

State, territory and globalization: dialogues between Jürgen Habermas and Milton Santos

Renata Rogowski Pozzo (State University of Santa Catarina, Brazil)

Iole Iliada Lopes is a Brazilian geographer, holding an MA and a PhD in human geography from Universidade de São Paulo. With strong ties to the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party), she has already held posts as the party's secretary for international relations and vice president of Fundação Perseu Abramo, a research and education institution linked to PT.

Her book *O Território, o Direito e os Estados Pós-Nacionais: um diálogo entre Habermas, a Geografia e as Relações Internacionais*¹ results from her doctoral thesis in human geography, defended at Universidade de São Paulo in 2005, first supervised by Armando Correa de Silva (1931-2000) and, after his death, by Antônio Carlos Robert Moraes (1954-2015). Lopes is the heir, thus, of a notable geographic lineage, considering that Professor Armando Correa da Silva², known among us as the “philosopher of Brazilian geography” formed a representative group of extremely thorough, critical and creative geographers, such as Antônio Carlos Robert Moraes himself, Ruy Moreira, Amélia Luisa Damiani, among others.

Initially, it is essential to situate her thesis, written at a moment in which the fall of the Berlin Wall still encouraged discourses about the end of the world socialist project and, together with it, the end of history, the end of grand narratives (beginning with historical materialism) and... the end of territory! This last issue would become the most notable path through which such *fin de siècle* deconstructions arrived in geography – not only in Brazil – raising metaphors (or fables of globalitarianism, as geographer Milton Santos wrote³) such as the famous “time-space compression”.

¹ LOPES 2022.

² His most representative works are the books *O Espaço Fora do Lugar* (1978), *De Quem é o Pedacinho?* (1986) and *Geografia e Lugar Social* (1991).

³ SANTOS 2000a.

In the 1990s, internationally, critical theory is traversed by these questions, which intertwine with a new world map formed by the post-Fordist mode of economic regulation, neoliberalism and the discourse of post-modernity.

It is in this context, thus, that German philosopher Jürgen Habermas makes globalization a central topic of his analysis, as he begins to discuss how the principle of communicative action, developed by him in the previous decade, could extend to institutional forms of state and social organization in contemporary times.

Drawing a parallel with Brazilian geography, in the 1990s Milton Santos (1936-2001), too, elaborates on the issue of globalisation. However, while Santos clearly positions himself in defence of the territory state as a form of resistance against the postmodern transnational state (notably in the 1993 essay *O Retorno do Território*⁴ (*The Return of Territory*), at the same time he points to the possibility of a «universal consciousness» as «another globalization» as a horizon (for instance, in the 1998 book *Por uma outra globalização: do pensamento único à consciência universal*⁵ (*For another globalisation: from hegemonic thought to universal consciousness*), Habermas elaborates controversial territorial conceptions by proposing the organisation of post-national states and a cosmopolitan democratic society.

Thus, throughout the book's 268 pages, published only in Portuguese until the present moment, the author seeks to understand “to what extent Habermas's theories about the post-national or cosmopolitan state would have succumbed to a current that, by accepting the inevitability of globalization, claimed to recognise in that process a *detritorialization* of society – the radicalization of which would culminate in a sort of end of territories”⁶, even though Habermas is an insistent critic of postmodern ideas, which frequently underpin such analyses. In the introduction to the book, a discussion of the concept of territory for geography and Habermasian thought regarding globalization set the tone for a reading of the work.

⁴ SANTOS 2014.

⁵ SANTOS 2000a.

⁶ LOPES 2022, p. 2.

It is worth stressing that the work's background argument, that of "re-affirming the importance of territory not only as an analytical category, but in its materiality for the functioning of societies engendered by capitalist modernity" is reactualised among other phenomena of reality, in the 17 years between defence of the thesis and its publication, by the deepening of territory transnationalisation processes carried out by countries and corporations, but also by the emerge of China and BRICS, by political recognition of the "global South" and, in Brazil, by the 2016 parliamentary coup against president Dilma Rousseff, from Partido dos Trabalhadores, and full-fledged embrace of the neoliberal system, disguised beneath the nationalist discourse of president Jair Bolsonaro (elected in 2018 and later defeated in his attempt at re-election in 2022 by Luís Inácio da Silva). Furthermore, in the face of the irrationalist and negationist wave that emerged in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth stressing the current renewed importance of attentive reading of a philosopher like Jürgen Habermas and his wager on human knowledge for the emancipation of society.

The book comprises three parts, each of which is developed in three chapters. The first part is titled "The social theory of Jürgen Habermas and the thesis of post-national states." It is considerably the longest part of the book, presenting a review of Habermasian thought.

In the first chapter, "The theory of communicative action," the author explores the essential elements of this theory presented by Habermas in 1981, when the philosopher undertakes his "linguistic turn," abandoning the paradigms of subject and self-consciousness, instead choosing «communication directed to intersubjective understanding as the foundation that will support his project for the emancipation of society and recovery of modern ideals [...]»⁷. As a starting point for that discussion, Habermas chooses moral and legal norms, given the importance that discourse ethics occupy in his theses, in the footsteps of Kant, for whom norms that could be generalised would be considered morally valid. In the first chapter, therefore, the author establishes connections between territory and law, the latter figuring as a possibility of universalisation, or formation of a cosmopolitan communicative community – something that could

⁷ Ivi, p. 39.

motivate approximations with Hegelian philosophy, but which is not explored by the author.

The second chapter, “Between facticity and validity: communicative reason as a foundation of law and democracy” deepens these reflections, with an attentive look at *Between Facts and Norms*” written by Habermas in the early 1990s. Here, the philosopher concludes that law is a category of social mediation between facticity, that is, the coercive nature of law, and validity, or the legitimation of norms. Lopes then investigates the relations between this idea and the theory of communicative action, as a theory of society that expresses Habermas’s conception of democracy, and through which processes law, in a non-coercive perspective, may legitimate the democratic organisation of complex societies.

After establishing this “theoretical background,” the chapter titled “Habermas and Post-national States” discusses Habermas’s proposal for overcoming the impasses of the welfare state caused by globalisation, highlighting the 2001 *A Constelação Pós-Nacional* (*The Post-National Constellation*), a collection of essays by the author on the topic. In that work, it is possible to identify the author’s recognition that the welfare state was established between the 1950s and 1970s in western European democracies and to a lesser degree in the United States, that is, in a very limited historical period and geographic space, as Lopes stresses. In his view, such a state was capable of conducting the pacification of class conflicts, ensuring better conditions for democracy and citizenship. Globalisation, however, diminished the state’s ability to regulate the economy and distribute wealth. A response to the crisis of the welfare state regarding its maintenance and a continued harmony between economic growth and social equity could be the constitution of post-national democratic constitutional states.

At this point, Habermasian theory postulates that “from the reality of national states themselves a political project to overcome their limitations in the face of global order should be constructed – even if such a project ends up, contradictorily, causing that historical form to be superseded”⁸. According to Habermas, it would be possible to establish a relation between the two forms of integration identified by him as the system (vectors of globalisation) and the lifeworld (the place), that is, between

⁸ LOPES 2022, p. 156.

instrumental rationality and communicative rationality. Lastly, emancipatory struggles should not demand national sovereignty, but engagement with what he distinguishes as the beginning of a post-national state, the European Union.

The second part of the book, where the author analyses certain theses positioned in favour of the idea of loss of territoriality, received the title “Discourses about the end of territory: is this concept losing its materiality and explicative validity?”. This section is an especially interesting read for geographers, as the discourse regarding the end of territories also generated crises internal to geography. In Brazilian geography, an example of this moment is *O mito da desterritorialização: do “fim dos territórios” à multiterritorialidade* (*The Myth of Deterritorialisation: from “the end of territories” to multiterritoriality*), by Rogério Haesbaert⁹.

Through the three chapters that compose this part, the author seeks to clarify her argument that, even if Habermas accepts ideas about the end of territory at first sight, his theory actually presents a territorial slant that is not sufficiently developed. Lopes selects two works, *O Fim dos Territórios* (*The End of Territories*), by French political scientist Bertrand Badie, published in 1995, and *Um Outro Território* (*Another Territory*), by Brazilian sociologist Renato Ortiz, published in 1999, to demonstrate the main arguments of that line of thought. Each of these books is presented in a chapter: “Bertrand Badie and the crisis of the principle of territoriality” and “Renato Ortiz and uprooted territoriality,” with the author presenting her syntheses in the third chapter, “Critical considerations on theses of deterritorialization”.

Lopes considers both analyses to stem from the realization that nation, state and territory are localised historical forms, and questions why both theories, identifying the transformations undergone by these forms in the current historical moment, point to their disappearance rather than transformation: «What we would like to put in question here, then, is not whether these forms are being historically transformed, but to what extent this transformation has reached that threshold at which, in dialectic terms, it is possible to identify a qualitative alteration that allows us to speak of *superseding*»¹⁰. She further argues: «Anyway, the problem

⁹ HAESBAERT 2004.

¹⁰ LOPES 2022, p. 218.

which seems to us central here is that if globalisation is rooted in a productive restructuration that intensifies the transnationalisation of economy, and if the circulation of information, goods and money gains world space, on the other hand the organisation of political power continues to be grounded on the structure of the national state, whose sovereignty, as seen, can only be defined territorially»¹¹.

At this point, the author raises the important reflection that theses about the end of the state find an echo in the historic observation that the state has been serving as a tool for capitalist accumulation and that its operation, in certain contexts, is marked by authoritarianism and violence. However, such theses end up, contradictorily, corroborating the neoliberal set of ideas that seeks precisely to use the state as an agent for facilitating accumulation.

This question, in fact, demands an important distance to be drawn between Habermas and such theses, as he proposed a theory and a «social project that would presuppose an established legal order and institutionalised power». That is why Lopes argues that his democratic project based on law would be «inherently territorial», given that there is no legal order without definition of a jurisdiction, nor institutional power without delimitation of scope.

Thus, the third part of the book is reached: «Post-national states and the cosmopolitan society of Jürgen Habermas: from inherent territory to absent territory», in which the author indicates why Habermas's theses should not be immediately identified with those about the end of territories, while pointing to the limits of his project.

Returning to Habermas's ideas, in the first chapter, «Inherent territoriality: the *territorial* democratic state of law as a foundation of the Habermasian emancipatory project,” Lopes demonstrates that the territorial discussion underlies his thought: «Neither can his social theory abandon a spatial basis that defines the limits of the exercise of institutional power and the validity of law, nor can the other imagine a global society integrated only through ‘networks,’ as his discussion of social solidarity and forms of communication directed to understanding in the lifeworld

¹¹ Ivi, p. 221.

presupposes a circumscribed, “closed” spatial horizon – a referent social space»¹².

In the second chapter, “Amplified territoriality: the European Union as a post-national *territorial* state,” in turn, Lopes shows how Habermas, believing in the welfare state’s superiority, but simultaneously realising that globalisation unstructured its national bases, proposes such a state in the post-national sphere. His idea involves the expansion of this model, which should impose limits to the market and wealth redistribution, a «federative democratic state of law», in which, we highlight, «national identities would be preserved»¹³, «it would not be the case, after all, for abandoning borders, but for creating a new, amplified border, with its function of territorial delimitation remaining intact»¹⁴.

In the last chapter of the last part, “Absent territoriality: Habermas’s cosmopolitan democracy,” Lopes finally analyses Habermas’s more mature proposal for overcoming the impasses of globalisation after recognising the limitation of national forms of power. At the same time, she points at a movement in his thought from a cosmopolitan state (or an international order underpinned by the nation-state form), the impasses and limitations of which were demonstrated by theory, to a cosmopolitan democracy, marked by the publication of the essay *A Paz Perpétua* (*Eternal Peace*) in 1996. At this moment, Habermas starts to discuss the loss of political capacity by states and the supposed mundialisation of politics and communication, which would be constituting a «global public sphere». It is at this point that, according to Lopes, Habermas’s arguments lose consistency – even more so considering the context of the two first decades of the 21st century, with the hardening of USA external policy, the war in Ukraine, or the scandal involving fake news in the Brazilian electoral process: «It is precisely that material foundation – territory – what will be lost in his attempt to apply some principles of organization of modern state democracies to a “world” that, in this sense, is no more than an abstraction»¹⁵.

¹² Ivi, p. 239.

¹³ Ivi, p. 242.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 243.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 249.

Finally, after following this path in which, even though the chapters may be read separately, each of them builds on the previous ones, Lopes builds the complex final consideration that territory is not absent for Habermas but, since it is inevitable, it is actually neglected, “which contributes to make explicit the difficulties he finds to adjust his project to concrete global social reality”¹⁶. Then, the honest way in which the author approaches Habermas’s thought is commendable, warning us that «[...] we would like to remind the reader that a good “dialogue”, like the one intended here, is not necessarily made of consensus and agreement; rather, it represents the possibility of expressing disagreement and counterpoints»¹⁷.

In that sense, it is important to mention that Habermas aligns with the critique of neoliberalism, especially for his active reflection about the future, whereas *pensée unique* disputes hegemonies by making historical and current processes invisible and denying possibilities of another future – including beyond capitalism. In fact, «the idea that modernity is an unconcluded project is perhaps one of Jürgen Habermas’s most well-known ideas». He distances himself, in turn, from liberal currents, which according to him treat «rights as goods liable to possession and distribution [...] law is not a “thing”, but a relation – and [...] as such, to *have it* is not enough: one must *exercise it* to benefit from it»¹⁸.

Nevertheless, the superficiality of his territorial reflections unfortunately moves his ideals of freedom and democracy away from concreteness. We can, perhaps, look at his work from the perspective of Susan Buck-Morss’s critique of French Enlightenment in *Hegel e o Haiti* (*Hegel and Haiti*), with a brilliant preface by Vladimir Safatle in its 2017¹⁹ Brazilian edition. The book, even though evidently not deploring universalist discourse, denounces the absence of slavery from European political philosophy and demonstrates how modern reason has clear geographical boundaries.

In fact, in this context, I believe that a topic opened by reading the book is: is modernity solely capitalist?

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 179.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 4.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 128.

¹⁹ BUCK-MORSS 2017.

Lastly, the contributions this work offers to Brazilian geography are notable, not only for the conceptual work it includes, especially about state and territory, but for the openings for dialogue between Habermas and Milton Santos. Perceiving Habermas's presence in Santos's concepts of horizontality and verticality is inevitable, and perhaps that also applies to Santo's proposal of the state as a federation of places²⁰.

These exchanges demonstrate the translatability of concepts and create openings for emancipatory universalist thought. Nevertheless, the contemporary world may force us to reassess the western idea of cosmos, to think about potent irradiations of history and territorialities from south to north for, as Milton Santos reflected:

«The world has significantly changed. All countries have changed immensely and so have diverse areas. We become astonished at these mutations. The results of the last census have been published in Brazil, and its contents indicate that much effort will be required of social scientists to reinterpret this country in relation to the world. The difficulty I face today is similar, but in an inverted manner. Because if I intend to produce a discourse that is not only about Latin America, but about the world, I do it from Latin America. Because all theorisations about the world are, ultimately, theorisations that have a geographic point of reference»²¹.

Bibliographical references

BUCK-MORSS, SUSAN, 2017
Hegel e o Haiti, n-1 edições, São Paulo.

HAESBAERT, ROGÉRIO, 2004
O mito da desterritorialização: do “fim dos territórios” à multiterritorialidade, Bertrand Brasil, Rio de Janeiro.

LOPES, IOLE ILÍADA, 2022
O Território, o Direito e os Estados Pós-Nacionais: um diálogo entre Habermas, a Geografia e as Relações Internacionais, Dialética, São Paulo.

²⁰ SANTOS 2000b.

²¹ Ivi, p. 87.

SANTOS, MILTON, 2000a

Por uma outra globalização: do pensamento único à consciência universal, Record, Rio de Janeiro.

Id., 2000b

El territorio: um agregado de espacios banales, “Boletín de Estudios Geográficos”, 96.

Id., 2014

O retorno do Território (1993), in Id., *Da totalidade ao lugar*, EdUSP, São Paulo.