

## **The geography of Milton Santos and the problem of the marxism of instances: a gramscian reading\***

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*This article analyses the discussion that Milton Santos establishes with Louis Althusser in two works central to the theoretical formulations that he developed from the 1970s on. Its objective is to confront the structuralism of the French philosopher with the category of socio-spatial formation then proposed by the Brazilian geographer. Contrary to what has been established in the literature, the article's conclusion points to a clear distancing between the two authors, since for Milton Santos the determinations of social transformation are not limited only to economic aspects, which still remain dominant in Althusser's structuralism, but are instead the result of the totality of social relations, strictly speaking, socio-spatial relations. This approach draws the Brazilian geographer much closer to reflections such as those developed by Antonio Gramsci's Marxism.*

*Milton Santos; Louis Althusser; Antonio Gramsci; Socio-spatial formation; Social totality.*

### *Introduction*

Milton Santos' rich and vast theoretical contribution to the human and social sciences, and especially to Geography, made him one of the most preeminent Brazilian intellectuals in what we could call the socio-spatial processes field of study. Among the many works dedicated to the intellectual biography of the Brazilian geographer, this article will focus on the one elaborated by the researcher Fábio Contel<sup>1</sup>, in order to discuss a thesis that seems to us both central and at the same time problematic for a correct understanding of Milton's theoretical-methodological proposal. In a word, our interest here is fundamentally to discuss the thesis according to which, in the book *Por uma Geografia Nova* (For a New Geography), Milton Santos reveals a hypothetical Althusserian affiliation in his work.

By examining this work, and especially chapter 13, which deals with Space as a Social Instance, as well as a correlated text, namely, *Sociedade e espaço: a formação social como teoria e como método* (Society and space: social formation as theory and as method), we seek to identify the relationship that Milton Santos

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<sup>1</sup> CONTEL 2014.

establishes with Louis Althusser by trying to pinpoint elements that demonstrate the theoretical distance between both authors.

The article is divided into three sections. The first outlines Contel's argumentation on the theoretical production of Milton Santos in the 1970s and his intellectual influences. The second, subdivided into three subsections, presents the dialogue that Milton Santos establishes with the French philosopher in the aforementioned works<sup>2</sup>. By means of a philological exercise that we intend to be thorough, we seek here to point out the passages in which Althusser is cited and how Milton Santos traverses the discussion with various authors to reveal the importance of the category of space as an element of social totality, which has been overlooked by most of the authors who have dedicated themselves to the study of the Social and Economic Formation (S.E.F.) category, including Althusser. This section closes with a discussion of the relationship between Althusser and Milton Santos with Hegel and dialectics understood as historical totality, at which point we will attempt to point out more clearly how far apart the notion of socio-spatial formation proposed by Milton Santos is from Althusserian structuralism, which itself is still hostage to a form of economicism. Finally, we strive to establish an approximation between the thought of Milton Santos and that of Antonio Gramsci. This approximation appears in the critique of the economicism and positivism of ordinary Marxists, as well as in the philosophical proximity of the two authors with regard to a discussion of the category of social totality, and notably of its relations with Hegel's dialectics.

### 1. *An Althusserian Milton Santos?*

*Por uma Geografia Nova* (For a New Geography) is considered by Fábio Contel as a revolutionary work in which Milton Santos expands on his «criticism of “traditional” French geography, but also of the ascendant Anglo-Saxon quantitative geography (the so-called new geography at the time)»<sup>3</sup>. It is in this work that Milton Santos «resorts to an in-depth dialogue with the history of philosophy, with the history of geographic thought, and incorporates in his discourse the main authors and debates that took place in

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<sup>2</sup> SANTOS 1982, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> CONTEL 2014, p. 403.

geography, economics and sociology, especially those authors with a Marxist background»<sup>4</sup>.

The above-mentioned author maintains that it is difficult to classify Milton Santos' affiliation to a particular «theoretical school», given the dialogue established by the Brazilian geographer with various authors. In spite of this, Contel proposes a clear theoretical inclination of Milton Santos in the cited work, basically guided by a particular Marxism, which was established through the search for a definition of «geographic space»<sup>5</sup>. In the author's words, «from this fruitful use of Marx's legacy, in *Por uma geografia nova*, Milton proposes a relatively simple definition of geographical space: a social instances»<sup>6</sup>, which Contel relates in a footnote to the notion of social instance as it appears in the Marxist formulations of Louis Althusser:

«According to the Althusserian reading, one of the main points of reference in the intellectual conjuncture of the 1960s-1970s, “Marx conceived the structure of all society as constituted by “levels” or “instances” articulated by a specific determination: the infra-structure or economic base (“unity” of productive forces and relations of production) and the superstructure, which comprises two “levels” or “instances”: the legal-political (the law and the State) and the ideological (the distinct ideologies, religious, moral, legal, political etc.)»<sup>7</sup>.

As we shall see below, Milton Santos does not disregard the instances of society, and effectively defines space from this category of understanding. However, the Brazilian geographer does not limit himself to the model proposed by Althusser, a misclassification that does not account for the depth of the discussion established in the aforementioned pages, and is decidedly problematic with regard to a correct comprehension of the Brazilian geographer's theoretical proposal.

## 2. *Brief philological examination*

As Gramsci defined it, philological rigour is that which, conducted «meticulously» and «with the utmost scrupulousness and scientific honesty», avoids

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<sup>4</sup> Ivi.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi.

«soliciting» from the texts «more than what the texts actually say»<sup>8</sup>. In fact, this is an indispensable method if what we intend is to reach the core of a given theoretical formulation. The subsections below aim to establish this exercise with a view to an accurate investigation of the problem proposed by this article.

## 2.1 Milton Santos in the face of Althusser's economicism

In discussing the concept of S.E.F., Milton Santos dialogues with a series of authors, with whom he indicates agreement and disagreement, in a thorough work of direct citations and theoretical elaboration. In *Por uma Geografia Nova*, Santos<sup>9</sup> notes the absence, in a wide range of authors, of an analysis of space as an instance that permeates society. He addresses his critique to both Marxist and non-Marxist theorists, but focusing mainly on the former:

«when, on the other hand, we turn to Marxist thought, we find nuances in the enunciation of the classification, but the absence of reference to space is, also, practically general»<sup>10</sup>.

Before presenting space as a social instance, the Brazilian geographer exposes the different classifications given to the so-called “instances”. Santos begins with the presentation of Plekhanov's scheme, which

«distinguishes five levels as being indispensable to the definition of society: 1. the state of the productive forces; 2. the economic relations which these forces condition; 3. the social and political regime based on this economic “base”; 4. the psychology of social beings, partly determined by the economy, partly by the entire social and political regime which is built upon it; 5. the various ideologies, which this psychology reflects»<sup>11</sup>.

As we mentioned before, in a recurrent way in the two works analysed here, Santos confronts different authors to express divergences or convergences. In the case of Plekhanov, the criticism is based on a quotation from Jakubowsky, namely:

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<sup>8</sup> DE LUTIS 2009, p. 303.

<sup>9</sup> SANTOS 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 177.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, pp. 177-178.

«the term social psychology ... apparently includes “the conscious, general reaction of men from an era to the social relations under which they live” and which manifest themselves “in different concrete ideologies” which are inseparable from it. This is why Jakubowsky proposes to suppress certain levels of the Plekhanovist scheme and distinguishes only three ‘regions’ (terms, incidentally, that Althusser and his disciples often use). These instances of society would thus be limited to the following list: 1. the economic base, itself determined by the productive forces; 2. the political and legal order that corresponds to it; 3. the ideological superstructures that top off the edifice»<sup>12</sup>.

As we have seen, it is in this quotation that Santos establishes the first direct contact with Althusser, from which we can infer that the French philosopher is presented as one who considers society from the well-known three instances. Nevertheless, for Milton Santos, «such a construction is only slightly different from that offered by other Marxists»<sup>13</sup>, since for most of these authors the formulations similarly list three already crystallized core structures as outlined above. In Santos’ view, in no case do these studies «mention space as being a social instance»<sup>14</sup>.

Even Armando Córdova’s proposition, «for whom modes of production constitute a particular form of modifying nature»<sup>15</sup>, ends up omitting space. This same author, who would go on to confront Althusser, repeats the classic three instances, although in a slightly different way:

«technical relations of production (techno-economic structure), social relations of production (socioeconomic structure), political and legal relations (legal-political structure), ideological and cultural relations, etc. It is quite possible that space is subsumed in this *et coetera*, but it is not stated clearly»<sup>16</sup>.

From this discussion on structures, Milton Santos questions whether space is a structure exclusively subordinated to the economic and whether the economy could function without a geographical basis. His answer is no to both questions, and that is «even if the word geographical is taken in its most

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ivi*, p. 178.

<sup>14</sup> *Ivi*, p. 179.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

erroneous sense, as a synonym of natural condition»<sup>17</sup>. However, seeking to move towards the notion of space as “second nature”, Milton Santos criticises those who limit themselves to an economicist interpretation of social relations and notes that «Marx gave primacy to totality, which appears clearly in the famous *1857 Introduction*»<sup>18</sup>. On this point, and signalling that he does not accept a simple *liquidation* of the economic moment, the Brazilian geographer concedes a certain amount of reason to the French philosopher, affirming that it is «possible, without doubt, to do as Althusser does», for whom, after all, there is «a structure in dominance (*structure à dominante*), responsible for the articulation between the parts and for order on the whole»<sup>19</sup>. But the criticism of the economicism that in any case remains in Althusser is clear, and it is found in the evaluation of Armando Córdova’s position expressed immediately afterwards. According to Milton Santos, Córdova’s reading

«seems to be essentially different from that of Louis Althusser, whose interpretation he disagrees with in several respects, although he admits like Althusser the character of domination “in last instance” of the social structure. What Córdova enshrines as the dominant structure is the socio-economic structure, something different from the *tout court* economic structure»<sup>20</sup>.

And, even so, going beyond the two authors, the Brazilian geographer insists that «organised space can never be considered as a social structure depending solely on the economy», since «other influences interfere in the modifications of the spatial structure»<sup>21</sup>.

It is therefore in the search to understand space as a social structure and to present it as essential to the study of the S.E.F. that, as we shall see further on, a decisive difference between Milton Santos and Louis Althusser appears.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p. 182.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, p. 183.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, p. 184.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

## 2. 2. Milton Santos with regard to Althusser's structuralism

In the book *Ideologias Geográficas* (Geographic Ideologies), Antônio Carlos Robert Moraes<sup>22</sup> proposes a discussion on the influence of Marxist theories in the human sciences during the latter half of the twentieth century. He points to the problem of the crisis in Western Marxism and the «lack of a broad strategy to surmount modern capitalism», as well as the way in which «these theorisations distance themselves from a global political practice»<sup>23</sup>. In his analysis, Moraes assigns Louis Althusser's theoretical formulation a major position in this scenario. The Althusserian reading «is directed as an effort at objectification, seeing Marxism as a “science” and seeking to grasp its essential logical procedures»<sup>24</sup>. These are ideas that re-established a guiding principle for Marxists in their analysis of reality, since they «repositioned a doctrinal security, restored a standard of analysis and rigorously redefined the basic categories of interpretation», albeit under the aegis of structuralism<sup>25</sup>.

Still according to Moraes, «Althusser's proposal finds great resonance in the Marxism of academic extraction», and this already from the 1960s, since its introduction in Geography occurred in the field of urban topics, where a geographical Marxism, “tributary of Althusser”, appears «mainly through the formulations of Manuel Castels and the French urbanists»<sup>26</sup>.

Nonetheless, the interpretative patterns of the structuralist analysis of society cost Althusser «a detachment from dialectics» and «a high dose of formalism»<sup>27</sup>. Thus, «the mode of production comes to be understood as a “theoretical model” whose “empirical manifestations” are expressed in socio-economic formations (only these being endowed with historical concreteness)»<sup>28</sup>, while the mode of production remains a mere abstraction. And here we have a clear departure from Milton Santos in relation to Althusser, indicating the French philosopher's mistake in starting «from the distinction between *theoretical concepts*, which define “abstract formal objects”, and *empirical concepts*, which are the determinations of the existence of concrete objects»<sup>29</sup>. While

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<sup>22</sup> MORAES, 1988.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, p. 87

<sup>24</sup> Ivi, pp. 87-8.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> Ivi, pp. 89-90.

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 88.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> SANTOS 1982, p. 21.

referring to the category of S.E.F., the Brazilian geographer stresses his rejection of this formalism, recalling a passage by Marta Harnecker in which she quotes Nicos Poulantzas. Harnecker

«rejects the definition of E.S.F. as “abstract social totalities”. For her, the E.S.F. contains a concrete reality, “historically determined”, structured on the basis of the way in which the different relations of production that coexist at the level of the economic structure are combined»<sup>30</sup>.

And he corroborates once again Harnecker’s formulation to uphold, against Althusser’s modelling, the historically determined study of geographical space, always through economic and social formations:

«social formations do not exist except through their concrete aspects, among which are the concrete modes of production which constitute them and enable us to understand the specificity of each society (...) as a historically determined reality with a territorial basis»<sup>31</sup>.

As highlighted by Moraes, with structuralism we are facing a clear «positivisation of Marxism»<sup>32</sup>. It is when «history itself is threatened by a perspective more concerned with structures (constants) than with processes (full of differences)»<sup>33</sup>. And this is where the whole Althusserian emphasis on the process of economic production seems to lie. This

«takes place entirely within the economy, although it implies, and precisely in the specific determinations of its structure, necessary relations with nature, and the other structures (legal, political and ideological) which constitute, when taken together, the global structure of a social formation belonging to a particular mode of production»<sup>34</sup>.

Milton Santos certainly agrees with the need to take structures together in order to understand the determinations of social reality, but he does not limit himself to this “positivisation”, valuing, unlike structuralism, the *processes*:

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 245.

<sup>32</sup> MORAES 1988, p. 88.

<sup>33</sup> Ivi, p. 89.

<sup>34</sup> ALTHUSSER 1978, p. 43.



«Since social events, expressed here as geographical events, depend on society as a whole, each particular event represents a determination of society as a whole and a particular place that defines it, adding to its original social dimension, an aspect that is, at once, temporal and spatial. *Places and area, regions or subspaces are therefore only functional areas, whose actual scale depends on the processes*»<sup>35</sup>.

Structures, but also *history* or, even better, *processes* and their social functions. And, by treating space as history and structure, the Brazilian geographer ends up further overcoming the very economicism present in Althusserian structuralism: space, Milton Santos insists, «cannot only be a reflection of the current mode of production because it is the memory of past modes of production»<sup>36</sup>. And, once again, casting the idea of space's active role, he states: «through space, history itself becomes structure, structured in forms. And these forms, as forms-contents, influence the course of history, since they participate in the overall dialectic of society»<sup>37</sup>.

It is, strictly speaking, a critique of the opposition between structure and history, itself forgotten from the centrality of geography in the historical process and thus the understanding of space not only as a «support» but also as the «subject of a process»<sup>38</sup>. Structures, processes, functions and forms, an articulated set of categories capable of facilitating the understanding of space as an actor, a participating subject in the social totality.

### 2. 3. Historical dialectics, totality and the acceptance of Hegel

We pointed out earlier that Milton Santos criticises the approach that sees the economic moment as an instance that overrides other instances, or moments, of social life. This is a mistake which Louis Althusser's Marxism tends to make when referring to the combination of the different practices of social existence (or social relations), which encompass economic practice, political practice, ideological practice, technical practice, and scientific practice:

«We think about the grounding and articulating relations of these different practices on top of each other in considering their *degree of independence*, their kind of

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<sup>35</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 219 (our italics).

<sup>36</sup> Ivi, p. 181.

<sup>37</sup> Ivi, p. 189.

<sup>38</sup> Ivi, pp. 188-9.

“relative” *autonomy*, in turn set by their *type of dependence* in comparison with the ‘last instance determining’ practice, the economic practice»<sup>39</sup>.

For Santos, however, «space does not depend exclusively on the economic structure, as some people tend to imagine»<sup>40</sup>, nor on the other structures, which are interrelated and depend on each other in a strict dialectical relationship. And here is a decisive point. It is dialectics, fundamentally understood as a historical dialectics, which allows us to introduce the idea of process as totality. For that reason he has even taken the notion of process from a standpoint that accepted the position of structuralist authors – such as the above-mentioned Marta Harnecker – without this entailing a continued imprisonment by the straitjacket of structuralism. In effect, Milton Santos goes as far as Lukács, to whom he refers in order to remind us «that the thesis of dominance does not prove, but rather clashes with the notion of totality»<sup>41</sup>. Therefore,

«space reproduces the social totality insofar as these transformations are determined by social, economic and political needs. As such, space itself reproduces within the totality when it evolves as a function of the mode of production and its successive moments. But space also influences the evolution of other structures and therefore becomes a fundamental component of the social totality and its movements»<sup>42</sup>.

And referring once again to Lukács, he insists on the centrality given to totality:

«For Lukács, the category of totality, a legacy left to Marx by Hegel, enshrines “the determining domination in every sense, of the whole over the parts” and constitutes the essence of the method used by Marx as “the foundation of an entirely new science”. According to this thinking, primacy corresponds to totality as structure, which stands above its substructures and overlaps the succession, in time, of the various specific categories»<sup>43</sup>.

This quotation leads us to another and decisive distancing between Milton Santos and Louis Althusser. It concerns the acceptance that the Brazilian

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<sup>39</sup> ALTHUSSER 1979, p. 62 (author’s italics).

<sup>40</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 182.

<sup>41</sup> Ivi, pp. 183-184.

<sup>42</sup> SANTOS 1982, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 184.

geographer gives to Hegel. Moraes points out that in the effort to objectify Marxism as a science, Althusser «will differentiate the “juvenile writings” from Marx’s mature work», the passage from one phase to another residing in the «integral surmounting of Hegel’s legacy»<sup>44</sup>. In fact, the French philosopher is clear in pointing out that «Marx’s discourse is in principle foreign to Hegel’s discourse», that is to say, «that his dialectics is entirely different from Hegelian dialectics»<sup>45</sup>.

Proceeding in a completely different way, Milton Santos surrenders to a resolute incorporation of the Hegelian historical dialectic: «Hegel assimilated the notion of reality to the notion of dialectics. And the notion of dialectics suppresses the risk of metaphysical elucubration when the reality analysed is space»<sup>46</sup>. But it is important to understand this well. The metaphysics criticised here is not the one already referred to in the second chapter of the same work, centred on the incorporation of Hegelianism and which thus opens up to the relations «between metaphysics and science», a decisive path to exceeding the Newtonian notion of three-dimensional space, that is to say, «the absolute and immutable space», without any relation to the temporal dimension<sup>47</sup>. We are, in effect, facing that Hegelian metaphysics inherited by Marxism, endowed with «a robust sense of man’s worldliness and politicality», as Domenico Losurdo put it<sup>48</sup>.

And here we arrive at a formulation that, among other aspects, also draws Milton Santos’ theoretical proposal closer to that of Antonio Gramsci’s Marxism.

### 3. *Milton Santos and Gramsci*

The innovative proposal involving the category of socio-spatial formation elaborated by Milton Santos is often credited to the Sartrean influences of the Brazilian geographer, who knew how to explore with great inventiveness Jean Paul Sartre’s notion of the “practical-inert”<sup>49</sup>. It is an evident influence and there is no need to question it, Milton Santos having returned to the French

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<sup>44</sup> MORAES 1988, p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> ALTHUSSER 1979, p. 53.

<sup>46</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 213.

<sup>47</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 49.

<sup>48</sup> LOSURDO 2014, p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> SANTOS 1982, pp. 18-19; SANTOS 2012, p. 172.

existentialist many times in his works. Nevertheless, little noticed, or at least little emphasised, are the references that, in the same pages dedicated to discussing Sartre's category, are made to the classics of Marxism, among them Marx and Engels themselves but equally Antonio Labriola, an author dear to Antonio Gramsci precisely because of his efforts to surmount the inability of the Marxism of the Second International to view social reality as a totality.

In fact, we should ask ourselves if it is not precisely these influences of historical materialism that prompted Milton Santos to rework Sartre's formulation, insisting that when it comes to «human space, the question is no longer one of inert practice, but of dynamic inertia»<sup>50</sup>. It does not seem to us, therefore, to be a question of a mere change of vocabulary, but of content. If for no other reason than the fact that the new formulation establishes a direct relationship with the question, clearly inherent in historical materialism, of unequal geographical development, and this by a much more complex and refined route than that of the static views of the problem. And here is what makes this category very close to that of passive revolution widely used by Gramsci<sup>51</sup>, aimed precisely at apprehending the «dynamic character of restorations»<sup>52</sup>.

Gramsci is not an author often cited by the Brazilian geographer, but he clearly appears in the texts of the period in which Milton Santos is elaborating the categories mentioned above. In *Para que a geografia mude sem ficar a mesma coisa* (So that geography changes without remaining the same thing), the Italian Marxist is referred to in the concluding pages precisely in the criticism of the «fetishism of appearance», or the «mystification» of approaches that allow themselves to take the «part as if it were the whole»<sup>53</sup>. In *Por uma Geografia Nova* (For a New Geography), the Brazilian geographer refers to the Italian Marxist just once<sup>54</sup>, but the whole philosophical basis of the critique of empiricism suggests close links with formulations that Gramsci elaborated for the same purpose<sup>55</sup>.

There is no doubt that the two authors are similar in their efforts to overcome the theoretical limitations of the political-intellectual fields in which they participate. In Gramsci's case, the positivism is present in the

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<sup>50</sup> SANTOS 1982, p. 19; SANTOS 2012, p.185.

<sup>51</sup> DA SILVA 2016, pp. 13-15.

<sup>52</sup> BURGIO 2002, p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> SANTOS 1982b, p. 18.

<sup>54</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 18.

<sup>55</sup> DA SILVA 2020, p. 70 onwards.

economicist formulations of Marxism from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in Milton Santos, through the influences of the empiricist slant of German and French geographies<sup>56</sup>. In the end, it is about the absence, in these two political-epistemological universes, of Hegelian dialectics. In Gramsci's words:

«The function and meaning of dialectics can only be conceived in all its fundamentality if the philosophy of praxis is conceived as an integral and original philosophy, which initiates a new phase in the history and world development of thought, insofar as it surmounts (and, in superseding, integrates into itself its vital elements) both traditional idealism and materialism, expressions of the old societies»<sup>57</sup>.

For Gramsci, without understanding the relation of identification that Hegel establishes between the rational and the real – the so-called “objectification of reality”, strictly historical in Gramsci – it is not possible to understand the philosophy of praxis and its position vis-à-vis the idealism and mechanical materialism that this identification seeks to combat. And this is precisely the case of Bukharin's *Popular Essay*, the target of Gramsci's critique in the groundbreaking Notebook 11. Bukharin features therein as much a hostage of a positivist Marxism as Plekhanov, he himself, it should be recalled, a cornerstone of the German and French geographies criticised by the Brazilian geographer<sup>58</sup>.

An example of Bukharin's positivism appears in the replacement of the Hegelian idea with the concept of structure – which he further reduces to economic structure, thus losing sight of the social-historical totality. As the Italian Marxist puts it:

«The Hegelian “idea” is resolved in both structure and superstructures, and the whole way of conceiving philosophy was “historicised”, that is, the birth of a new, more concrete and historical mode of philosophising than the preceding ones began»<sup>59</sup>.

And here is how, in contrast to the empiricist view of the real, Gramsci maintains that the philosophy of praxis (or historical materialism) is «the

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<sup>56</sup> SANTOS 2012, pp. 52 onwards.

<sup>57</sup> GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1425.

<sup>58</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 48.

<sup>59</sup> GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1420.

absolute historicism, the absolute worldliness and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history», a line from which «the lode of the new conception of the world must be sought»<sup>60</sup>. The same worldliness and earthliness that, for Milton Santos, can be achieved only through the category of economic and social formation, a particular dimension of the «universal totalisation», and thus the category «best suited to the study of space», because it «allows us not to move away from concrete reality», to which Hegel «resembled... the notion of dialectics»<sup>61</sup>.

And it is precisely by this path, which is also that of transcending the old philosophies, «purging them of all their metaphysical apparatus and leading them to the concrete terrain of history»<sup>62</sup>, where Milton Santos insists there is no opposition between History and structure:

«The modifications in the role of the forms-content – or simply in the function accorded to the form by the content – are subordinated, and even determined, by the mode of production as it is realised in and through the social formation. Thus, the movement of space suppresses in a practical, and not only philosophical way, any possibility of opposition between History and structure»<sup>63</sup>.

With Bukharin, who reduces the economic to a technical instrument, portraying it as the sole and supreme cause of historical development, thereby simplifying the whole of social relations and productive forces, we are faced with the denial of totality and thus the very negation of a conception of integral development. This is noted by Gramsci, in establishing a direct relationship between Bukharin and the positivist historian Achille Loria:

«In this regard, moreover, the mode of thinking expounded in the *Essay* does not differ from that of Loria, if not even more criticisable and superficial. In the *Essay*, it is not exactly clear what the structure, the superstructure, and the technical instrument

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<sup>60</sup> Ivi, p. 1437.

<sup>61</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 213.

<sup>62</sup> GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1438. We have already noted the presence, in Milton Santos, of two notions of metaphysics, and it is worth noting here that the same distinction appears in Gramsci. In Notebook 7, referring to Engels' well-known formulation according to which the «German proletariat» is the «heir to classical German philosophy», as well as situating it in relation to Lenin (Ilitch) and the Revolution of 1917, Gramsci writes: «it can be stated that the theorisation and realisation of hegemony practiced by Ilitch was a great “metaphysical” event». Ivi, p. 886.

<sup>63</sup> SANTOS 1982, p. 17.

are: in it, all the general concepts are nebulous and vague. The technical instrument is conceived in such a generic way that it stands for any tool or utensil...»<sup>64</sup>.

It is a simplification also criticised by Milton Santos. We should remember his rejection of the Vidalian concept of “gender of life”. In agreement with Max Sorre, he insists that the concept is «no longer applicable in the modern world where human groups act mainly according to impulses from the outside»<sup>65</sup>, that is to say, the impulses of the dominant mode of production and the elements of totality inherent in it. Its «optic of a technique linked to culture and not to the mode of production» makes it a totally outdated concept for the purposes of understanding the stage of capital globalisation, when the «economy is based on folly» and the «social order is only maintained because ideology intrudes», which means that «the political order is obliged to be confused, and this to infinity with the other instances of life»<sup>66</sup>.

This is how it can be understood that «only the study of the history of modes of production and social formations will enable us to recognise the real value of each thing within the totality», of each space<sup>67</sup>. As we can see, it is a conception clearly anchored in historical materialism, but still a conception that in no way accepts ignoring the role that geography – or more precisely geographic space, already redefined as a «socialised nature», a «Second Nature»<sup>68</sup> – plays here as an element of the historical-dialectical totality:

«The greater need is to demystify space if we wish to bring together the characteristics specific to space and the corresponding social formation into a theory that emerges from reality. It is a matter of seeing space as it is, a social structure, like other social structures, endowed with autonomy within the whole and participating along with the others in an interdependent, concerted and unequal development»<sup>69</sup>.

And here a conclusion is imposed. There is no doubt that we are still facing the use of the notion of instance to define the category “space”. Nevertheless, the formulation is all geared towards transcending the hierarchy of “levels”, “structures”, “instances” or “moments”, dear to the “architectonic” vision of

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<sup>64</sup> GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1441.

<sup>65</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 36.

<sup>66</sup> Ivi, pp. 37 and 236.

<sup>67</sup> Ivi, p. 263.

<sup>68</sup> Ivi, pp. 163 and 203.

<sup>69</sup> Ivi, p. 265.

structuralism. It is actually a matter of considering geographic space from that «double phenomenology» – structure and superstructure – to which Gramsci referred to when speaking of the «technical instrument»<sup>70</sup>. And that is precisely what seems to differentiate the appropriation of historical materialism undertaken by Milton Santos's Geography, strictly speaking a contribution to the detachment from what André Tosel called the «Marxism of instances», not by mere chance referring to the differences between Gramsci and Althusser, not even perceived by a philosopher of the stature of Henri Lefebvre<sup>71</sup>.

### *Final considerations*

Restricting ourselves basically to the writings of the late 1970s and early 1980s, in this paper we have tried to expose part of Milton Santos' efforts to transcend the old philosophies marked by positivism and economicism within Geography. This dialogue was centred, above all, on the discussion of the relations between the Brazilian geographer and the French philosopher Louis Althusser, an exponent of Marxist structuralism. As we have tried to demonstrate, Milton Santos' formulations, organised around an articulation of the categories space, structure, function, and form, as well as a reappraisal of the category of social-economic formation as a socio-spatial formation, do not amount to an association with Althusserian structuralism, with which he demonstrates substantial differences.

Certainly, Milton Santos considers space as a social instance, that is, as a structure of social determinations – being simultaneously subordinate and subordinating, in a dialectical relationship with the other structures. But it is for this very reason that this category becomes an element of the social totality. In other words, we are faced with a formulation that allows the Brazilian geographer to oppose those who consider space as a structure subordinated exclusively to the economic, strictly speaking still a legacy of the structuralist approach. And it is this that, by casting the discussion into the terrain of historical dialectics, marks a clear distancing between Milton Santos and Althusser. This effort, also aimed at overcoming the old positivist traditions incorporated in the Marxism that arrived in Geography, draws Milton Santos's

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<sup>70</sup>GRAMSCI 1975, p. 433. Still according to Gramsci's reasoning, it is, both logically and «also chronologically», a complex formed by «social structure – superstructure – material structure of the superstructure» (ivi, p. 434).

<sup>71</sup> TOSEL 2017, pp. 316-317.



theoretical production very close to that of Antonio Gramsci, even if the latter was an author who was little cited in the texts in which the Brazilian geographer lays the foundations of his contribution to a “Critical Geography”. And this approach has as its point of contact the German classical philosophy and, in particular, the thought of Hegel, which had a powerful influence on Italian Marxism and especially in Gramsci,<sup>72</sup> a perspective generally ignored by commentators on the work of the great Brazilian geographer.<sup>73</sup>

Far from closing the discussion and exhausting the possibilities for analysis, the research we present here should merely be considered the initial stage of a long construction, which also corresponds to a more organic absorption of Gramsci’s thought as part of the formulations of so-called Critical Geography. Indeed, the thesis that «the notions of mode of production and social formation – but above all the latter – have not been adequately explored by those who study human space remains entirely valid»<sup>74</sup>, and one could even suggest a certain recent impoverishment in its studies.

A future path for research in this field could involve an investigation into the use of the Gramscian category of hegemony in the reflections of the Brazilian geographer. Recalling once again André Tosel’s article quoted above, we are faced with a category which, rejecting the dualism between “authority” and “concession”, moves away from a structuralist view of the State, that is, from the State comprehended «at the level of an instance»<sup>75</sup>. And this is also the way, as Milton Santos said in the final pages of *Por uma Geografia Nova*, to establish a «new geography presided over by the social interest», a geography capable of «revaluing man himself» – «a problem of knowledge», but also «a moral problem»<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> LOSURDO, 1997.

<sup>73</sup> Another example of this limitation is the work of Saquet and Silva, 2008, which refers to the influence of authors as different as «A. Einstein, A. Whitehead, H. Lefebvre, E. Durkheim, F. Braudel, JP Sartre» (p. 40), but not manages to perceive the centrality of classical German philosophy in the theoretical formulations of Milton Santos.

<sup>74</sup> SANTOS 2012, p. 244.

<sup>75</sup> TOSEL 2017, p. 317.

<sup>76</sup> SANTOS 2012, pp. 262 and 266.

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