Dória’s first months in office, Mauro intervened against the removal of his works by the city government, which resulted in his detention. To mitigate the backlash from a flood of criticism, the mayor announced a new policy for graffiti, creating the Museu de Arte de Rua (MAR — Street Art Museum): a specific site chosen by the city where authorized artists could perform their work, subject to prior approval of their designs. The initiative caused further controversy, particularly between graffiti/visual artists and pichadores. In this context, the former were granted the title of “artists” by public authorities, while the latter continued to be regarded as vandals and delinquents. The MAR also divided the graffiti artists themselves: between those critical of the project and those who integrated into it, joining the museum’s evaluation committee — such as Mauro¹¹ himself, who subsequently had a project approved by the city in 2019 to participate in exhibitions promoted by MAR.

SCENE FIVE: THE MAGAZINE COVER

Finally, I present another significant and public ethnographic example: a cover story from *Veja São Paulo*¹² magazine, published in June 2018. Initially, the article caught my attention due to its use of the term “entrepreneurs” (empreendedores) in connection with the world of peripheral cultural production. It was the first time I had seen cultural production from São Paulo’s peripheries associated with the idea of entrepreneurship and a business-oriented vision. Organized into segments, the article featured the cultural producers who graced the magazine cover; each segment functioned as a sort of individual mini-portfolio, listing their main achievements, partnerships, and the monetary values mobilized by these young people, characterized as entrepreneurs. Likewise, the report was filled with “catchphrases” evoking an imaginary structured around the idea of individual resilience (superação), decoupling culture from the broader political and collective mobilization that had characterized peripheral production — at least discursively — decades ago. Furthermore, the article made no mention of the structural inequalities existing in these contexts as faced by the subjects producing culture in the peripheries. Not even racism, which is indispensable for understanding such difficulties, appeared in the piece. Injustices, when mentioned, sounded natural — innate to that territory and those people — but something that could, on the other hand, be overcome through sheer individual effort.

10 According to an article published on the Itaú Cultural website, “[t]his phrase, [Ver a cidade] (‘See the city’), which can be read on many walls throughout the city of São Paulo, always accompanied by a yellow house with a brown roof, is the invitation that visual artist Mauro Neri extends to us so that we do not fail to perceive the beauty, cruelty, resistance, and possibilities of our city”. For further information, see “Ver a cidade e suas nuances” (2018) .

11 “Após cruzada contra pichadores, Prefeitura de São Paulo lança programa Museu de Arte de Rua” (Giannini 2017).

12 “Grajaú: um novo centro efervescente de artistas” (Rosario 2018) .

ON CULTURAL PARADOXES IN THE PERIPHERIES: SOME NOTES

It is worth noting that in referring to these paradoxes, I do not seek an indelible essence of what has come to be known as “cultural production from the peripheries.” Rather, my intention is to reflect precisely on the actions of these agents and their political, social, and cultural propositions. I take into account their trajectories and relationships with instances of power — be they public or private — as they developed their work over the years. Furthermore, I examine what has been accumulated throughout this journey where culture serves as the “driving force” — and is often used as an irrefutable argument — for numerous actions, transformations, transactions, and mobilizations within and from the peripheries, whether by the cultural market or by various peripheral cultural producers themselves.

That said, I will present a brief historical overview of cultural production in the peripheries of São Paulo. While at the beginning of this cultural mobilization the relationship with power — or what the writer Ferréz called “the system”¹³ — was almost antagonistic, marked by a tone of criticism and denunciation of that very system, over time these relations became commonplace, progressively depoliticized, deradicalized, and complex. This is especially true regarding private power (notably through its insertion into and assimilation by the market), both driven by funding policies for the cultural arena. The current relationship suggests an “emancipation through integration” — via culture and consumption — into “the system.” However, the anti-systemic character (Reyes 2013; Santos 2019, 2024) of the clash with capitalism and the Brazilian establishment, which was — at least discursively — evident at the time of the emergence of Marginal/peripheral literature (*Literatura Marginal/Periférica*), is clearly illustrated in this excerpt from the text “Literary Terrorism” (*Terrorismo Literário*), written by Ferréz:

(...) The dream is not to follow the pattern; it is not to be the employee who became the boss — no, not that. Here, no one wants to humiliate; as for paying crumbs, forget it — we know the pain of receiving them. We are against your opinion; we will not live or die based on a seal of acceptance. In truth, everything will continue, whether many want it or not. Once, the capitalist flame harmed our grandparents; now it harms our parents, and in the future, it will harm our children. The ideal is to change the record, to break the cycle of the lie of “equal rights,” of the farce that “everyone is free.” We know it is not like that; we live it in the streets, under the gaze of the new *capitães do mato* [slave hunters] — police officers who are paid to remind us that we are classified by three letters: classes C, D, and E. Street literature with meaning, yes; with a principle, yes; and with an ideal, yes: to bring improvements to the people who build this country but do not receive their share. (Ferréz, 2005: 9–10)

13 Although the notion of a “system” may at times appear abstract, here it should be understood as referring to marginalization, social neglect, lack of access to public policies, police violence, the extermination of Black and peripheral populations, and the other structural hardships that continue to shape social life in the peripheries of São Paulo, as can be observed in the discourses of several of these cultural agents, as described in both Nascimento (2009) and Tennina et al. (2016).

According to Leite, “[t]he literature of the São Paulo periphery is divided into two periods: a) Marginal Literature, from 2000 to 2005; and b) Peripheral Literature, from 2005 to the present day” (Leite 2014). It is from this “second wave,” marked by the growth of *saraus* [literary soirées], that it becomes possible to delineate the change in the meaning of discourses and practices regarding how subjects in this context perceive and react to the presence of power — precisely when the São Paulo cultural market begins to open up to collectives and individual cultural producers from the peripheries. Or, quite simply, when it is no longer possible to ignore the impact of such productions. Marginal/peripheral literature gained prominence through the *saraus*, paving the way for other forms of production — such as graffiti, visual arts, theater, and audiovisual works — to catch the attention of other agents involved in the world of art and culture in São Paulo, whether as consumers or producers.

Thus, book collections, public funding calls (*editais de fomento*), and “partnerships” with private institutions emerged. The discussion on peripheral culture gains prominence beyond the territories where it originated and is mobilized by peripheral cultural producers themselves, as well as by academia and public and private cultural sectors. Aderaldo (2017) states that during this process, the concept of “cultural citizenship”¹⁴ gained greater strength and space in the city of São Paulo, transforming the relationships of peripheral political and cultural movements — previously marked by profound neglect, tension, and confrontation — with both public and private power.

(...) the emergence of a series of collectives and cultural movements in peripheral regions and the considerable investment in policies — on the part of management bodies at the federal, state, and municipal levels — guided by the aforementioned principle of “cultural citizenship” in the early 2000s, generated significant practical effects. These included a noticeable multiplication in the number of NGOs dedicated to teaching cultural activities to populations considered socially or culturally “marginalized,” the expansion of opportunities for artistic creation and enjoyment among these same populations, and the strengthening of “alternative” spaces for cultural production and consumption, especially in the peripheral regions of large urban centers. (Aderaldo 2017: 22)

Questions regarding the reach of these subjects and their works — as well as the relationship forged with the established powers, which until then had remained alien to the cultural universe of the peripheries — became even more evident and significant when considering the “pedagogical, aesthetic, and political project” (Nascimento 2009) identified in these productions. Nascimento (2009) argues that such a project alludes to the use of literature as a political act aimed at engaging in a dialogue with the populations of Brazilian urban peripheries. It refers to the construction of a discourse intended to “teach” or “expand” the critical capacity of the public through texts with a moral and/or ethical foundation (Nascimento 2009: 80).

14 “Cultural citizenship” is a term coined by the philosopher Marilena Chauí in 2000 and subsequently disseminated through the social work of NGOs and progressive sectors of public administration, as discussed in her book *Cidadania Cultural: O Direito à Cultura* (2021).

Observing the scenes described above felt starkly at odds with what I had witnessed in the field, from my undergraduate research period to the writing of the undergraduate thesis (2019) resulting from those investigations — something I began to examine closely during my master’s degree. Despite their differences, the cultural production of these collectives was guided by a critique of social and structural inequalities with the intent of overcoming them, and by political actions within a field described as leftist, similar to the idea of popular power (*poder popular*) within a broader social imaginary. Their conception of culture was akin to a project of self-determination for the peripheries, encompassing access to quality public services — such as schools, health clinics, daycares, and the like — as well as opposition to the genocide of the Black and peripheral population. These were themes that, on more than one occasion, I witnessed being discussed beyond their mere citation in poetry and texts during the activities of these two collectives.

This does not mean that the collectives and subjects featured in *Veja São Paulo* do not care about such issues. However, their discourses and actions seem to rearrange practices and establish new tensions and disputes. The aforementioned article synthesizes the perception that new logics are at play, redefining disputes and producing new dynamics that I believe are fundamental to analyze. The report seems to align with a discourse widely present in the social sphere today, derived from a business logic in which people and their complexities are seen as resources that must be managed to “succeed.” It is a logic where the confrontation and overcoming of structural inequalities take place within the realm of individual success and depend exclusively on personal effort. It is a logic that seeks to silence — with an entire material, aesthetic, and subjective apparatus — the collective history of struggles, mobilizations, and achievements of the peripheries, transforming them into meritocratic, self-help, or market-oriented values. Or further still, transforming people’s desire for dignity and quality of life into an entrepreneurial essence. Something was underway that was apparently very different from the purposes enunciated by peripheral cultural producers when these collectives first emerged as a politico-cultural movement more than twenty years ago.

This business-oriented, entrepreneurial, and meritocratic logic — typically neoliberal — has been encouraged today more than ever. However, the term “culture” has never been so frequently invoked from within this logic as it is now, paradoxically in the name of inclusion, diversity, and representation, through the mobilization of processes related to the constitution of identities based on culture. Stuart Hall (2016) reflects on the relationship between culture and power by revisiting Foucault’s analysis of Diego Velázquez’s painting *Las Meninas*. In revisiting this discussion, Hall also presents the problematics of the painting by debating who is being represented, and who the subject of the painting is; he demonstrates how it is possible to multiply the angles and perspectives on which subjects are being represented by following the play of mirrors and gazes in the Spanish painter’s work. Nevertheless, Hall suggests that the “main” subject represented on Velázquez’s canvas is the spectator — or, as Foucault would say, the “subject-spectator.” According to Hall, Velázquez’s painting only makes sense when we abandon the notion that it

has a fixed position in itself. This meaning is, “therefore, constructed in the dialogue between the painting and the spectator” (Hall 2016:106). The author further points out that:

In this sense, discourse produces a subject-position for the spectator-subject. For the painting to work, the spectator, whoever they may be, must first subject themselves to its discourse and, in this way, become the painting’s ideal spectator, the producer of its meanings — its subject. This is what it means when it is said that discourse constructs the spectator as a subject — by which we mean that it constructs a place for the subject-spectator who is looking and producing a meaning for the scene. (Hall 2016: 107)

As outlined by Hall, how can we think about market discourse and its current interest in non-hegemonic cultural identities within the present context, including the peripheral identity? Regarding representation within the market logic, we might ask: does it also subject identities seeking representation and legitimacy to its own discourse, primarily — even when these identities are considered to be at the margins and not at the “center of the painting”? It is evident that the peripheries are not outside the interests of this logic. If anything has been mobilized from the peripheries by the market, it is their cultural identities. In the aforementioned work, the author discusses racism as a social, subjective, and economic mobilizer of the Empire. Might we understand certain aspects of anti-racism and the promotion of cultural diversity today as a new commercial asset of the Empire — that is, of power? The intent of this work is to point out the aspects of this relationship between culture, neoliberalism, and (neo)colonialism, considering, as Hall teaches us, the importance of shifting assumptions and certainties when considering politics and power in the production and analysis of culture. This article also aligns with what Lila Abu-Lughod termed “writing against culture” (Abu-Lughod 2018). The author raises several relevant questions regarding the anthropological craft and its critical challenges, referencing contributions not only from feminist anthropology but also from anthropology produced by non-white and non-Western scholars to indicate certain blind spots in a critique that fails to reflect upon its own position. One of the sharpest critiques in her text is the one directed at the concept of culture:

(...) The concept of culture is the hidden term in all that has been said about anthropology. Most American anthropologists believe, or act as if they believe, that “culture,” notoriously difficult to define and ambiguous as a referent, is nevertheless the true object of anthropological inquiry. Nonetheless, one could argue that culture is important to anthropology precisely because of the anthropological distinction between self and other that underlies it. (...) Yet, despite its anti-essentialist intent, the concept of culture retains certain tendencies to crystallize differences, much as concepts like race also do. This becomes most evident if we look at a field where the shift from one concept to the other has occurred. Orientalism as an academic discourse (among other things) is, according to Said (1978, p. 2), “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’” What he shows is that, by mapping together geography, race, and culture, Orientalism fixes certain differences between “Western” and “Oriental” peoples in ways so rigid they can easily be considered innate. (Abu-Lughod 2018: 200–201)

Just as it serves as a warning for the anthropological analysis proposed by the author, it is relevant here not only to understand how funding agencies and my interlocutors mobilize the concept of culture but also to interpret what kind of “other” is constructed from this — discursively and subjectively — and how my interlocutors understand and give meaning to this process. Thus, taking into account our colonial past and its implications in the context of the peripheries, as well as the way the concept of culture has been mobilized around them, this work embraces the inquiry that Lila Abu-Lughod poses to anthropologists and anthropology, based on her reading of Edward Said. That is, should anthropologists treat “‘culture’ and ‘cultures’ with the same suspicion, as these are key terms in a discourse in which otherness and difference end up becoming, as Said (1989: 213) puts it, ‘talismanic qualities?’” (Abu-Lughod 2018). Consequently, the mobilization of the term “culture” by its various agents will be placed under suspicion and demarcated according to the interests surrounding it.

It is worth noting that this work does not constitute a detailed analysis of the artistic production of the peripheries, although the scientific literature on the subject is fundamental to my reflections. Part of this bibliography is mobilized here, such as the works of Aderaldo (2017), D’Andrea (2021, 2022), Leite (2014a, 2014b), Nascimento (2009, 2011), Reyes (2013), Silva (2013), and Tennina (2016, 2017). These works, among others, have focused on highlighting the particularities of culture produced in the peripheries, announcing its novelties and contributions, and celebrating its qualities. It is because of these issues and others already presented that this work prioritizes an investigation into “the words of encouragement the system gives” (Gonçalves 2010) to such production and the crossroads at which it finds itself.

THE WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT THE SYSTEM GIVES: THE “NEOLIBERAL PERIPHERY”

It is necessary here to examine other facts in the public arena that also have implications for cultural practice in the peripheries and the agency of their actors, such as my interlocutors. One of these facts is materialized in the research conducted by the Center for Public Opinion, Research, and Studies of the Perseu Abramo Foundation, titled “Perceptions and Political Values in the Peripheries of São Paulo,” which “revealed” a conservative and liberal trend within the peripheries. The study further reveals the inability of Brazil’s main progressive party to engage in a serious self-criticism regarding its actions over the last forty years. Published in 2017, the study had a significant impact on the media and sparked a compelling intellectual debate, in which part of the analysis pointed to the periphery as being liberal, conservative, and even anarchist. There was also substantial criticism regarding the interpretation offered by the study, pointing to a lack of depth, a crisis of representation, and the “fetishization of poverty” by the Left,¹⁵ alongside the climate of polarization and the absence of a societal project that goes be-

15 “A periferia liberal e os riscos da disputa narrativa ‘dos pobres’” (2017).

yond access to consumption. One notices that in many reports, as in the aforementioned study, beyond the essentialist and romanticized view of the peripheries, there is a tone of astonishment regarding the conservative and liberal nature of many responses from cultural collective subjects concerning changes in the peripheral cultural scene. It is as if the periphery and the poor were — once again — a world apart, or perhaps the “ideal subject” of *Lulopetismo* and progressivism, or the “revolutionary subject” par excellence of the Brazilian Left.

Amid the profusion of articles derived from said research, two are particularly striking for their assertive analysis of the “phenomenon” of conservatism and liberalism in the peripheries and *favelas* of São Paulo. The first is an interview (Amaral 2017) with sociologist Gabriel Feltran in April 2017. In this interview, when questioned about the Left’s difficulty in understanding the universe of the peripheries and how the Left has distanced itself from the workers, Feltran states:

(...) In municipal elections, the peripheries of São Paulo have elected Erundina, Maluf, Pitta, Marta, Kassab, Haddad, and Dória. But look, they have voted for Lula, for the most part, since 1989. It is evident, then, that it is not an ideological or partisan vote in the classic right-versus-left sense that many people wanted — and still want — to see. It is a vote that conceives the world through proximity, personal relationships, and trust in the candidate’s ethics; it is a close-range, moral vote. Because of this, it has always been very close to the churches, which are highly politicized spaces. And we know that the Pentecostal expansion is much more conservative than progressive, unlike the Catholic grassroots communities (*comunidades de base*). (...) The Left has been losing the vote in the peripheries in recent years by ceasing to be “the Left.” That is, when they lost proximity to what was happening in the popular world (*mundo popular*). And when they considered that this proximity — which the grassroots communities had, which the pastoral groups had, which the unions had — was electorally less important than television and popular policies for improving well-being, such as *Bolsa Família*, *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, etc. Even worse, it was when they lost the image of change, of renewal; when they became morally identical to other traditional politicians. There is no vacuum in politics. Other groups — such as the military police (who have hours of daily programming on broadcast TV, inside homes in the periphery, with charismatic figures as hosts), the Evangelicals (with their media and grassroots actions), as well as labor market entrepreneurship — have been much closer. And by being close, they win elections there. (Feltran quoted in Amaral 2017)

In the same year, another significant and emblematic interview (Henrique, Santana, and Nascimento 2018) — in line with the political perception of the peripheries in São Paulo — was given by Mano Brown of Racionais MC’s, a musical group regarded as an authentic representative of the peripheries. In the interview, Brown is also questioned about the transformations that have occurred in the peripheries in recent years and their relationship to the national political climate — especially the polarization between the Left and the Right — to which he offers some compelling reflections:

Tim Maia used to say this: in Brazil, the poor are right-wing. The Lula government gave people the conditions to own a few things, and after that government, people want the police to defend those things. He becomes a right-wing guy, defending the very values that fucked him over. This reflected back against Black people. You go to the North, the Northeast: Fortaleza, the country’s homicide leader. Maceió, Salvador, Recife... Black people are dying like crazy. If it

was already hard during Lula's time, imagine now? That's when the kids actually join factions. You take a guy who's been abandoned by everyone and you welcome him, give him assistance, a name, a family... (Mano Brown, quoted in Henrique, Santana, and Nascimento 2018)

In both interviews, it becomes evident that the primary issue in the peripheries is, and always has been, survival — the reproduction of life. This has been, and continues to be, mobilized and contested in different ways, with primacy given to whoever offers concrete answers to everyday situations. Even if this means more police repression, or as a former conservative politician would say, “*a ROTA na rua*” [the ROTA patrol on the streets]. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the population of the city of São Paulo has only rarely allowed a progressive administration to govern — to say nothing of the state government.

However, there is another interesting fact that neither interviewee discussed, but which is also linked to the Perseu Abramo Foundation and the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*), yet was not part of the aforementioned study's analysis. This is the emergence of *editais* (public funding calls) and the infrastructure created around them to train young cultural producers from the peripheries in fundraising for their projects. I argue that this moment is fundamental to understanding not only the current context of cultural production in the peripheries but also to providing a possible response to the Perseu Abramo Foundation's study and its “visible disappointment” in labeling the periphery as neoliberal. Aderaldo (2017) points out something important on this topic: with the rise of these funding calls, a parallel technical infrastructure was created around collectives and individual cultural producers in the peripheries to train them in project drafting and fundraising. Beyond instructing them in these areas, this initiative encouraged the pursuit of private financing, as many of these funding calls stemmed from partnerships with NGOs and other public-private partnerships. Moreover, it equipped them with a semantic and subjective apparatus corresponding to this field of social business.

A circuit was thus created that moved out of the peripheries and accessed spaces of hegemonic culture in the city of São Paulo. Cultural production from the peripheries gained ground in various prestigious institutions and events across the city. This involved numerous benefits brought by the funding calls, which also introduced other issues that must be understood. As Aderaldo shows us when following an audiovisual collective, when the possibility arose for the group to institutionalize itself before the Ministry of Culture and the Municipal Audiovisual Secretariat to obtain greater cultural and financial capital, the heterogeneity that composed the group — which had political principles more aligned with popular and social movements and against market rules, concerning itself even with the training of its members and audience — took on controversial proportions. Amid internal conflicts, interests diverging from those that had originated the group became central, often justified by the essentialist mobilization of a notion of “periphery” devoid of broader political scope. Regarding this moment, Aderaldo states that:

Gradually, the network migrated from an association focused on coordinating events and public actions among cultural collectives specifically dedicated to audiovisual language in the city, toward becoming an entity responsible for streamlining the distribution and promotion of films made by collectives with radically diverse proposals and stances. A portion of these collectives was attracted solely by the opportunity to share in the benefits provided by the efficiency of the distribution and exhibition system promoted by the CVP's reticular organization. Consequently, a variety of attitudes and representations that had initially sparked criticism from this network of collectives began to be found within the network itself. This was reflected in the films they received, the texts eventually published in the magazine they edited, and the hollowing out of their meetings. (Aderaldo 2017: 192)

As my interlocutors reported in interviews (Santos 2019, 2024), the *editais* also fostered competition among collectives, while simultaneously creating a dependency on this specific model of cultural funding. De Tommasi and Velazco (2016) make a similar observation regarding a social project aimed at youth in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, leading us to conclude that this process also occurs in other urban contexts across Brazil. Furthermore, access to these funding calls and the act of fundraising bring with them specific discourses, subjectivities, and worldviews. Subjectivity, in this context, is approached from Ortner's perspective:

By subjectivity I will always refer to a culturally and historically specific consciousness. In using the word consciousness I do not intend to exclude various unconscious dynamics, as seen, for example, in the Freudian unconscious or the Bourdieusian *habitus*. But what I mean is that subjectivity is always larger than these things, and in two ways. At the individual level, I will assume, with Giddens, that actors are always at least partially "knowledgeable subjects," that they possess some degree of reflexivity about themselves and their desires, and that they have some "penetration" into the ways in which they are formed by their circumstances. They are, in short, conscious in the conventional psychological sense, something that must be emphasized as a supplement to, and not a replacement for, Bourdieu's insistence on the inaccessibility, for actors, of the underlying logic of their practices. At the collective level, I use the word consciousness as it is used by both Marx and Durkheim: as the collective sensibility of a set of socially interrelated actors. Consciousness is, in this sense, always ambiguously part of people's personal subjectivities and part of public culture (...) (Ortner 2007: 380–381)

In accordance with this ambiguity that constitutes subjectivity and social consciousness, it is evident that, on one hand, the infrastructure surrounding the *editais* enabled the funding and development of various cultural productions in the peripheries — guaranteeing their visibility, as well as that of their agents, within the hegemonic cultural circuit. On the other hand, it also facilitated specialized training in fundraising beyond public cultural grants, such as financing from private companies and institutions. Furthermore, it fostered cleavages, hierarchies, disputes, and a mass of precarious "*grant-seeking cultural workers*" [trabalhadores culturais de edital] (De Tommasi & Corrochano 2020; De Tommasi & Silva 2020). Regarding public and private power and the training for using development grants, there are three compelling testimonies from leaders — Marcio Batista, Rose Dórea, and

Sergio Vaz — of Cooperifa¹⁶, featured in the work of Nascimento (2011). I reproduce them below as they help to illuminate this dynamic:

The VAI program funding us is an obligation... we do participate, yes, because it is public money [...] And the money from Itaú Cultural — is it Itaú's? It doesn't belong to Banco Itaú; that money is also public money. To avoid the responsibility of distributing public funds — which belongs to the Ministry of Culture — what does the government do? It grants tax exemptions to Banco Itaú, and Banco Itaú created an institution. So the money, which is public, stays in the hands of a private cultural institution. So, what do we do? Isn't that how the game works? We are in the game, so... with Itaú Cultural, it's this relationship with public money that they are there managing. And as long as it works this way, right, and if we think we should go there... (Márcio Batista, quoted in Nascimento 2011).

Rose Dórea adds:

[...] But, like, when Itaú came along, the way they came, I thought it was very beautiful; it happened in a nice way. But there were other places... the VAI program was something that worried me a bit... how it would come... even if it is public money, because we have this thing about being kind of self-sustaining, right? And so, I didn't know how the fact that Cooperifa had accepted that money would sound in some people's heads, you know? But only because of that, not that... I think that since it's public money, one has to be very careful not to lose focus, not to do what many people do, which is using that money for their own benefit... because, like it or not, even with us doing everything we do, many people think that's what we do — that we take the money and use it on things for ourselves. But that's not something that happens; that's something that hurts me a lot, that's the kind of comment that just destroys me. (Rose Dórea, quoted in Nascimento 2011).

And finally, Sérgio Vaz speaks about the importance of Cooperifa's primary partnership, which “made possible” the anthology *O rastilho da pólvora* (2004), the poetry CD *Sarau da Cooperifa* (2006), and the *Revista Cooperifa* (2011), as well as funding the *Semana de Arte Moderna da Periferia* [Modern Art Week of the Periphery] and the *Mostra Cultural da Cooperifa* [Cooperifa Cultural Exhibition] (...)” (Nascimento 2011). Regarding this partnership, Vaz states:

I believe that all of our dreams were made possible thanks to partnerships. It's like I said, there are things you can do without money, and there are things you just can't do without it. And there are things you can do with money, but without the partnership, it's impossible — there's an affective partnership as well. In my view, Itaú isn't just the building, it isn't just a bank; I know the people who work there, I have lunch with them, I drink beer with them, so it's not just about the cash, it's an affective partnership... just as we've already turned down other partnerships, you know? Believe it or not, we might be easy, but we're not *that* easy [laughs]. (Sérgio Vaz, quoted in Nascimento 2011).

16 Cooperifa is a cultural collective conceived by Sérgio Vaz and founded in 2001 in the southern zone of São Paulo. After several relocations, the poetry gathering (sarau) is currently held at the “Bar do Zé Batidão,” in Taboão da Serra (Nascimento 2011). In early 2025, the collective announced on its Instagram account an indefinite suspension of its activities.

The articulation surrounding funding on the part of Cooperifa is noteworthy, as is its members' vision regarding what they call partnerships. It is also symbolic that the VAI program, while considered an "obligation," causes concern about how it will "arrive" and how the public perception of Cooperifa's use of this grant will be — particularly regarding its accountability and the group's ideal of "self-sustainability." It is worth considering how subjectivities are mobilized to justify the actions these agents propose, mobilizing their yearnings, wills, and desires within the cultural system in which they are embedded.

During my Master's research, I also encountered testimonies¹⁷ where the perception of public and private funding pointed toward a critical view of public power, recognizing private funding as a more effective possibility for carrying out high-quality cultural actions and for the valuation of cultural producers. This was stated by Vanilson, a member of *Imargem*, as he described the process of access by both *Imargem* and *Ecoativa*¹⁸ to private sector funding grants:

"I think this whole idea of public grants versus private companies makes us think like this, you know: that the grant is just a cost-reimbursement. It's not a salary, and it's not an income. It's a cost-reimbursement, and that's being generous! Sometimes it's very, very minimal. We have to do three projects with grants to have a decent income — the kind where you can say, 'hey, I can support myself every month.' And SESC brought an idea that wasn't this 'cost-reimbursement' thing. It's that we need — we really need — to be funded for the work we do, to be remunerated. And so, this idea emerged that the grant is a cost-reimbursement, but with private companies, it's a remunerated thing; it's actual work, with recognition for what each person does as an educator, as an artist, based on how each one identifies with what they are." (Vanilson, in an interview granted on June 6, 2021)

Furthermore, for Vanilson, access to private financing symbolizes a kind of ascent within the cultural market and recognition in the private sector, stemming from the awarding, execution, and accountability of public funding:

And a grant isn't exactly something profitable either. Anyone who thinks you can make money, that you'll get... Man, we used to do three grants because we had to; otherwise, we wouldn't make ends meet, you know? It's not enough money for a person to do what they want with their life, you know? So, let's do it — let's write two projects for two grants. That was the idea: the VAI program wouldn't allow a collective to participate more than twice. So it was an automatic thing — the project gained visibility elsewhere and other people would say: 'Look, how cool! There's this project that participated in such-and-such grant,' because the grant also provides visibility, right? The project gains visibility through the grant as well! Other companies are also looking at various projects that are happening because they want to figure things out, because the [social sector] wants to do it too, right? All companies have a social [sector], so... (Vanilson, in an interview granted on June 6, 2021)

17 In the testimonies provided to me and incorporated into this section of the article, the interviewees consented to the use of their real names.

18 The result of grassroots mobilization on Ilha do Bororé, Ecoativa was officially established in 1999. At that time, closely connected to local social and cultural movements, it promoted cultural, ecological, and social initiatives in the surrounding area. After a hiatus from 2006 to 2013, it resumed its activities under a different organizational structure, focusing on arts education, community-based tourism, and ecology. For further information, see Santos (2024).

Another consequence of the *editais* is the underlying competition created among various cultural collectives. During my undergraduate research, this issue emerged in several interviews, and it reappeared during my Master's, especially among my former interlocutors. In 2017, the collective *Poesia na Brasa*¹⁹ — which has never made use of private financing, beyond occasional activities within the SESC network — argued that “the *editais*, besides tying collectives to a form of management, turn them into a kind of hostage to public funds. This is because many collectives began to base their activities on whether or not they were selected by a funding call” (Santos 2019: 89). Sonia Bischain, from *Poesia na Brasa*, stated that the emergence of the VAI program was important in enabling the realization and development of cultural activities in the peripheries, but she also offered a critical reading of certain aspects of these grants:

(...) It was good because we managed to publish several books, but, like, it's not the most important thing. We also managed to publish without the funding, you know? Of course, there were cases where people who got the money helped out *saraus* [literary soirées] that hadn't gotten into the program. Because they couldn't get it — since you could only get two in a row and you wouldn't get a third... But we also managed to do it without funding. We did it through other partnerships, in other ways... So, I think that for many people it was important, but a time came when some groups would only do things if there was public money. We went to many schools, to many places, without earning anything! There was no funding. (Sonia Bischain, in an interview granted on July 4, 2017)

In an interview with Ana Fonseca, from the *Perifatividade*²⁰ Collective, she discussed the logic that the limited slots of the *editais* impose on cultural collectives. Even if one could argue that such conditions increase the effort put into writing and executing a project, it still inevitably stimulates a logic of competition among cultural producers in the peripheries. In other words, once again, access to these grants and their related infrastructures is imbued with disputes surrounding the idea of merit, limiting the actions of those who try to act otherwise, as seen in the following testimony:

(...) Now, take a project like the *fomento* [the Law of Cultural Promotion for the Peripheries], with two years of implementation — if you propose something that you just do all the time... (...) if I were the evaluator, I wouldn't approve it. So, I try not to be that conditioned thing, but I try to think, because if I don't think with the head of the person evaluating and instead write whatever I want, then that's just a personal piece of writing. I can keep it in my closet.

19 The *Sarau da Brasa*, as it is popularly known, began its activities in 2008 in Vila Brasilândia, in the northern zone of São Paulo. The collective emerged in response to the aspirations of a group of young people — childhood friends who were already engaged, in various ways, with cultural initiatives in the region — and who, upon entering university, conceived the idea of returning to their neighborhood of origin to establish a cultural collective. Influenced by groups such as *Cooperifa* and *Sarau do Binho*, as well as by writers such as Sérgio Vaz and Ferréz, the cultural collective *Poesia na Brasa* was thus formed. For further information, see Santos (2019, 2024).

20 Strongly influenced by Rap/Hip Hop culture, the collective *Perifatividade* emerged in 2010 in Fundão do Ipiranga, in the southern zone of São Paulo. Working primarily through literature, the collective develops initiatives in the fields of education and human rights, making use of local public facilities such as public squares, schools, telecenters, and related spaces. For further information, see Santos (2019; 2024).

It's not a project! It feels bad to think this way. I don't feel good about it, but in reality, that's what it is. You are there to fight with your brothers and sisters for that little crumb. But that's it! Man, we are competing with people from Ipiranga and people from Heliópolis! If we had applied this year, we would be competing with *Me Parió* [Me Parió Revolução, a women's editorial collective], which also has people from *Perifatividade*! Can you imagine if we were competing in that same year? How awkward would that be? What I'm saying is: this is how the public system puts us at odds! And if we want to participate — because we can also say, 'we don't want to be part of this, competing with my brothers' — but if we do want to participate, then let's send something that is actually worth sending, right? (Ana Fonseca, in an interview granted on September 11, 2021)

Thus, it is established that the structure surrounding the *editais* also germinated hierarchies, disputes, dependency, and even the political de-articulation of a more radical and critical verve among peripheral collectives regarding popular participation beyond the “four lines” of representative democracy. Furthermore, it paved the way for private initiatives in the field of cultural funding in the peripheries, even interfering in public management. Therefore, taking into account the demobilization and abandonment of the Workers' Party's grassroots cadres in the 1990s (D'andrea 2022; Feltran 2007, 2011) — institutionalizing them into technical and bureaucratic apparatuses for federal-level electoral disputes, creating cadres within the spheres of “high politics” — how can we assign the status of “liberal” to the peripheries? How can we point to such a result without considering that cultural and youth policies — aimed at what was then called the Third World — were and continue to be conceived in the grand halls of the World Bank and the IMF (Davis 2006; Reyes 2013; Yúdice 2006) for the purpose of controlling this population? These are policies that began under a federal government — led by a sociologist president and an anthropologist first lady — known for its strong privatizing character, but which the Workers' Party embraced without hesitation, and more: expanded and turned into its trademark. After all, who and where is the (neo)liberal?

IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION, AGENCY, AND SURVIVAL IN THE “ERA DA PERIFA”

The discussion regarding the cultural market and cultural production in the peripheries gained centrality starting with Marginal/Peripheral Literature. Nascimento (2009) discusses this theme, addressing various characteristics of this market. The author states that “it is worth considering that the designation ‘peripheral literature’ or ‘literature from the periphery,’ and its correlates, ‘peripheral writer’ or ‘writer from the periphery,’ are synonyms used by the writers studied here themselves (especially when they present themselves in social spaces other than the periphery)” (Nascimento 2009: 124). Thus, the author argues that the meanings of the adjectives accompanying literature produced in the peripheries also function as a “brand” that “can be used as a differentiator in the market” (Nascimento 2009). A brand that, at times, adds a “value of ‘authenticity’” (Nascimento 2009) to the works of certain

authors — making them attractive to the publishing market — and at other times interests the authors themselves, externalizing “a certain desire for marginality in the choice of theme or discourse, such that stigmatization becomes the driver of book sales and the literary careers of periphery residents and inmates” (Nascimento 2009).

Silva (2013) addresses the points of contact and divergence between Black literature and peripheral literature, relating them to their historical moment and pointing out not only possibilities, intersections, and confluences, but also divergences, tensions, and paradoxes. One of the testimonies by the writer Ferréz, contained in Silva’s work, is particularly interesting for this research, not only to reiterate the ambiguity present at the time in Marginal/Peripheral Literature regarding its diversity of interests and actors, but also how such an identity — or brand, as seen above — is mobilized:

These guys have a dream, man! That they’re going to walk side-by-side with the literary elite, you feel me? There are a lot of guys in the ghetto who have a fake discourse, who think they’re going to grind with those guys and be right there next to them, hanging out, and they don’t want to be labeled as Marginal Literature, you know? If you take Malcolm’s book [*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*], in Harlem, you have the Black people who are truly Black and own it, and then you have the Black people who are already ‘whiter,’ drinking whiskey with those guys, speaking softly, trying to fit into society, you get what I’m saying? So, there are a lot of guys like that in the periphery too. A lot of guys from the periphery who want to be elite. Most of them want to be elite. These guys don’t want to be poor. And I don’t want to be poor either! I didn’t take a vow of poverty, you feel me? But there’s a difference! It’s about how far you’re willing to go, the price you’re willing to pay, to be that way. (Silva 2013: 634–635)

Thus, it is understood how the issue of identity is of vital importance in literature as well as in other cultural productions from the peripheries, going beyond its pedagogical, aesthetic, and political projects. Such production is intrinsically related to the material survival of its agents. This is where peripheral identity perhaps finds its strongest foundation — the bond that has always united its subjects: the struggle for survival amidst structural precariousness.

This identity, which was re-signified in artistic and subjective aspects and was responsible for the “elevation of self-esteem in the peripheries” (D’Andrea 2021, 2022; De Tommasi 2013, 2014; Nascimento 2009, 2011; Reyes 2013; Silva 2013; Tennina et al. 2016; Tennina 2017), remains strictly marked by the precarious conditions of cultural agents — with the exception of those who managed to “pass through the eye of the needle” of the cultural market, achieving some stability — as well as by the precariousness of the peripheries themselves. Returning to the concept of agency, mobilized to refer to the possibilities of action for these marginalized/subalternized subjects in the face of the avalanche of structural inequalities weighing upon them, it is worth reflecting on the limits of this concept to perhaps deepen the debate and qualify the discussion on more concrete and practical ground.

In the first chapter of *The Constitution of Society*, Anthony Giddens presents the foundations of his structuration theory, seeking to overcome classical dichotomies in social theory,

especially that which opposes action and structure. The author argues that social structures do not exist as external, static, or coercive entities that determine human behavior, but rather as sets of rules and resources that are only actualized through social practice, being continually produced and reproduced by agents. Action, in turn, is conceived as a reflexive process in which individuals monitor their conduct and the circumstances of their performance, mobilizing practical knowledge that allows them to guide and adjust their routines. This perspective leads Giddens to formulate the notion of the duality of structure, according to which structure and agency are not opposite poles but simultaneous and interdependent dimensions of social life: structures shape action, while simultaneously being shaped by it. In this chapter, Giddens also emphasizes the situated and temporary nature of action, the role of routines in maintaining social order, and the inseparability of power and agency, since acting always implies the capacity to produce effects in the world. With this, the sociologist establishes the conceptual bases for understanding society as a dynamic and recursive process, in which subjects and structures are mutually constitutive.

Sherry Ortner's concept of agency maintains a direct dialogue with Giddens' structuration theory but adds analytical dimensions that complexify the relationship between action, power, and social context. In Giddens, agency is understood as the capacity of actors to "make a difference" in the course of events, always articulated with power as the possibility of mobilizing resources, and situated within the dynamics of the "duality of structure," through which action and structure co-produce each other in time-space (Giddens 2009). Ortner adopts this foundation but shifts the focus to an ethnographic approach to agency, emphasizing that subjects act oriented by culturally significant projects and embedded in concrete relations of inequality (Ortner 2006). Thus, while Giddens develops a general ontology of action, Ortner politicizes the concept by treating agency not merely as practical competence, but as engagement in projects marked by power disputes, domination, resistance, and subtle modes of non-conformity. In this way, the anthropologist expands the Giddensian scope by incorporating intentional, moral, and affective dimensions of action, evidencing that agency manifests both in transformative strategies and in everyday practices of survival and contestation, especially among subalternized subjects.

The discussion of agency in Anthony Giddens and Sherry Ortner is expanded by the reflection proposed by Jean and John Comaroff regarding the relationship between ethnography and historical imagination. If, in Giddens, agency constitutes the capacity of actors to intervene in the flows of the social world through practices situated in the duality of structure (Giddens 2009), and if, in Ortner, this agency is refined as engagement in culturally significant projects intersected by power relations, inequalities, and multiple forms of resistance (Ortner 2006), anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff add that such practices can only be fully understood when inscribed in a dense historical temporality, where past, present, and future overlap in the constitution of the subject and their possibilities of action. For the

authors, ethnography cannot separate agency from history, as everyday actors mobilize symbolic repertoires, collective memories, and expectations of the future that configure the very field of action (Comaroff & Comaroff 2010). Thus, the articulation between the reflections of these authors reveals that agency must be understood not only as practical competence (Giddens) or as the realization of projects situated within power relations (Ortner), but also as a historical-constitutive process in which socially located subjects elaborate, imagine, and perform their lives based on historical trajectories and regimes of meaning that precede and surpass them. In this sense, the historical imagination proposed by the Comaroffs reinforces that agency is always a temporally situated practice, constituted by the friction between structures, projects, and lived histories. Furthermore, according to the Comaroffs (2010), “many anthropologists have been suspicious of ontologies that grant primacy to individuals over contexts. This is because these clearly rely on Western assumptions; among them, that human beings can triumph over their contexts based solely on force of will, and that economy, culture, and society are the aggregate product of individual action and intention” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2010: 12). On this same topic, the authors state:

For, however open they may be, systems of meaning have determinations of their own. They do not merely bend to the will of those who wish to know them and act upon them; on the contrary, they play a significant role in the formation of subjectivity. In other words, the “motivation” of social practice always exists at two distinct, though related, levels: first, the (culturally configured) needs and desires of human beings; second, the pulse of collective forces which, gaining power through complex routes, operate through the former. This distinction informs the analysis of all historical processes, but its significance has been highlighted by the humanist turn in the social sciences, which has prompted calls for a greater concern with agency. This emphasis acquires special visibility when we examine epochal movements such as European colonialism, in which “heroic,” resolute action was a central theme and even a driving force. From our point of view, however, this impulse is not sufficient to account for the determination of related processes — or even to tell much of the story. Of this, the imperial mission is once again a testament: an initiative motivated by contradictory forces whose consequences differed radically from the declared motives of those involved. (Comaroff & Comaroff 2010: 44)

Based on this discussion, I emphasize that the eagerness for excessive and sometimes uncritical celebration surrounding the possibilities arising from the recognition and representation of subalternized identities — especially by the cultural market — does not necessarily mean that unresolved issues are close to being challenged, much less that they are moving toward a minimally dignified outcome. Throughout this work, the testimonies of my interlocutors, as well as other cited examples, evidence this ethnographic and analytical complexity regarding issues that trace back to our colonial past and remain a constant in everyday life, albeit clad in contemporary guises. Access to public and private policies within the context of cultural production in the peripheries — despite its enormous transformative potential — has often been limited to being just another exotic product on the market (with an expiration date) or, at best, a “pat on the head” while actual justice remains elusive. Along these lines, Tennina (2017) states:

The management of peripheral capital by state and governmental bodies, as can be deduced from what has been said so far, although having enabled indisputable gains for peripheral artists themselves, ended up functioning also as preventive programs that seem to replace a long-term integration policy. More than integration, therefore, these are policies of insertion, which translates, as João Camillo Penna explains (2009, p. 173), into a measure that ‘would have a transitory character [...], a localized emergency corrective, as a substitute for more general policies which are, by definition, more expensive, and which for now, until further notice, the State finds itself unable to offer.’ Culture, in this sense, assumes an excessive role in public policies, since it takes on the condition of functioning as a large-scale social solution. (Tennina 2017: 172)

De Tommasi (2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2016a, 2016b, 2018), De Tommasi and Velazco (2013, 2016), De Tommasi and Corrochano (2020), as well as De Tommasi and Silva (2020), point out how, stemming from peripheral culture, an entire subjective and material infrastructure has been mobilized under the discourse of “fighting poverty.” This infrastructure articulates terms such as representativeness, empowerment, protagonism, and autonomy — all conveyed as underlying the peripheral existence — alongside individual training, fundraising, and the seizing of opportunities offered by the market and private institutions, mediated by public power. In addition to the primacy of private programs and financing — mostly of foreign origin — authors like Tommasi point to the origins of terms like “empowerment,” which are typical of corporate language but have been naturalized in the rhetoric of subalternized populations — such as those in the periphery — and even in progressive discourse. Tommasi’s analyses align with the article by Arantes (2004), which offers a critical analysis of Third Sector actions, discussing their penetration into the State and the public arena through their semantic and subjective subtleties, as can be seen below:

Hence also the permanent dispute over the meaning of words, around which much of the political struggle is concentrated. And for good reason: from one moment to the next, “rights” became privileges, and moreover at the expense of the “excluded”; a subject of rights became a user of services; social destruction became a progressive synonym for “reform”; social security, a misunderstanding in a country of chronically improvident people; unionism, a corporatist spasm; “citizenship,” mere participation in just any community; “solidarity,” philanthropy, of course; public good, the aggregated interests of social groups; the unemployed, an individual with low employability; “partnership,” whenever private initiative provides the initiative and public authorities provide the funding, etc. Indeed, an “astonishing semantic slide” (...). For now, let us notice — pardon the insistence — that this world, truly upside-down, is nonetheless a stage for battles of interpretation precisely because the contenders are employing the same words (...) Who has not heard this daily voice of reason: you are not understanding anything when we talk about “rights,” “reforms,” etc.; we were misunderstood, which is natural given the complexity of the new world order; therefore, we will, didactically, explain it all again until you comprehend what will happen to you anyway, whether you want it or not. Under these conditions, how can we orient thought and political will toward a “democratic articulation between power and rights,” if in the other camp, the mortar of “citizenship rights” is also used to cement the alliance between power and money? (Arantes 2004: 178–179)

In the analysis of both authors, the semantic and subjective reconfiguration that heavily influences materiality — and which also forms part of the foundation of agency, as seen previously — can only happen through the State. It is the State that takes charge of the “organization and articulation of the masses” for the “citizen actions” of companies and other philanthropic agents concerned with “the social”; it is the State that organizes public funds for private initiatives in the name of citizenship and social management.

The State at times imputes roles to the cultural production of the peripheries that it should fulfill itself (Tennina 2017), at others it trains young peripheral cultural producers to also manage poverty (De Tommasi & Velazco 2016) and hurls them into precarization (De Tommasi 2016a, 2016b). Or even, it involves these cultural producers in the slippery field of neoliberal semantics by importing and inserting corporate concepts into daily life, applied to both the public arena and the *self* (Arantes 2004; De Tommasi & Velazco 2013, 2016). Loïc Wacquant discusses what differentiates neoliberalism from liberalism and how the “anthropology of neoliberalism has polarized between a hegemonic economic model, anchored by variants of market rule, and a rebellious approach, fueled by derivations of the Foucauldian notion of governmentality” (Wacquant 2012: 505). According to the author, “these two conceptions converge to obscure what is ‘neo’ in neoliberalism, namely, the reengineering and restructuring of the state as the main agency that actively shapes the subjectivities, social relations, and collective representations appropriate to making the fiction of markets real and relevant” (Wacquant 2012: 507).

It is possible to understand, then, that the State was not eroded by neoliberalism, but rather that the State is an active part of the neoliberal project. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1994), Wacquant reiterates that the formation of the contemporary State is permeated by two internal battles, corresponding to the tensions and disputes existing within the social body: one is the vertical battle, between oppressors and oppressed, which antagonizes the upper echelon of the State — composed of enthusiasts of neoliberal policies and the marketization of life — against the lower state echelon, the executive — those who advocate for the preservation of the public bureaucracy. The other is the horizontal battle, involving the dispute between two variants of capital competing for internal hegemony: economic and cultural. The first, representing the right hand of the State, is responsible for fiscal restrictions and market imposition; the second defends minorities dispossessed of economic and cultural capital, symbolizing the social wing, the left hand of the State. The author then states: “[u]sing this scheme, one can diagram neoliberalism as the systematic shifting of state priorities and actions from the left hand to the right hand, that is, from the protective (feminine and collectivizing) pole to the disciplining (masculine and individualizing) pole of the bureaucratic field” (Wacquant 2012: 512). And it is from this systematic shifting that the State’s rightward predisposition derives, according to Wacquant (2012). For the author, this happens systematically in two complementary ways that, in my view, reveal the political and ideological character of the State:

(i) the transfer of resources, programs, and populations from the social wing to the penal wing of the state (as occurs when sick patients are “deinstitutionalized” with the closing of hospitals and “reinstitutionalized” in jails and prisons after transitioning through homelessness); (ii) the colonization of social welfare, health, education, low-income housing, childcare services, etc., by panoptic and disciplinary techniques and by the tropes of the right hand (as occurs when hospitals privilege budgetary concerns over medical ones in their internal organization and when schools prioritize the reduction of youth dropout and classroom violence over pedagogy, hiring security guards instead of psychologists). This double rightward leaning of state structure and policy is emphatically not the product of some mysterious systemic imperative or irresistible functional necessity; it is the (structurally conditioned but historically contingent) result of material and symbolic struggles, fought within and outside the bureaucratic field, over the responsibilities and operating modalities of public authority. (Wacquant 2012: 512)

Frantz Fanon’s formulation that “the colonized wants to be the colonizer” (Fanon 2022) offers a key to understanding how peripheral cultural practices — now embedded in public and private funding circuits — can be captured by neoliberal rationalities that re-actualize, under new forms, colonial verticality. In the *editais* aimed at São Paulo’s peripheries — especially those structured by criteria of innovation, cultural entrepreneurship, measurable impact, and self-management — an “ideal peripheral subject” is produced. This subject must convert their experiences of inequality into competitive projects aligned with metrics of efficiency. Such a figure corresponds to what Loïc Wacquant terms “actually existing neoliberalism,” characterized by the retraction of the social State, the expansion of penal technologies, and the moralization of poverty via individual accountability. By shifting the task of managing their own precariousness onto peripheral artists and collectives, these grants promote a regime of subjectification that encourages the internalization of neoliberal values, converting vulnerability into a resource and precariousness into capital. In this sense, the movement described by Fanon reappears in the contemporary form of the “peripheral entrepreneur artist,” capable of mimicking institutional codes.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of cultural policies aimed at São Paulo’s urban peripheries demonstrates how *editais* structured by the grammar of entrepreneurship, innovation, and impact measurement produce subjects shaped by neoliberal rationalities that re-actualize historical inequalities. Using the key proposed by Fanon — according to which the colonized tends to imagine themselves in the colonizer’s place — it becomes possible to understand how peripheral artists and collectives are interpellated to convert their experiences of precariousness into competitive projects responsive to efficiency metrics, internalizing institutional standards that reiterate colonial verticality in a contemporary form.

By integrating the anthropological discussion on agency, especially in Sherry Ortner and Anthony Giddens, we can perceive that this interpellation is not restricted to a process of submission; rather, it operates through the constitution of fields of action structured by expectations, incentives, and management technologies. In Ortner, agency appears simultaneously as situated action and as a projective orientation, always inscribed within regimes of power that shape the imagination and the horizon of possibilities. Meanwhile, the Giddensian notion of agency, articulated with the duality of structure, shows how individuals produce and reproduce the social conditions that limit them, revealing that the “autonomy” of peripheral agents is, to a large extent, configured by the very devices that claim to emancipate them. Thus, the figure of the peripheral entrepreneur artist emerges as the result of a process of the “conduct of conduct,” in which freedom is continually molded by neoliberal governmentality.

Therefore, although cultural grants expand access to previously inaccessible resources, they also operate as devices of governmentality that translate historical inequalities into individualized and meritocratic competencies. Agency, far from representing full freedom, manifests as a space of negotiation: a tensioned field between reproduction, adaptation, and invention, in which peripheral artists both mimic institutional codes and produce fissures and alternatives. Thus, understanding the *editais* as arenas of dispute — and not as mere technical instruments of funding — allows for the recognition of the ambivalences and possibilities that emerge from peripheral action, highlighting how the colonial imaginary persists, but also how it can be challenged.

The discussion developed here suggests, therefore, that more democratic cultural policies require not only expanding access to resources but redesigning the structures of evaluation, participation, and decision-making so as not to reproduce the neoliberal logic of individual accountability. Only then will it be possible to promote forms of creation that do not merely survive, but destabilize the regime of value that converts precariousness into capital and inequality into merit — and that, ultimately, allow us to imagine futures that escape the permanent re-incorporation of colonialism under new guises.

I have discussed the environment in which peripheral cultural production finds itself, reflecting on its paradoxes, contexts, dynamics, modes, and possibilities of action. To provide a broader perspective, I drew on events and testimonies collected in the field, as well as situations I followed — sometimes virtually — related to cultural, political, and ideological practices in São Paulo’s peripheries. Between positivist essentializations — celebrated in various academic works and public-private partnerships, market-oriented from the start, which highlight progress and the transformative power of agency as if social justice were at the service of a single project or grant — and negative essentializations, which once again punish the poor, the marginal, and all manner of the “wretched of the earth” as solely responsible for their misery, I chose a more realistic and less disguised analysis of what I playfully called

the “neoliberal turn” in the peripheries. Although this analysis may strike some readers as pessimistic, I maintain that it is a case of “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” (Gramsci 1920). Far from presenting a definitive analysis of all the theme’s nuances, I hope to have contributed to the debate.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from the author’s previous research, including interviews and fieldwork. These datasets, along with the author’s master’s thesis and undergraduate monograph, are available in the Institutional Repository of Scientific and Intellectual Production of Unicamp at <https://repositorio.unicamp.br/Resultado/Listar?guid=1776113047399>. Additional cited articles and books are available through their respective publishers and original sources.

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