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The Imperial Mode of Living in a semi-peripheral social formation: notes on the case of Brazil

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“[...] an der Spitze des Weltprozesses und Weltganzen ist diese Front und die ungeheure, noch so wenig begriffene Kategorie Novum. Deren Inhalte sind nicht bloß die unerschienenen, sondern die unentschiedenen, sie dämmern in bloßer realer Möglichkeit, haben die Gefahr des möglichen Unheils in sich, aber auch die Hoffnung des möglichen, noch immer nicht vereitelten, durch Menschen entscheidbaren Glücks” (Bloch 1973: 728).

Abstract

Contrasting images, arising from disparate, if not opposed, diagnoses disseminated over the last two centuries by representatives of different sectors of Brazilian society, raise the question of how the “imperial mode of living” manifests itself in Brazil. The imperial mode of living approach can be considered a construct that proposes to explain everyday life as being conditioned by the social relations prevailing under the dominance of neoliberal globalization, including the relations between society and environment. The main purpose of this article is to mobilize evidence and offer a plausible answer to that question. The analysis of the historical process of formation and of the socio-spatial contradictions of Brazilian development suggests that, from the perspective of the ruling classes, and of a considerable part of the intelligentsia and even of the progressive political forces, the vision of the future of Brazil seems to converge with the premises of the “imperial mode of living”. From the perspective of the subalternized classes, the options indicate autonomy, social self-regulation and social self-determination – which point to the authentic Novum.

Zusammenfassung

Gegensätzliche Bilder, die sich aus unterschiedlichen, wenn nicht gar gegensätzlichen Diagnosen ergeben, die in den letzten zwei Jahrhunderten von Vertretern verschiedener Sektoren der brasilianischen Gesellschaft verbreitet wurden, werfen die Frage auf, wie sich die „imperiale Lebensweise“ in Brasilien manifestiert. Der Ansatz der „imperialen Lebensweise“ kann als ein Konstrukt betrachtet werden, das vorschlägt, das tägliche Leben als durch die vorherrschenden sozialen Beziehungen unter der Herrschaft der neoliberalen Globalisierung bedingt zu erklären, einschließlich der Beziehungen zwischen Gesellschaft und Umwelt. Das Hauptziel dieses Artikels ist es, Beweise zu mobilisieren und eine plausible Antwort auf diese Frage zu geben. Die Analyse des historischen Entstehungsprozesses und der sozialräumlichen Widersprüche der brasilianischen Entwicklung legt nahe, dass aus der Sicht der herrschenden Klassen, eines beträchtlichen Teils der Intelligenz und sogar der progressiven

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politischen Kräfte die Vision der Zukunft Brasiliens mit den Prämissen der „imperialen Lebensweise“ übereinzustimmen scheint. Aus der Perspektive der subalternisierten Klassen hingegen verweisen die Optionen auf Autonomie, soziale Selbstregulierung und soziale Selbstbestimmung – und damit auf das authentische Novum.

Keywords Brazil, imperial mode of living, peripheral social formation, regional development

1. Introduction

For a long time Brazil – here meaning its people, culture and nature – has been quite appreciated by non-Brazilians. But, since the early 1940s, this optimistic view has been reinforced by the very favourable impression that emerges from *Brasilien: Ein Land der Zukunft*, by the Austrian *Stefan Zweig* (1941). Such optimism would certainly please the ruling classes of any country. *Zweig*, however, professed it barely five years after his arrival in Brazil. At the beginning of the year following the publication of *Brasilien...*, he committed suicide.

In opposition to such favourable views, some of the interpreters of the so-called Brazilian Social Thought (BST), in particular Manoel Bomfim, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Caio Prado Júnior, pointed out problematic aspects of the formation of Brazil – which would have repercussions on its later development. Despite a certain optimism that animated Brazilians in the second half of the 1950s, there was a feeling that Brazil would need to face some challenges, especially that of underdevelopment, with serious consequences in terms of interregional disparities (*Furtado* [1958] 2012). Thus, also the ruling classes began to concede that there was a considerable distance between the *de facto* Brazil and a potential Brazil. However, their diagnosis of the country differed completely from the picture outlined by the BST interpreters. *Darcy Ribeiro*, a well known anthropologist and also an important interpreter of the BST, rescued, with his characteristic sarcasm, the prediction of the Brazilian ruling classes:

[...] besides being a mestizo people – and therefore inferior and unfit for progress – we are also a tropical people. And tropical does not work! Civilisation in the tropics is no good! Tropical is too much. But that is not all. Besides being mestizo and tropical, [...] there was the reason we were Catholic, of a baroque Catholicism. A backward, extravagant thing, of praying in Latin and confessing in Portuguese.

For on top of all that [...] there were other forces, even worse, among them, our Portuguese ancestry. Do you see how unlucky we are? Instead of English grandparents, Dutch, good people, Portuguese... Lusitanians! It was obvious that this country could not go forward [...] that this nation was really doomed: mestizos, tropicals, Catholics and Lusitanians is too much (*Ribeiro* 1978: 11)¹.

These contrasting images, arising from disparate, if not completely opposite, diagnoses disseminated over the last two centuries – on 7 September 2022, Brazil (or a part of it) will “commemorate” the 200 years of its political independence – by representatives of different sectors of Brazilian society, raise the question that matters here: how does the “imperial mode of living” (IML) manifest itself in Brazil? The purpose to be pursued in the following pages is to mobilize evidence and thus offer a plausible answer. In any case, from the perspective of the ruling classes, and of a considerable part of the intelligentsia and the progressive political forces, the vision of the future of Brazil seems to converge with the premises of the “imperial mode of living”. But what about the perspective of the subalternized classes?

The following sections will seek, on the basis of available evidence, to explore these issues analytically. In the second, following this introduction, we will attempt to sketch a brief picture of the (unequal) historical-geographical formation of Brazil, taking, as much as possible, the premises of the IML approach as background; in the third, we will attempt to examine what appear to be contradictions of unequal regional development in Brazil. Finally, the fourth and last section outlines some conclusions and perspectives.

2. Uneven development and the imperial mode of living in Brazil

How does the “imperial mode of living” manifest itself in a semi-peripheral social formation such as Brazil? The IML can be considered a construct that propos-

es to explain everyday life as being conditioned by prevailing social relations under the domination of neoliberal globalisation, including relations between society and the environment. It reproduces itself between social formations (core-core, core-peripheral, peripheral-peripheral), between regions and cities, between city and countryside, between gender and race, between society and nature, and between social classes. But the emphasis given to the relations between the Global North and the Global South deserves special attention. Indeed, the argument, echoing dependentist theses, rests on the explicit consideration that the (societies of) core social formations – and increasingly also semi-peripheral social formations such as China, India and Brazil – enjoy better living conditions (i.e. higher standards of production and consumption) as a result of the exploitation of labour power and nature in peripheral social formations, therefore, as a consequence of inequalities on an international scale, whose reproduction is functional to the hegemony of the IML (*Brand and Wissen 2017: 43, 61; Wissen and Brand 2017*).

Like other semi-peripheral social formations, Brazil is inserted, to a considerable degree, but contradictorily, in a broader context – the world economy – in which the dominance of the IML can be admitted, that is, in which characteristics such as those mentioned can be identified. However, what Brazil has become results from a complex historical process, marked by a geographically uneven development (*Wissen and Naumann 2008; Smith 1986; Theis 2009*), whose most significant features can be presented here only in a stylised form.

Literature tends to converge on a point in time when this process was triggered: it is the instant when the Portuguese reached the coast of Bahia. Needless to recall that this moment coincides with the interruption of the flourishing of numerous peoples, until then closely bound to the land (*Ribeiro 1995; Theis 2021*). On the basis of political-institutional criteria, we can distinguish: a colonial period (1500-1822), an “imperial” period (1822-1889) and the First Republic (1889-1930). The period from 1930 to the present has been characterised by political-economic criteria, its beginning corresponding to the process of import substituting industrialisation and the most recent stage to the dominance of finance capital. Geographical aspects will be examined in the following section.

A. During the colonial period, from 1530 onwards,

Portugal began to exploit sugar farming. With the production of sugarcane under a large property regime – *Celso Furtado (1977: 12)* will speak of “the success of the great agricultural enterprise of the 16th century, unique at the time” –, the Portuguese would consolidate their presence in the colony. As of the mid 17th century, with the crisis in the sugar economy (due to Dutch competition), a new source of wealth would come on the scene: gold, found in Minas Gerais in 1698. The peak of its exploitation would be reached around 1760, and from then on its production would decrease until it became insignificant. In brief: “the sense of the Brazilian colonization [...] [was] that of a colony destined to supply the European commerce with some tropical or mineral commodities of great importance: sugar, cotton, gold” (*Prado Jr. 1961: 113*).

B. What changes will follow from the political rupture in 1822? Two are of greater relevance: the formation of an “independent national state” and the “expansion of the competitive social order” (*Fernandes 1975: 155-156*). However, neither one nor the other would lead to the breaking of the Brazilian economy’s ties of subordination to the world economy. As of 1830, coffee would become the main export product of the then young independent nation. With the advent of the coffee economy, a “new entrepreneurial class” would emerge (*Furtado 1977*) – which, perhaps unwittingly, would contribute both to the abolition of slavery in 1888 and to the coup that resulted in the Republic in 1889. In short: the modifications in favor of greater economic autonomy and better life conditions for the Brazilian women and men who did not belong to the ruling classes were few.

C. The four decades that comprise the First Republic, inaugurated by the late generalisation of wage employment in Brazil, did little to change the reality of people of African descent. On the one hand, the policy of whitening the workforce, made possible by European immigration, led to the social marginalisation of the recently freed; on the other hand, the advent of the Republic was nothing more than a formality, since not only African descendants were excluded from the relevant political decisions, but also indigenous peoples, women and non-property owners (*Theis 2020*). Despite the advancement of industry in the early decades of the 20th century – the number of workers jumped from 150,800 in 1907 to 275,500 in 1920 (*Prado Jr. 1981: 270*) –, the economy (and politics) was still in the hands of the “coffee lords”. But the advance of the productive forces of capital would receive a de-

cisive impulse from both the crash of the New York Stock Exchange and the “Revolution of 1930”.

D1. Textile production began in what is now the Northeast region² in the first half of the 19th century. However, as a process linked to the expansion of the domestic market, Brazilian industrialisation would only gain strength after the 1930s. With the crisis resulting from the 1929 Crash – that is, with the sudden reduction of hard currency income due to the fall in coffee exports – there was a considerable decrease in imports. A set of activities aimed at substituting the goods previously imported would finally lead to the “emergence of a system whose main dynamic centre [was] the domestic market” (Furtado 1977: 233). Getúlio Vargas’ ascension to the presidency at that same time would be providential: during his first long mandate, important instruments were created to regulate capital-labour relations (see Table 1). This provided, so to speak, the conditions for the advance of the productive forces of capital in Brazil (Demier 2013).

Table 1 Regulatory instruments of capital-labour relations in Brazil, 1930-1943. Source: own elaboration

Regulatory instruments	Year
Ministry of Labour	1930
Eight-hour day for workers in industry and commerce	1932
Employment record booklet	1932
Right to holidays	1933/1934
Minimum wage	1940
Consolidation of Labour Laws	1943
Labor justice	1943

D2. From the mid-1950s onwards, the Brazilian economy received a new impulse from the strong role played by the State in the provision of capital goods and the growing presence of foreign capital in the production of durable consumer goods – the establishment of multinational car manufacturers dates from this period. It seemed to be the best recipe for overcoming underdevelopment, in a context where a certain optimism prevailed. The civil-military coup of 1964 interrupted the virtuous developmental cycle, making room for financial capital (Tavares 1983). It is true that, in the midst of state authoritarianism and the tri-championship won by the Brazilian national football team in 1970, there was a boom – that the “regime” hastened to celebrate as “economic miracle”. However, this miracle was, to a considerable extent,

financed by loans that would result in a heavy foreign debt, corrected by high interest rates from the end of the 1970s on (Furtado 1982). Despite its apparent solidity, the “regime” – weakened by its economic failures, by the progressive concentration of wealth and by an increasingly audacious civil society claiming for democracy – would end up melting in the air.

D3. From the mid-1980s onwards, with the slow and secure transition offered by the managers of the authoritarian state, to the point where the media-parliamentary-legal-classist coup of 2016 took place (Bastos 2017; Zibechi 2020), lasted what has been called the “New Republic”. In this period, capital seemed to have adjusted to the conditions of a semi-peripheral social formation. In particular, from 2003 to the mid-2010s, it seemed finally possible that the process of capital accumulation could occur in a framework not only of progressive expansion of individual and collective freedoms, but also of reduction of misery and poverty and, therefore, of the brutal social inequalities that have marked Brazil throughout (almost all) its history (Salata 2016). However, instead of living with democracy and low levels of inequality, the ruling classes revealed their unequivocal authoritarian vocation. There should be no doubt that the Temer (2016-2018) and Bolsonaro (2019-?) governments faithfully express their undisguised preferences.

Thus, in view of what has been succinctly presented of its historical process of formation, we can proceed to an initial approximation in relation to the question of how the IML has manifested itself in Brazil. And the approach under consideration allows us to infer: first, that its integration into the modern world economy occurs in a contradictory way, highlighting a bias of passivity and subordination of Brazil in relation to the whole – which, in fact, characterises it as *Schwellenland*, as a semi-peripheral social formation³; and, second, that its development – in other words: its socioeconomic and political-institutional dynamics –, with unequivocal repercussions on its territory, is uneven (Theis 2020; Gomes Jr. et al. 2018). The following section will seek to explore some of the socio-spatial contradictions of Brazilian development in the light of three specific cases.

3. Socio-spatial contradictions of the Brazilian development

Abstracting the risks involved in any attempt to delimit times and spaces, it will be considered here that each of the four periods of Brazil's formation summarized above corresponds to specific socioeconomic and political-institutional dynamics, with their respective historical-geographical configurations. The hypothesis we have been working with – and which seems consistent with an argument centred on the IML approach – is that the Brazilian territory has been fragmented into regions functional to the perpetuation of a socioeconomically unequal and environmentally predatory development. In other words, Brazil has been geographically disorganised into regions, into socially unequal spaces, which are connected to each other as a result of decisions that escape the needs and interests of the subalternised classes. The region initially responsible for producing the wealth that would enable the Portuguese to establish their control over the colony was the Northeast. However, with the entrance of sugar from the Antilles into the European market, it lost its dynamism. The consequent displacement of resources to the region where the gold and diamond mines were located represented, simultaneously, a weakening of the old sugar cane region and the rise of the centre-south of the country as a more dynamic economic space (Prado Jr. 1961). The economic relevance of this region would be consolidated with the emergence of coffee as the main source of foreign currency for the country. As, in the first decades of the 19th century, sugar and gold would contribute less and less to the creation of value, the slaves mobilized in these activities would end up being diverted “to the more prosperous regions”, that is, “the labor force in the North would begin to flow to the South” (Prado Jr. 1981: 174).

The suspension of the slave trade, in the middle of the 19th century, would have repercussions on the economic geography of the young independent nation. In other words: the previously abundant labor force would become scarce. The growing need for labour – both from the coffee economy and from other activities, especially in rural areas, but also increasingly in the cities – could not be met by the influx of Africans, so an explicit policy was adopted to encourage the entry of European settlers (Lambert 1957).

From the perspective of inter-regional relations, the Brazilian territory would soon be fragmented into

regions that did not communicate with each other – although they did connect with important ports in Africa and Europe, especially Lisbon. It is a fact that the physical conditions did not provide connections between the various settlements until the end of the colonial period. However, the means of transport were restricted, until the 19th century, to navigation. In fact, during the latter, the cabotage route would once again become the main means of articulation of the Brazilian territory. It was a regression to the primitive system of the beginning of colonization: the maritime modal, which articulated the penetration routes perpendicular to the coast. Thus, the regions were connected to the “outside”, but remained to a considerable extent disconnected from each other (Prado Jr. 1961: 263).

In the most remote past, the agents who exerted the greatest influence on the socioeconomic and political-institutional dynamics in Brazil and, by extension, on land-use planning, were the Portuguese. During the “imperial period”, decision-making power in the economic and political spheres would be progressively concentrated in the hands of coffee producers. In the second half of the 20th century an increasingly influential group of industrial entrepreneurs would establish themselves. And in the last decades, the group of bankers and financiers has been gaining immeasurable power. Thus, while in the first three centuries decisions concerning the organisation of the territory were taken from Lisbon, in the last two centuries their epicentre has shifted to the centre-south of Brazil, first to Rio de Janeiro, then to São Paulo.

It should not be surprising, however, that the ruling classes have been disorganizing the Brazilian territory according to their interests, located not in the country, but elsewhere. They are, so to speak, minority partners in businesses that are subsidiary to productive activities controlled from the core social formations, businesses that project Brazil as a minor appendix to the world economy⁴. Three cases can illustrate the hypothesis formulated at the beginning of this section: the devastation of the forest combined with aggression against the indigenous population, in the Amazon; the soybean complex, in the Midwest; and mining, in Minas Gerais.

With regard to Amazonia, it should be remembered that the advance of the productive forces of capital implies a continuous incorporation of new spaces in which non-capitalist economic forms subsist⁵. Capital

has evidently been governing social relations (and between society and nature) in the Brazilian Amazon for more than a century. Although there were previous attempts to introduce market-oriented activities, rubber would become the first product with which Amazonia would be inserted in the world market. The so-called “rubber cycle” had its peak in the three decades between 1879 and 1912. During this period, Brazil became the world’s largest producer and exporter of this commodity – in 1910, it exported more than 40,000 tons of the product (D’Agostini et al. 2013). Since then, the delicate Amazon biome, which comprises 6.9 million km² spread over nine different countries, has been the scene of increasingly pernicious interventions. Given the dynamism of Brazilian capitalism, the damaging “regional development strategies” adopted by Brazil (although not only by it) stand out – remembering that Brazil is home to 4.2 million km², i.e. 60%, of the Amazon biome.

The “development” of the Brazilian Amazon received a strong boost in the 1960s/1970s, with emphasis on infrastructure – such as the BR-230 highway, known as *Rodovia Transamazônica* – which enabled the implementation of the “large projects” of the 1980s, especially the *Projeto Grande Carajás* (Becker 1988). The consequences of these initiatives were tragic, not only due to the devastation of the ecosystems encompassed by the rainforest, but also to the degradation of the indigenous living spaces (Kohlhepp 1989; 1991).

As of the 1990s, these trends intensified, especially with a more strategic presence of the state in mobilizing resources, with the participation of private capital, to expand infrastructure in the region. As a

result, new possibilities for diversifying productive activity in the region and, in some cases, expanding the scale of previously existing activities have opened up (Becker 2003). Among those that have advanced significantly in the Amazon biome, mining, soybean cultivation and cattle farming stand out (see Table 2).

The advance of these and other activities in the Amazon biome can be measured by the processes of deforestation and environmental degradation – only between August and December 2020, 4,367 km² were deforested (especially in the state of Pará) and 7,663 km² were degraded (IMAZON 2021) – and by the violence perpetrated against indigenous communities – only in 2020, 182 indigenous people were murdered, with another 110 having committed suicide (CIMI 2021). In brief: these are some of the ways in which the “regional development strategies” have manifested themselves in the Brazilian Amazon (Lima et al. 2020). The counterpart of the economic boom, made possible by State action through the provision of infrastructure, and by the protagonism of private capital, which progressively incorporates new non-capitalist spaces into its domains, has been the destruction of the rainforest, with serious risks to its rich biodiversity, and the degradation of the physical (with constant threats to life) and cultural conditions of indigenous peoples, peasants and the poor population of the region (Paula 2013).

With regard to the soybean complex, it is concentrated in the Midwest of Brazil, was formed as a result of the possibilities opened up by the world market and is based both on the exploitation of poorly paid labour and on the predatory use of common resources.

Table 2 Activities that have driven regional development in the Brazilian Amazon. Source: own elaboration based mainly on APIB (2022) for mining, Mendonça (2020) for soybean cultivation and Caramel (2022) for cattle farming

Activity	Main characteristics
Mining	Mining, especially for gold and iron ore, occurs in Pará. If one considers garimpo ⁶ and industrial mining, 72.5% of all national mining is concentrated in this important state of the Brazilian Amazon. It is worth remembering that Brazil’s production in 2021 was over one billion tons. In contrast, deforestation, with all its severe implications and, above all, threats to indigenous lands and lives, are increasing.
Soybean cultivation	Brazil is the world’s largest producer of soybeans, an economic activity that has also found fertile ground in the Brazilian Amazon. As in other parts of the country, it has advanced in areas of illegal deforestation, growing its cultivation at the price of non-compliance with norms of conservation of Permanent Preservation Areas and maintenance of legal reserves.
Cattle farming	In the recent period, cattle ranching may be one of the main sources of destruction of the rainforest and of threats to ecosystems and indigenous populations in the region. The pasture area has reached 20 million hectares in the Brazilian Amazon, contributing to expand the space for an increasingly larger cattle herd, which is expected to reach 200 million heads in a short time.

It contributes greatly to agribusiness and generates spectacular gains for the new regional elites, but favours the concentration of wealth and environmental degradation.

The socioeconomic dynamics, which include major quantitative and qualitative changes, not only in productive activity (considered here above all soybean agriculture, although cattle farming has an equally leading position), but also in the urbanization process, have raised the Midwest to a condition of prominence in demographic and economic terms. Evidence shows that the regional population grew, in relation to the Brazilian population, from 2.9% in 1950 to 7.4% in 2010. This means that, while the Brazilian population grew 3.6 times in this 60-year period, the population of the Midwest – which includes the states of Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Goiás and the Federal District/Brasília – grew 9.1 times (*IBGE* various years). The growing offer of labor force, propitiated by internal migrations, has favored agribusiness and, thus, boosted the region's economic dynamism. The result is that the regional GDP (i.e. Midwest GDP in relation to Brazil's GDP) went from 6.1% in 1991 to 10.3% in 2017 (*IPEA* various years).

The state of Mato Grosso offers interesting evidence of how regional agribusiness has advanced, especially from 1980 onwards, with the use of *highly modernised agriculture* and an orientation of regional agricultural production (mainly soybeans) towards globalised markets. It is the result of a combination of huge land surfaces, large volumes of private capital (with credit being offered by state banks), sophisticated production systems (e.g. with the use of transgenic seeds) and very advanced technologies. This soybean agribusiness model can be identified “in a large part of the BR-163 area of influence (municipalities of Nova Mutum, Lucas do Rio Verde, and Sorriso)” (*Coy* 2020: 20). However, it could only be established as a result of typical processes of primitive accumulation, i.e. of the displacement of peasants from the lands they occupied for their own subsistence, resulting in a progressive land concentration that would benefit the businesses of the new regional elites.

If, from the economic point of view, it is a successful story, the social and environmental implications of soybean production are nefarious. As to environmental effects, there is mainly deforestation, soil erosion, and deterioration of water resources – which can be seen as results of *neoliberalization of nature*. As to so-

cial effects, there is the progressive “dispossession” of peasants, growing social inequalities and precarious living conditions (e.g. housing). The geographic implications of soy agribusiness are revealed in the asymmetric relations not only between workers and entrepreneurs (who live not merely in different neighbourhoods, as well as in different cities), but also between the regional sphere of soybean production and the international sphere of its commercialization/realization (*Coy et al.* 2021: 9).

At last the soybean complex in the Midwest can be considered a success story of Brazil's dynamic agribusiness. Based on the use of advanced technologies and the large scale of production and commercialisation, it faithfully characterises the contradictions of ultraliberal capitalism: while it willingly avails itself of the benefits of the visible hand of the state in the domestic sphere, it submits to the conditions of fierce competition posed by the world market; while it accumulates extraordinary economic results, it is not shy about its corollary of social exclusion and destruction of nature (*Aguilar* 2021; *Coy and Huber* 2020).

With regard to mining, its importance for Brazil is not small, to the extent that it contributes 4% to the country's GDP. However, for some Brazilian states, this importance is relatively greater, as in the cases of Pará, seen above, and Minas Gerais. In the latter, the participation of mining reaches 8% of the GDP. More than 50% of the Brazilian production of metallic minerals is concentrated there – such as iron ore, niobium (75% of world production), tantalum (world's largest producer), as well as zinc and lithium. The dependence of Minas Gerais in relation to mining can be measured by the number of municipalities involved: 482, i.e. 56% of the total of 853 municipalities in that state (*Vasconcelos* 2022).

It should not be surprising that, in activities that provide immense economic gains, large private companies, Brazilian and foreign, are active. The biggest of them all is Vale S.A., formerly *Companhia Vale do Rio Doce*, founded in 1942 by the Getúlio Vargas government and privatised in 1997. It is the largest iron ore producer in the world. One of the biggest Brazilian multinationals, its power is enormous. It employs 55,000 workers and invoices more than US\$36 billion/year (*Gortázar* 2019).

If, however, the state of Minas Gerais – or rather: the shareholders of the mining companies – extracts

enormous economic benefits from mining production, it also reaps a considerable collection of damages. The victims have been human beings, those who work in mining and those who live around the mines. And non-human nature (water, vegetation and fauna) does not escape unscathed from it. The first tragedies associated with mining activity, with high human and environmental costs, date back to the second half of the nineteenth century – and have been ongoing until recent years (*Trocate and Coelho 2020*).

In the last quarter century there were at least nine socio-environmental disasters in Minas Gerais involving mining dams, including those of Mariana in 2015 and Brumadinho in 2019 (*Estronioli et al. 2022*). The Mariana disaster, product of the rupture of a tailings dam (Fundão), occurred on 5 November 2015. As a result, approximately 50 million cubic meters of mining debris were released, which reached the *Rio Doce* and travelled about 600 km to the coast of the neighbouring state of Espírito Santo. As a result of the collapse, 19 people died immediately. Other damage included the destruction of hundreds of dwellings, the devastation of flora and fauna and the degradation of water, putting at risk the supply of communities in the affected region (*Zhoury et al. 2016: 36; Teixeira 2019: 212-213*). The Brumadinho Dam I disaster, which occurred on 25 January 2019, was even more serious: an avalanche of ore waste killed 235 people. 100 days later, another 35 people were still missing (*Gortázar 2019*). As in previous cases, not only were human lives lost, but also the homes of the survivors were damaged and the environment of the region was degraded.

Whose property is the Fundão Dam in Mariana, where the 2015 disaster occurred? It belongs to Samarco Mineração S.A., whose capital is jointly controlled by Vale S.A. and BHP Billiton Brasil Ltda (*Zhoury et al. 2016: 36*). What about the Brumadinho I Dam? Coincidentally, it is also owned by Vale S.A.

There have been several explanations for the occurrence of so many and such serious socio-environmental disasters arising from mineral exploitation in Minas Gerais and Brazil (*Castro and Carmo 2019*). However, it seems reasonable to consider that:

[...] the problem of mining activity is [...] complex. There are hundreds of dams, pipelines, waste rock dumps, mines, power plants, railways, ports and other infrastructures with harmful effects on workers and populations. The key to under-

standing this structure that generates waste and deaths lies in the institutional and economic apparatus that organizes mining activity in Brazil (*Trocate and Coelho 2020: 97*).

Just as in the case of the activities that had driven regional development in the Brazilian Amazon and the soybean complex in the Midwest, mining activity in Minas Gerais is also a case of economic success, supported by generous government policies and integrated into ultra-competitive markets, which ensures extraordinary gains for shareholders of mining companies, but at the price of social exclusion and environmental destruction.

Considering what was briefly presented above in relation to the historical-geographical configurations corresponding to the different socio-economic and political-institutional dynamics in its formation process, one can proceed to a new approach to the question of how the IML has manifested itself in Brazil. From this perspective, one can infer, in the light of the three cases mentioned, that what we have called here the socio-spatial contradictions of Brazilian development rest on asymmetrical relations between the regional and international/global scales. On the one hand, there is a conformation of Brazilian private capital in relation to the world market, that is, to the competitiveness requirements of exported products; on the other hand, however, Brazilian private capital is internationally competitive because, with the help of the state, it disposes of abundant and cheap labour force and has unrestricted access to common resources – a clear indication of how IML is present in Brazil (*Brand and Wissen 2017*).

4. Conclusion and outlook

The analysis of the historical formation process and the socio-spatial contradictions of Brazilian development should allow some more general inferences to be drawn from the evidence mobilised in the two previous sections.

In Brazil, as well as in other semi-peripheral and peripheral social formations, regional development has been limited to GDP growth on a regional scale. One initial aspect is that, given the precedence of the economic dimension, little or no attention is paid to other equally relevant dimensions. Another aspect, even more crucial, is that, for common sense, eco-

conomic growth has been taken as a *conditio sine qua non* for the achievement of non-economic (social, environmental etc.) objectives. Perhaps it should be remembered that, in a commodity-producing society, the development of the productive forces constitutes the universal tendency of capital⁷. It is not a question, therefore, of defining another rhythm and another direction for the accumulation of capital, since it is a socially uncontrollable process. However, even if this alternative were really on the horizon, considering another direction for the process of capital accumulation, aiming at non-economic objectives, such as the reduction of inequalities and environmental preservation, is a *contradictio in terminis*: what leads to both inequalities and environmental degradation is precisely the process of capital accumulation. The “regional development strategies” adopted in Brazil and in other semi-peripheral and peripheral social formations are therefore part of the problem, not of some solution.

As seen in the preceding section, in the light of three concrete situations, there have been numerous threats to the integrity of human beings who, in general, live in communities and/or are part of social vulnerable groups, including native peoples and Afro-descendants, but also peasants and poor people in the peripheries of medium-sized and large Brazilian cities. They are the subalternised classes. They are, without knowing it, the victims of the commodity-producing society in full activity in Brazil. When they do not join the ranks of the reserve army – unemployment reached about 13.5 million people by the end of 2021 – they work, in increasingly precarious conditions and for wages that since 2016 have been adjusted below inflation, to enrich the richest. But there have also been countless fronts of threats to the nature found on Brazilian territory, i.e. to the soil and subsoil, to the very rich vegetation that includes the tropical rainforest in the north and araucaria forests in the south, to watersheds, rivers and water resources in urban areas and in the countryside, to air quality due to pollution from *queimadas* in the inland and from cars in the urban environment. The aggressions against the environment have their unequivocal origin in the uninterrupted process of capital accumulation, which also deprives more and more human beings of their means of living.

As a synthesis of a process of capital accumulation that is not oriented toward the production of use values, but toward the continuous overcoming of its *Aus-*

gangspunkt, and thus produces wealth at the price of the integrity of women and men, as well as the preservation of the natural physical environment, there is its concrete expression in geographic space. Taking Brazil as reference, one tends to naturalise the fact that, with an area of 8,515,767 km², it is the fifth largest nation-state on the planet. Among the inhabitable terrestrial surfaces, its geographical dimension is considered, above all by the Brazilian ruling classes, as a privileged space for the reproduction of capital through the exploitation of its labour force and common resources⁸. Internally, however, the organization of the territory clashes with the way Brazil inserts itself into the world market: since its occupation by the Portuguese, the regions are *loci* of wealth creation that can be traded with external agents. The borders of the regions have been defined by conditions (that the spaces delimited by them meet) to produce goods destined for the world market. Hence, the result is a territory geographically fragmented into regions that continuously reproduce a socioeconomically unequal and environmentally predatory development (*Theis* 2019).

But there is also politics, i.e., an institutionality in which conflicts are manifested and resolved (or not). The political forces currently at the head of the Brazilian State have been correctly identified as backward and conservative (*El País Brasil* 2021). With regard to the indigenous peoples of the Brazilian Amazon, for example, there have been complaints that the current government has contributed to weakening their protection, usurping their lands and denying their right to consultation on projects in the areas they inhabit (*Ferrante and Fearnside* 2021). In short: both the subalternised classes and the natural environment have been despised by the public policies of the current government. But, perhaps it is convenient to remember that, although the commitment of the progressive forces – which governed Brazil between 2003 and 2016 – to democratic values and respect for political institutions is undoubted, the public policies then adopted privileged, without questioning, economic growth, conventional regional development strategies, and exploitation and exportation of natural resources⁹. It seems, therefore, that to a considerable extent the IML approach allows for a convincing explanation of the trajectory of Brazil's uneven development. There are, nevertheless, subtle aspects that challenge the approach when one moves to consider options in relation to the diagnosis, when one intends to jump from the existing reality to alternatives. Thus, it should be noted that if the existing real is un-

derstood on the basis of structures, the analysis is closed. If one considers the shareholders of mining companies in Minas Gerais and the regional elites who control the soybean complex in Mato Grosso, on the one hand, and indigenous peoples and communities of African descent, on the other, as agents involved in regional development strategies, or even as actors disputing the direction to be given to *development*, the analysis is closed. Also when nation-states are taken as references to analyse neoliberal globalisation, the analysis is closed. And it also is closed if centrality is given to the state, generally considered *the* structure that, if governed by progressive forces, can favour a socially more just and environmentally more sustainable development. So it is right that the state does not constitute the opposite pole of capital (Brand and Wissen 2017). But, in fact, it integrates the capital-relationship. The hypothesis that the state can contribute to overcoming the tribulations of semi-peripheral social formations, if governed by progressive political forces, is misleading, as much as the hypothesis that capital can be controlled and put – by the state – at the service of the demands of the whole society. The analysis opens up if one considers that capital is a relation, i.e. the economic form of society – and the state its political form (Bonfeld 1992). And that what, since the 1980s, has amalgamated social formations on an international scale is not just neoliberal globalisation, but the old world market – certainly commanded by capital¹⁰.

That being said, there then remains, properly speaking, the point of a prospective nature: does Brazil still have a chance of becoming the “country of the future”? It should be remembered that *Stefan Zweig* was not the first to formulate a positive vision of the country¹¹ – nor should he be the last. Against favourable images, one could once again refer to the sarcastically negative interpretation of the vision of the Brazilian ruling classes, according to *Darcy Ribeiro*. However, what *Darcy Ribeiro*'s sarcasm cannot hide is his own unwavering faith in the future of Brazil – but, in another key: the viability of the country would be the product of the struggle of women and men, of the various races melting pot in its territory, belonging to the subalternized classes. The result of this struggle would convert the really existing Brazil into a *land without evil – terra sem males*. If, on the world scale, there are determinations which favour the reproduction of capital (a process), the social relations which take place on the national and subnational scales are conditioned, so to speak, by the corresponding deci-

sions of the personifications of capital (the economic form) and the managers of national states (the political form). Within the real existing, marked not by social contradictions but by social antagonism (Holloway 2002), it is up to the subalternized classes to finally brush history against their grain – “die Geschichte gegen den Strich [...] bürsten” (Benjamin 1991: 697). The diagnosis that emerges should exclude the alternatives that have kept the subalternized classes trapped in the existing reality. Hence, the options indicate autonomy (Dinerstein 2015; 2016), social self-regulation (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2012) and social self-determination (Holloway 2006) – which point to the authentic *Novum*.

Notes

- ¹ translated by the author as well as citations from *Furtado* 1977, *Prado Jr.* 1961 and 1981, *Fernandes* 1975, *Coy* 2020, *Trocate* and *Coelho* 2022 and *Contel* 2014.
- ² In 1969/1970, the “regionalization which [...], with some changes, [endures] to the present day, dividing Brazil into the current five Great Regions as we know them: North Region, Northeast Region, Southeast Region, South Region and Midwest Region” was adopted (Contel 2014: 8).
- ³ [...] “on a number of economic criteria (but not all), the semiperiphery represents a midway point on a continuum running from the core to the periphery. This is, in particular, true of the complexity of economic institutions, the degree of economic reward (both in terms of average level and range), and most of all in the form of labor control” (Wallerstein 1974: 102-103).
- ⁴ [...] “The situation of dependence and organic and functional subordination of the Brazilian economy in relation to the international group in which it participates is a fact linked to the roots of the country's formation [...] It will essentially be a colonial economy [...] as opposed to what we would call a national economy, which would be the organisation of production according to the needs of the population that participates in it” (Prado Jr. 1981: 270).
- ⁵ “Der Kapitalismus ist die erste Wirtschaftsform [...], die die Tendenz hat, sich auf dem Erdrund auszubreiten und alle anderen Wirtschaftsformen zu verdrängen, die keine andere neben sich duldet. Er ist aber zugleich die erste, die allein, ohne andere Wirtschaftsformen als ihr Milieu und ihren Nährboden, nicht zu existieren vermag” (Luxemburg [1913] 1990: 411). Brand and Wissen (2017: 15) recover this point when they observe that “Die imperiale Lebensweise [...] kann sich nur so lange erhalten, wie sie über ein Außen verfügt, auf das sie ihre Kosten verlagern kann”.
- ⁶ Garimpo is the activity (generally carried out for economic purposes) of extracting minerals (for example, gold or

diamonds), undertaken by individuals (*garimpeiros*, in general manually) and by mining companies (generally mechanized). Garimpo can also be the location where the activity takes place.

- ⁷ “Die universelle Tendenz des Kapitals erscheint hier [...]. Obgleich seiner Natur nach selbst borniert, strebt es nach universeller Entwicklung der Produktivkräfte und wird so die Voraussetzung neuer Produktionsweise, die gegründet ist nicht auf die Entwicklung der Produktivkräfte, um bestimmten Zustand zu reproduzieren und höchstens auszuweiten, sondern wo die – freie, ungehemmte, progressive und universelle Entwicklung der Produktivkräfte selbst die Voraussetzung der Gesellschaft und daher ihrer Reproduktion bildet; wo die einzige Voraussetzung das Hinausgehen über den Ausgangspunkt” (*Marx* [1857/1858] 1983: 445).
- ⁸ “The imperial mode of living implies the integration of places and territories into the capitalist world order and the commodification of their labour power and their natural resources” (*Brand and Wissen* in this number of *Die Erde*).
- ⁹ [...] [die] “sogenannten progressiven Regierungen in Lateinamerika [haben] bisher kaum Alternativen zum weltmarktorientierten Neoextraktivismus, also zur unbedingten Förderung von Rohstoffen und zur Anbau landwirtschaftlicher Produkte und ihrem Verkauf auf dem Weltmarkt, entwickelt” (*Brand and Wissen* 2017: 66).
- ¹⁰ “The world market is [...] not coterminus with the sum of the many national economies. Rather it comprises the relations of capitalist social reproduction within, between and beyond national borders” (*Bonefeld* 2014: 149).
- ¹¹ Heinrich Schüler, born in Germany, was the author of a book whose title was also *Brasilien: Ein Land der Zukunft*, which anticipated *Stefan Zweig’s* by almost three decades. Having obtained Brazilian citizenship, Schüler became Brazil’s consular representative in Bremen and deputy consul in Hamburg. Besides his optimistic vision of the country, he was an ardent defender of “Germanism” in Brazil (*Romão* 2020).

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