


The Insertion of Milton Santos' Geographic Space in the Althusserian Interpretation of the Social Whole: A Structure Like the Others?

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The Insertion of Milton Santos' Geographic Space in the Althusserian Interpretation of the Social Whole: A Structure Like the Others?

Abstract

The present article intends to investigate some of the possible theoretical approximations between Santos' propositions about geographic space and the Althusserian interpretation. Mainly, the discussion revolves around the following question: How far could one go by reading certain propositions by Milton Santos through the lens of structural Marxism? It is concluded that, as a necessary support for the historicization of social structures, space assumes unique importance for the analysis of reality through an Althusserian prism: its consideration suggests a forwarding of the contradiction between history and structure, allowing to contemplate the diachrony and contradiction present in each socio-spatial formation. Thus, just as the analysis of the Althusserian ballast of certain elaborations by Milton Santos helps to illuminate certain points of his work, Santos' work can also contribute largely to the theorizations of structural Marxism, highlighting the role of space in the construction of an analytical framework capable of unravelling the determinations of the present.

Keywords: geographic space, social structure, Milton Santos.

A inserção do espaço geográfico de Milton Santos na matriz althusseriana de interpretação da totalidade social: uma estrutura como as outras?

Resumo

O presente artigo pretende investigar algumas das aproximações teóricas possíveis entre proposições de Santos sobre o espaço geográfico e o esquema interpretativo althusseriano. Principalmente, a discussão gira em torno da seguinte questão: até onde se poderia chegar empreendendo uma leitura de certas proposições de Milton Santos pelas lentes do marxismo estrutural? Chega-se à conclusão de

que, como suporte necessário à historicização das estruturas sociais, o espaço assume importância ímpar para a análise da realidade: sua consideração sugere um encaminhamento da contradição entre história e estrutura, permitindo contemplar a diacronia e a contradição presentes em cada formação socioespacial. Destarte, assim como a análise do lastro althusseriano de certas elaborações de Milton Santos ajuda a iluminar certos pontos de sua obra, também a obra de Santos pode contribuir largamente com as teorizações do marxismo estrutural, ressaltando papel do espaço na construção de um arcabouço analítico capaz de desvendar as determinações do presente.

Palavras-chave: espaço geográfico, estrutura social, Milton Santos.

La inserción del espacio geográfico de Milton Santos en la matriz de interpretación althusseriana de la totalidad social: ¿una estructura como las demás?

Resumen

Este artículo pretende investigar algunas de las posibles afinidades teóricas entre las proposiciones de Santos sobre el espacio geográfico y el esquema interpretativo althusseriano. Principalmente, la discusión gira en torno a la siguiente pregunta: ¿hasta dónde se puede llegar al emprender una lectura de ciertas proposiciones de Milton Santos a través de la lente del marxismo estructural? Se llega a la conclusión de que, como soporte necesario para la historización de las estructuras sociales, el espacio adquiere una importancia única para el análisis de la realidad: su consideración sugiere abordar la contradicción entre historia y estructura, permitiendo la contemplación de la diacronía y contradicción presente en cada formación socioespacial. De esta forma, así como el análisis de la inspiración althusseriana de ciertas elaboraciones de Milton Santos ayuda a iluminar ciertos puntos de su obra, la obra de Santos también puede contribuir en gran medida a las teorizaciones del marxismo estructural, destacando el papel del espacio en la construcción de un marco analítico capaz de desentrañar las determinaciones del presente.

Palabras-clave: espacio geográfico, estructura social, Milton Santos.

Introduction

In a certain portion of Milton Santos' theoretical work – especially texts written between the mid-1970s and 1980s – there is a notable structuralist inspiration. Traces of structural Marxism, as noted by Moraes (2013), are especially noticeable. Terms such as *structure*, *system*, *variables*, and *elements* are not rare in works such as *Espaço e Método* (2008a) and even in the classic *For a New Geography* (2002a); reality is conceived as a structured whole, resulting from the interaction of a set of social structures, among which geographic space would appear. Perhaps it could even be said that this was the main (never the sole) theoretical framework used by the author, at the time, to philosophically sustain space as a category of analysis and a dimension of reality endowed with an active role – not a mere reflection, but a social structure like the others.

However, while the search for reaffirming space in critical social theory – to use Soja's (1993) expression – remains throughout Santos' theoretical production and bequeaths a methodological framework aimed at apprehending social reality starting from the space, Structuralism loses strength as a source of its philosophical support: in what is considered the great systematization of its theorization about space (Santos, 2002b), there is a perhaps more authorial terminology, in addition to a noticeable existentialism influence. It is worth noting, however, that it is not a matter of postulating the existence of an *epistemological cut* in Milton Santos' intellectual trajectory, definitively separating the author of *For a New Geography* (2002a) from that of *The Nature of Space* (2002b; 2021a). In fact, we agree with those who emphasize continuities.

Also, this is not a matter of reducing this or that phase of his work, which is always profound and nuanced, to affiliate it with one theoretical current. As is known, his theoretical productions have usually resorted to different theoretical references, connected in a conscious and original way, in consonance with its characteristic and unique erudition. As summarized by Contel (2014), the richness and complexity of the authors worked by Santos make it unfeasible to define a theoretical school to which the author belongs; nonetheless, it is in *For a New Geography*, originally published in 1978, and in theoretical texts contemporary to this work, that the author incorporates more intensely discussions of Marxist authors. In this sense, it is worth noting that structural Marxism was particularly in vogue in the 1960s, when it experienced its “explosion” (Dosse, 1993). For much of this decade Santos was exiled in France – the cradle of Althusserianism – working at the universities of Toulouse, Bordeaux and Sorbonne (Contel, 2014), making it almost certain Pedrosa's hypothesis (2018, p. 437) according to which Santos would have already established contact with structural Marxism at this occasion. In addition, it is worth noting that the Althusserian ideas did not restrict themselves to the Francophone world: they were particularly well received in the American intellectual environment, which the Brazilian geographer frequented in the 1970s, when “he dedicates himself to the systematic study of Marxism, which leads to suppose an eventual deepening in Marxist structuralism” (Pedrosa, 2018, p. 437)¹. It is in this decade that Santos publishes the two main texts that will serve as the basis for our theoretical exercise: his classic text proposing the category of

¹ This and all non-English direct quotations in this text have been freely translated by the author.

socio-spatial formation, in an edition of *Antipode* from 1977, and the already mentioned (and also classic) book *For a New Geography*, in 1978, which perhaps can be considered the most complete representation of the author's intellectual project at that time.

As also pointed out by Contel (2014), it is possible to identify in *For a New Geography* a well-defined driving motive, in the name of which Santos mobilizes diverse references (among which are authors of structural Marxism): the search for defining the Geographical Space. The book is divided into three parts: the first one dedicated to making a balance of modern Geography, critically analyzing a series of different strands and schools of geographical thought, reaching the conclusion that Geography was "widowed from Space"; therefore, the second part of the book is dedicated precisely to defining the geographical Space. It is the part when the author more intensely and directly dialogues with structural Marxism, defining Space as a structure or social instance like the others commonly listed by this current of thought. Finally, in the third part some consequences of this definition of Space are drawn for the construction of a critical theoretical framework in Geography, an intention that will also mark later works by the author.

That said, we indicate that the reflection proposed here does not undertake an exhaustive reading of the work of Milton Santos, of part of it, or even of the book *For a New Geography*. Rather, the scope of the analysis undertaken here is restricted and well defined: If it is true that in part of the author's work there is a more intense dialogue with structural Marxism, there is an approximation worthy of further investigation and that is far from being exhausted, although it is not uncommon to be noticed and/or even discussed (Duncan; Ley, 1982; Grimm, 2011; Moraes, 1993; Moreira, 2015; Peet, 1998; Pedrosa, 2013; Silva; Voigt, 2021). Within this framework, the intention is precisely to highlight some of these possible points of contact. Furthermore, it is about opening a discussion about how the theory of space proposed by the author could be incorporated, at its limit, into the framework of structural Marxism. Thus, the guiding motive of the reflection is the following: *How far can one go by reading certain propositions by Milton Santos through the lens of structural Marxism?* The follow-up question is: *Can geographic space be considered social structure in Althusserian terms?*

Advancing the conclusion to which this article arrives, we understand that the theoretical edifice of structural Marxism is compatible with fundamental contributions by Milton Santos for thinking about geographic space. More than that: space as a dimension of social totality becomes fundamental in the apprehension of concrete reality and essential to overcome the abstract-formal level to which the discussion about social structures is bequeathed if these are not historicized. In this sense, space functions as a kind of necessary support for the historicization of structures, imposing conditions on structured social practices of the present through forms inherited from previous moments, so that taking it as such, as something other than structure, does not imply prejudice to the consideration of its active role – that is, the understanding that space is not a mere receptacle or reflection of social structures, playing instead an active role in the evolution of social dynamics (Santos, 2002a, p. 186). We hope to better clarify these indications throughout the exposition that follows.

For that, we took as a primary source the portion of Milton Santos' work in which the author most dialogues with the referred theoretical current. As Moraes (2013) observes, and

already mentioned here, these are method texts written between the late 1970s and early 1980s. More specifically, in addition to the materials already mentioned – the book *For a New Geography* (2002a; 2021b) and the article on the category of *social formation* (2005) – our analysis also went through the books *Espaço e Método* (Space and Method, in free translation) (2008a) and *Metamorfoses do Espaço Habitado* (Metamorphoses of the Inhabited Space, in free translation) (2008b). As for structural Marxism, we mainly use the assertive contributions of Saes (1998a; 2014; 2016) and Boito Jr. (2007; 2016) in addressing certain ambiguities contained in the original works of the Althusserian current.

The Althusserian Matrix of the Social Whole

First, we have to outline some of the points of the theoretical framework that lays the foundations for our enterprise. It can be said that the interpretative matrix of the social whole, according to the Althusserian current, corresponds to an *expanded perspective of the mode of production*. It is an expanded perspective because it is no longer restricted to the economy (the way of producing, *stricto sensu*) to also encompass politics and ideology (Boito Jr., 2016). In this sense, mode of production and social totality appear as synonyms, corresponding to a structured reality, in which “economy, politics and ideology are organic levels, or instances, articulated with each other according to specific laws” (Althusser, 2005, p. 24).

Thus, an important consequence of this conception is noted by Saes (2014, p. 3): the infrastructure/superstructure scheme – in which the second term would be determined by the first – “gives way to a plurality of structures, whose relationship is more complex than the one-sided relationship between bottom and top.” Or, with Dosse (1993, p. 339), it can be said that “Althusser replaces the mechanistic vulgate of the theory of reflex with a structured totality in which meaning is a function of the position of each of the instances of the mode of production.”

Milton Santos (2002a), in turn, seems to intend, in the second part of *For a New Geography*, precisely to elevate space to the category of social structure. Referring to those “who consider society as a system or a structure,” Marxist or non-Marxist, the author criticizes them for the general omission of space in the listing of the component instances of this structured totality (Santos, 2002a, p. 177). It is also worth mentioning that the author cites prominent authors linked to the Althusserian group, such as Charles Bettelheim and Marta Harnecker, precisely to point out their omission regarding space in the listing of social instances/structures (Santos, 2002a, p. 178-179).

Are these criticisms fair? We believe so, if inserted in the wake of criticism of the underestimation of geographic space by critical social theory (Soja, 1993). In other words: these authors, as in most of the Marxist heritage, do not have a detailed treatment of space as an active dimension of social reality, a problem that Milton Santos intends to address. However, should the inclusion of space in the Althusserian scheme be proposed taking it as a structure like the others? What are the consequences of taking it as a social structure? Are there ways to emphasize its active role as a dimension of social reality, within the interpretative matrix of structural Marxism, without considering it itself a social structure? These are the main guiding questions of this article, contemplated by the indication of the title: How far can one go by

reading Milton Santos through the lens of structural Marxism? In order to raise the bases of the attempt to answer the questions, it becomes central to define the concept of structure according to the theoretical current adopted here.

Beforehand, however, it is worth announcing our assumption: space could be considered a structure in the *general* sense of the term – that is, that sense common to all so-called structural approaches in human sciences, so that the consideration of space as a social structure, suggested by Santos (2002a), is adequate and consistent with its purposes. However, it does not exactly fit as a social structure in the *specific* terms of structural Marxism. It is worth mentioning that this understanding does not presuppose the indication of an alleged mistake in the author's work. This is because taking to the limit a theorization about space while maintaining strict fidelity to the Althusserian framework was not among his purposes. After all, verifying the existence of inspiration from structural Marxism in Santos' work does not imply that it is the only one, nor that it is absolute. Thus, our proposal remains a retrospective theoretical exercise, undertaken with the sole purpose of promoting theoretical debate and indicating possible approximations.

It is also worth mentioning that, as we understand it, the rejection of geographic space as a social structure does not imply annulment of the consideration of its active role, nor does it prevent taking it as a factor or social fact, which influences and conditions the actions and functioning of the structures themselves. On the contrary, as we try to demonstrate below, taking it as something different from structure precisely highlights innovative aspects contained in Milton Santos' formulations.

Social Structure: General and Specific Meaning

It is from the nineteenth century onwards that the concept starts to be incorporated into the social sciences, which happens through the work of authors as distinguished as Spencer, Marx, Durkheim and Radcliffe Brown (Dosse, 1993). With it, the concept of social structure

implies some underlying ideas, such as: totality, interdependence of parts, self-regulation and transformation. It would seem that this set of terms constitutes and brings together the various authors who discuss society as being determined by positive causes, external to individuals, human behavior being a result of laws of social processes (Minayo, 2001, p. 8).

In this same context, for Firth (1983, p. 35), social structure is “concerned with the ordered relations of parts to a whole; with the arrangement in which the elements of social life are linked together.” More than that, it would be “the analytical resource that serves to understand how men behave socially” (Firth, 1983, p. 36), referring to the general idea that social structure can be considered something that is imposed on individuals, conditioning their social practices.

At this more general level, we understand that geographic space could be sustained as a social structure – its functioning is conditioned to a totality and its constituent parts appear in an interconnected and interdependent manner. In this sense, an approach to space as a structured reality appears particularly clear in *Espaço e Método*. In it, space is described as a *system of systems, or system of structures*, and the various *elements* and *variables* whose interaction would result in socio-spatial dynamics are listed (Santos, 2008a).

Furthermore, and we understand this to be one of the objectives to which Milton Santos (2002a) dedicates the second part of his classic *For a New Geography*, space also assumes an *active role*, that is: like other social structures, geographic space also imposes itself on individuals in an inescapable way, contributing to actively shaping the course of society. In a well-known formulation: space is not a mere receptacle over which events unfold, but a *factor* or *social factor* that conditions actions. It is worth mentioning that we agree with Santos in what we believe to be one of the most successful proposals for the reaffirmation of space in critical social theory (Soja, 1993), which the author builds by raising geographic space to the status of philosophical category by way of considering it precisely a structure or social instance (the author seems to use the terms interchangeably).

However, if, on the one hand, the more general meaning of the term social structure allows us to encompass the geographic space (since it imposes itself on individuals and can be read as a structured reality), we understand that, in the *specific* sense of the term adopted by the Althusserian current, this association would appear as improper.

As has already been said in the previous section, the central aspect of the Althusserian contribution to the exercise undertaken here is the expanded perception of the mode of production, corresponding to a *structured social whole* – but what exactly are structures in this sense? To circumvent the long discussions about the concept of structure in the Althusserian texts of choice, since there is no consensual or absolute definition, we will make use of the careful interpretation of Saes (2014, p. 4), which provides a synthesis that seems right: For the author, a structure would consist of “the system of ideas that is imposed on practices of a certain type, framing and confining them within certain limits,” thus acting “as the ideological guide of a practice of a certain type, allowing its constant reproduction and ensuring its durability in historical time.”

Therefore, structures provide the fundamental basis of values that inform social practices. In another formulation, it can be said that the action of a given individual is conditioned by the values of the place occupied by them in a given set of social relations. This is the *thesis of social determination* (Boito Jr., 2016). At the same time, structure only exists in the practices of individuals who bear social relations. In this sense, *practices serve as support for structures*. Or, as stated by Motta (2014, p. 56), structures are structuring practices (in reproduction) while never ceasing to be structured by them (in transformation).

This leads to the famous thesis that history is a *process without a subject*. In addition to the uproar that the postulation caused in certain Marxist circles, it simply means that, in accordance with materialist Marx, the historical dynamic is given by imperatives that escape individuals – it is given first by the structures that inform the actions of agents collated as functional groups. In this sense, the thesis of structural determination appears mainly as an antidote to voluntarist conceptions that see individuals as endowed with full free will, immune to ideological sanctions that emerge as an effect of structures.

That said, we understand that giving emphasis to the structures that lay the foundations for the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production does not imply determinism or fatalism. Benton (1984, p. 214) proposes that structures should not be seen as something that is imposed

on men from the outside, but rather as something incorporated into the worldview of individuals. In this sense, we can refer to the notion of ideology. For Therborn (1987, p. 13), its function basically consists of “modeling the way in which human beings live their lives as conscious and reflective actors in a structured and meaningful world. Ideology functions as a discourse that is addressed, or, as Althusser said, questions human beings as subjects.” Following another caveat by Benton (1984, p. 214), it is worth saying that structures should not necessarily be seen as constraining individual possibilities of action, but also as providing possibilities for action. As an example, we can think of Boito Jr. (2016, p. 166), in which the legal and ideological relations of the capitalist mode of production can contribute to the organization of the struggle for claims of the working class. Thinking in these terms, the association of the structural explanation with determinism or fatalism is difficult to sustain (Benton, 1984, p. 214).

It is worth mentioning, albeit in passing, that Milton Santos (2002a, p. 95) seems to share with the Althusserians the thesis of structural determination: the author recalls that the very notion of organized society presupposes “the precedence of collective praxis, imposed by the structure of society and to which individual practices are subordinated.” For Santos (2002a, p. 96), space would also be “the result of a collective praxis that reproduces social relations.”

Conventional Matrix and Alternative Matrix

And what are these conditioning structures of social practices? How many are there? It is worth mentioning that the most common reading of the theoretical proposal of structural Marxism corresponds to a Trinitarian formula, comprising the *economic*, *juridical-political* and *ideological* structures (Harnecker, 1973). In addition, there would be a kind of ordering hierarchy of the relations between the structures: one of them (the economic) would be *determinant in the last resort*, insofar as it would grant the other structures their place in the matrix of the social whole, with one of them assuming the position of *overdeterminant* in a given mode of production (Motta, 2014). As you can see, it is a somewhat intricate discussion that restores a certain economism to new bases.

However, if this is the *official version* of the interpretative matrix of the social whole of this theoretical current, Saes (1998a) observes an alternative version, present mainly in the concrete research of the epigones of structural Marxism. In this alternative matrix, it is thought of a scheme of *reciprocal implication* between the structures, dispensing with the discussion of a supposed hierarchy or overdetermination: all are reciprocally conditioned, each maintaining its relative autonomy. From this reciprocal conditioning, the reproductive dynamics of a given mode of production would emerge.

Another implication of this alternative matrix is the exclusion of the ideological structure. As pointed out by Saes (1998a), ideology cannot be considered as a separate structure, like the others, as it is first and foremost an effect of the structures. After all, it has already been said that the effect of structures is to provide the base values that will guide the actions of agents in their practices. These base values are nothing but ideological. In this sense, Saes' caveat is in line with certain postulations of Althusser himself (2017, p. 58), for whom “ideology must be thought of as sliding into all the parts of the edifice, and and considered as a distinctive kind

of cement that assures the adjustment and cohesion of men in their roles, their functions and their social relations.”

That said, it remains that the aforementioned alternative matrix corresponds to a binary formula, comprising the economic and juridical-political structures, with ideology as a reflection of both on the practices of the support agents. In this sense, the capitalist economic structure, for example, conditions the economic practice of agents by imposing on those deprived of the means of production the need to submit to wages, while imposing on owners the yoke of intercapitalist competition and the imperatives of the law of valorization (Belluzzo, 1980; Rubin, 1980).

The juridico-political structure of capitalism, in turn, as pointed out by Poulantzas (2019), formally extends rights (in particular the right to property) to all individuals, treating unequals as equals and thus contributing to disintegrate the class identity of agents in the production process. At the same time, the bureaucratic organization of the state apparatus makes it appear *ideologically* as a neutral entity, representative of the interests of society as a whole, agglutinating around itself precisely the agents atomized by bourgeois law (Saes, 1998b; Boito Jr., 2019).

From this, the condition of interdependence and reciprocal conditioning between social structures is verified. The capitalist economic structure cannot resist without the ideological reinforcement arising from the “norms and values of the capitalist State [that] allow the incessant reproduction of the relatively peaceful insertion of workers in the capitalist production/exploitation process” (Boito Jr., 2019, p. 8). Inversely, the capitalist juridico-political structure also depends on the existence of a capitalist economic structure, having in the preservation of this its *raison d’être*, with the hegemonic agents of the capitalist economic structure being those in better conditions to exercise political power in favor of their interests.

There is still a final caveat here: certainly, the two structures comprised by the referred alternative matrix do not exhaust the dimensions of social reality. There are artistic, philosophical, scientific, religious practices, etc., that correspond to fundamental aspects of social life and are irreducible to economic or juridical-political structures. How to reconcile them to the scheme exposed here? Once again, we believe that Saes (2014, p. 6) provides a pertinent solution: the theoretical distinction between *structure* and *instance*. While the articulated structures provide the fundamental base of values that guarantee the reproduction of social life, the instances are configured and developed, as specific types of practices, precisely from this system of values established by the structures. That is, instances are fundamental aspects of social life, although tributaries of the basic system of values provided by the articulation of social structures. Thus, while Santos (2002a) uses the terms *structure* and *instance* interchangeably, as synonyms, we understand that distinguishing them is valid here: after all, we are here using an interpretive matrix of the social totality based on structural Marxism and this distinction (between structure and instance) does not harm the proposal, to be supported later, of inserting Space into this matrix using the category of *socio-spatial formation* and not from the concepts of structure and/or instance.

It is worth noting that in this text – by using the idea of an alternative matrix – we are mainly relying on an updated reading of the Althusserian current, which incorporates improvements and advances made by commentators and continuators of the work of the French philosopher and his group. These alternative and contemporary readings of structural Marxism were not,

naturally, available to Santos when he wrote his texts analysed here. Points of Althusserianism questioned and addressed by the strand adopted here, such as the ideas of overdetermination and determination in the last instance by the economic – rejected, it should be said, by Santos (2002a) – were usually seen as intrinsic to this theoretical framework. Therefore, we understand that resorting to this alternative reading of structural Marxism – even if it differs from that predominant version at the time of Santos’ contact with the current – has the advantages of addressing some points rejected by the Brazilian geographer himself. Moreover, it remains faithful to a more general conception of the social totality as resulting from the articulation of a plurality of spheres, essential for developing our argument below on how space could be inserted into this interpretive scheme through propositions found in Santos’ work.

Social Structures and Geographic Space

At this point in the discussion, we believe that there are already enough elements to affirm that geographic space does not fit as a social structure – nor as an instance, according to the meaning used above – in the Althusserian theoretical edifice. As explained above, structures are what provide the foundation of fundamental values of a certain form of social organization and thus condition practices of a certain type (e.g., economic structure conditions economic practice). In a reciprocal implication, the structures (economic and juridical-political) of capitalism contribute to ensure the reproduction of the capitalist social whole. Furthermore, the structures do not have a concrete existence except through their support agents (that is, individuals whose practices reproduce a certain pattern of social relations). Space, however, is different. Firstly, space exists by itself, concretely: its forms are endowed with existential autonomy (Santos, 2008b, p. 59). Furthermore, it would be difficult to argue for the existence of a certain kind of spacial practice that would sustain a structure. There are certainly practices *in* space. All practices, by the way, take place in space, but motivated by values whose ideological basis is provided by the social structures themselves, or social spheres. After all, objects are not endowed with the *autonomy of meaning* (Santos, 2008a, p. 59), with the values of geographic objects given according to the specific socioeconomic structure of a given society (Santos, 2008b, p. 73).

That said, let’s move on to a second point: considering space as something other than structure according to Althusserian parameters *does not* imply prejudice in the consideration of its *active role*. First, there are the limits of thinking only in terms of the structures of a mode of production. So far, the discussion has been about concepts contained at a high level of abstraction. After all, the general concept of expanded mode of production (or structured social totality) that we use, as well as the brief description of the economic and juridical-political structures of the capitalist mode of production, are concepts that designate abstract-formal objects that do not exist in reality unless they are historicized and spatialized. For that, it is necessary to resort to another level of abstraction, more concrete, capable of apprehending the particular determinations of the social formations that really exist (Althusser, s.d.). It is, after all, only “at the most concrete level of the concept of social formation that the historical particularities of a given society can be characterized” (Lazagna, 2017, p. 30-1). As put by Boito Jr. (2016, p. 168):

“The concept of social formation deals with the way in which a certain mode of production prevails in a historically determined society, and may (...) include economic, political and social elements of modes of production prior to capitalism.”

That is, even though capitalist structures – that is, a capitalist state, a set of liberal rights and the division of economic agents between wage-earners and capitalists – predominate in the vast majority of social formations in the western world, there are abyssal gaps between the internal realities of each formation. The reference to the concept of the capitalist mode of production is certainly necessary since its determinations make it possible to explain fundamental aspects of the concrete totalities in which its structures predominate. However, the specificities of each concrete reality emerge as consequences of the *history* of each social formation: the predominant structures overlap other, coexisting ones, and the inheritance of past modes of production. It is the category of socio-spatial formation “that allows the analysis of what is unique to each country and that, seen as a methodological choice, can avoid decontextualized comparisons between different nation-states” (Grimm, 2011, p. 161).

More than that, in terms of the structures of a mode of production, we are at the level of reproduction and synchrony. There is no room for contradictions, after all, these are structures that are mutually implicated in the reproduction of a certain social pattern (Saes, 2016). However, this reproduction is not linear, but expanded, taking the form of spiral development. Even though the structures tend to reproduce indefinitely, there is an underlying progressive development of the productive forces (Saes, 2016, p. 129). This, in turn, can give rise to contradictory effects of disruption of the social totality. So, we can say, with Boito Jr. (2007, p. 53), that the contradiction is not in the structure, but in its effects. To directly use the words of Balibar (1980, p. 254), whose insights the aforementioned authors use to address the issue of transition, “the contradiction is not, therefore, original, but derived.” Thus, the processes towards overcoming a mode of production can only be observed with reference to each social formation, a level of abstraction that allows evaluating the concrete operation of structures and their potentially contradictory effects in historically determined social totalities. Thus, the category of social formation (or socio-spatial formation, as will be indicated) “refers to the particular and concrete combination, these are, a spatial order of objects, parallel to an economic, social, political, cultural and symbolic order,” forming an “articulated set of orders [that] assign a proper value to things, men and actions” (Silveira, 2014, p. 153).

That said, the centrality of the concept of social formation for the analysis of concrete reality is clear; and it is exactly at this level that, as we understand it, space can be properly inserted as a *fundamental dimension of social reality*. In this sense, we return to Milton Santos’ contributions to the debate on social formations: for the author, “no other category could be more adequate to the study of space, because this category allows us not to distance ourselves from concrete reality” (Santos, 2002a, p. 213). Within this framework, Santos (2005, p. 32) sustains space as a fundamental category for the correct assimilation of the determinations of a social formation, given that, “the unity of continuity and discontinuity of the historical process cannot be realized except in space and through space,” in such a way that, “the evolution of the social formation is conditioned by the organization of space.”

Having existential autonomy, spatial forms (or geographic objects) remain after the processes that created them, starting to, inevitably, condition future actions (Santos, 2002a). A predominant structure in a given social formation operates on a historically determined spatial support: being an *unequal accumulation of times*, space simultaneously presents objects whose creations date back to different moments and different driving values. Thus, the predominant logic at a given moment cannot make a *tabula rasa* of the history of a given social formation, since its legacies are inevitably inscribed in the space and condition new actions (Santos, 2002a, p. 182). Thus, following the guidance of Santos (2002a; 2005), we will refer to social formation as *socio-spatial formation*, since geographic space is its fundamental dimension.

Therefore, perhaps we can say that the geographic space is the *support* necessary for the historicized structures. With this characterization, its *active role* is not rejected. On the contrary: space and its *rugosities* condition the concrete operation of structures in a given social formation. Moreover, the category of socio-spatial formation allows confronting the *synchrony* of the social structure operating in the sense of its perennial self-reproduction considering the potentially contradictory effects of expanded reproduction, making room for considering *diachrony*. We understand that this is a very reasonable alternative meaning for Santos' assertion that space suppresses the possibilities of opposition between *structure* and *history* (Santos, 2005, p. 31). As an anchor in reality, space as a "fundamental component of social totality" (Santos, 2005, p. 33) allows putting into historical and concrete perspective concepts that would otherwise remain on an abstract level. And, in this sense, "socio-spatial formation is a category that could lead us to overcoming incomplete dialectics such as time-space or society-naturalness, based on the logic of pure concepts" (Silveira, 2014, p. 156)

The key to establishing, according to the proposed reading, the interface between structures (and social spheres) and geographic space, we understand to be precisely its hybrid character. After all, unlike the territorial configuration, composed only of materiality, space is the set of objects plus the actions imposed on these objects (Santos, 2008b, p. 78). Thus, if objects as material forms have an autonomous existence, their functioning can only be understood with reference to social practices that attribute significance to materialities (Santos, 2002a, p. 187; 2008b, p. 58-59). Space must be correctly apprehended from this intrinsic relationship of spatial forms with the functions and meanings attributed to it at a given moment.

If "society establishes the values of different geographic objects, and the values vary according to the specific socioeconomic structure of that society" (Santos, 2008a, p. 73), then the *social practices*, the *actions* (conditioned by the structures), are the neuralgic point in which the determinations of social structures are imposed on space, at the same time that the rugosities of testimonial space imprints its mark on the delineation of the social dynamics, by transporting to the present determinations inherited from previous moments. It is in this way that the dominant structures and social relations in a given period come into contact with "a set of representative forms of past and present social relations" (Santos, 2002a, p. 153), constituting a moment of a process resulting in the evolution of the concrete whole, the socio-spatial formation.

Final Remarks

In general terms, it can be said that the present reading is part of a certain geographic tradition that takes the contributions of structuralist Marxism to think about geographic space. As put by Benach (2012, p. 291), “if Althusser had concentrated his efforts on theorizing the relations between structures, Marxist geographers tried to do the same by thinking about the relations between modes of production and space.” However, the idea contained here differs essentially from the most famous Althusserian lineage proposal in spatial studies, which is the one expounded in *The Urban Question*. Despite the great contributions and advances represented by the work, Castells’ (2020) endeavour seems to be mainly that of *projecting* the determinations of social structures onto space. What allows us to deviate from this reading is precisely the attempt to maintain fidelity to Milton Santos’ essential proposal: that of granting an active role to geographic space, not understanding it only as a mirror of society, but as a determining factor in its development. In this framework, the understanding proposed here of space as something different from social structure does not echo old accusations of supposed spatial fetishism, as found in Souza (1988).

We disagree with Silva and Voigt (2021), who argue that the balance of Santos’ theoretical contributions in his dialogues with Althusserianism – mainly thinking of his re-reading of the category of social formation and his emphasis on the role of spatial forms in shaping social evolution – would result in a definitive distancing and incompatibility of the Brazilian geographer’s proposals with structural Marxism. On the contrary, we defend here that these same points of Santos’ work are, in fact – as we argued throughout the text – compatible with a matrix of interpretation of the social totality based on structural Marxism. This does not mean, it should be emphasised, that the author did not resort to other theoretical currents in his elaborations at that time or adhere to all the positions inherent to structural Marxism – it is undeniable that Santos was always critical of the idea of an overdetermination by the economic, for example – but only that these distances and/or disagreements are not insurmountable and do not clash with the most fundamental aspects of a critical structural understanding of reality. More than merely compatible, we understand that Santos’ contributions addressed in this article (namely, the category of socio-spatial formation and the defense of the active role of spatial forms) allow for fundamental advances that can contribute to grasping reality from an interpretive matrix inspired by Althusserianism.

We agree with Pedrosa (2018, p. 445) about that Santos incorporated contributions from Althusserianism as tools to strengthen Brazilian critical geography, but he did not limit himself to merely reproducing imported ideas, reworking concepts and providing highly original and valuable contributions, such as the concept of socio-spatial formation. Peet (1998, p. 127) also highlights the category of socio-spatial formation as an example of Santos’ original elaboration resulting from his dialogue with structural Marxism.

It is worth emphasizing – even at the risk of repetition – that the consideration of space as something other than *structure* in the Althusserian framework does not reflect a judgment that its importance as a dimension of social reality is minor. Rather, it comes from the fact that it does not fit the meaning of structure according to this current of thought: unlike the social

structures of the Althusserian matrix, space – even if only in part – exists autonomously (*existential autonomy* of geographic forms) and does not correspond to a specific type of social practice. It is precisely its specificity as a *hybrid*, with its forms existing autonomously, but being necessarily animated and signified by the set of actions, which calls for another categorization of space, emphasizing its particularities. In this sense, it is as a *necessary support* to the historicization of social structures that space assumes a unique importance for the analysis of reality through the prism of structural Marxism. Its consideration suggests a forwarding of the contradiction between *history* and *structure*, allowing the contemplation of the *diachrony* and the *contradiction* present in each socio-spatial formation, but which would remain hidden if the analysis were restricted to the abstract-formal level.

It is also worth noting that the proposal to understand space as a necessary support for structures does not presuppose considering that the attribution of a status of social structure to geographic space is wrong, as suggested, for example, in the second part of *For a New Geography* (2002a). This is because, if we judged it in this way, we would be demanding from the author a commitment to the Althusserian assumptions that is never established. After all, geographical space could be framed in the broader definition of social structure, so that such a postulation in the author's work is fully adequate to his purposes. Thus, we are not proposing rectifications to the author's work: it was rather a specific theoretical exercise, consisting of reading part of his contributions in the light of the Althusserian interpretative scheme, seeking to take this approach to the limit. It was, therefore, a retrospective theoretical undertaking, with a view to promoting theoretical debate.

Thus, in this article we sought to address an aspect of Milton Santos' work that is far from being exhausted: his theoretical approach and dialogue with the current of structural Marxism, noticeable especially in his theoretical works from the mid-1970s and 80s. It is worth emphasizing the importance of future discussions in this regard: even if one understands later works by the author – thinking here mainly of *The Nature of Space* (2002b) – as more complete and finished systematizations of his intellectual project of theorizing about geographical space, the recovery and analysis of its previous proposals remains relevant. After all, as indicated by Nobre (2018), works prior to the greater effort to systematize the thinking of important authors are interesting for potentially containing the seeds of other possible readings, allowing to illuminate aspects of the work that, otherwise, would remain opaque.

In this sense, and with the purpose of advancing – albeit a little – in the proposal to investigate the relations of certain discussions by Milton Santos with the current of Marxist structuralism, this article proposes a specific theoretical exercise, while being aware of its limitations. As explained in the last section, we reached the conclusion that there is no incompatibility between the Althusserian interpretation of the social whole and the conception of geographic space as endowed with an active role. Moreover, space – through the category of socio-spatial formation – corresponds to a fundamental dimension of reality, whose analysis is essential for the correct apprehension of concrete reality. In this sense, just as the analysis

of the Althusserian ballast of certain elaborations by Milton Santos helps to illuminate certain points of his work, Santos' work can also contribute largely to the theorizations of structural Marxism, highlighting the role of space in the construction of an analytical framework capable of unraveling the determinations of the present.

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