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➲ A Recent Sociological Utopia of Urban Space in Brazil

Abstract: The alleged conceptual parsimony of Brazilian urban studies as of the 1980s is addressed by focusing on sociological conceptualizations of urban space in Brazil. These only seldom bring to the fore the ways in which Brazilian cities and/or metropolises differ from the North American and European urban contexts that inspire these theoretical conceptualizations. This becomes clear by pursuing from a Lefebvrian standpoint the sociological representations of urban space in the recent Brazilian debate (1998-2008) – thus disclosing a specific utopia implicit in this research.
Keywords: Urban studies; Urban space, Representation; Sociology, Brazil; 20th-21st Century.

Resumo: Este paper problematiza a suposta parsimônia conceitual dos estudos urbanos brasileiros da década de 1980 em diante enfocando as conceituações sociológicas de espaço urbano no Brasil. É raro que essas revelem *diferenças* das cidades e/ou metrópoles brasileiras em relação aos contextos norte-americanos e europeus que costumam inspirar tais conceituações em termos teóricos. Basta rastrear, na perspectiva teórico-metodológica lefebvriana, as representações sociológicas de espaço urbano no debate brasileiro recente (1998-2008). Revela-se assim que uma utopia bem específica permeia tais pesquisas.
Palavras-chave: Estudos urbanos; Espaço urbano; Representação; Sociologia Brasil; Séculos XX-XXI.

Introduction

This paper addresses the "current state of play and future perspectives" of urban studies on Latin America in Latin America in the 21st century by reflecting, from the standpoint of an urban social scientist in Brazilian academia, upon the reasons for a diagnosis that has been common in bibliographic reviews of Latin American urban studies since the 1980s: its conceptual parsimony. By this, I mean the alleged relative timidity of the disciplines that deal with urban issues in the region – geography, architecture, sociol-

ogy, economy, anthropology, urban planning, history and law (Valladares/Coelho n.d.: 3[1]) –, when it comes to developing theoretical accounts of urban space in Latin America, as soon as one assumes that 'urban space' sums up the various socio-spatial entities covered by the respective researchers in the countries of the region: small towns, mid-sized cities or big ones, in demographic terms, the latter often being called 'metropolises'.

Overall assessments of the so-called urban studies in Latin America in recent times, from the 1980s to the early 2000s, are fairly unanimous in pointing out that the research is concerned with producing empirical studies on urban contexts rather than with producing theories (Valladares/Coelho n.d.: 6, Schteingart 2000: 23, Reynoso 2003: 143, Gorelik 2005: 115). Only the reasons given in explanation of this phenomenon differ. The "pulverization" of Latin American urban investigation is attributed to the "decadence of optimistic visions" about the development of Latin American countries and their cities, a process associated with rising disbelief in the conceptual references associated with the theory of marginality and with structuralist Marxism (Schteingart 2000: 16). Another point of view revolves around the difficulty of acquiring "in-depth knowledge of a specific reality" and of accumulating theoretical and methodological instruments able "to generate a stable common basis", associated with the "sequence of consensual issues or objects" among researchers (Reynoso 2003: 143). A third argument is that Latin American research as of the 1980s is unaware of the "tradition" of "the monumental critical and collective intention of producing a theory and a culture of the Latin American city" which evolved in the region between the 1950s and the 1970s (Gorelik 2005: 130). It is not surprising, therefore, that the programmatic propositions in some of these reviews comprise the need to evaluate the conceptual problems found in previous research studies (Valladares/Coelho n.d.: 9), as well as the necessity of a "conceptual review of some traditional issues", and the "proposal of analytical categories for new issues" (Schteingart 2000: 3).

I would like to argue here that the difficulty lies less in the conceptualization operation itself, i.e. in making use of 'city' notions with different conceptual values in order to explain social or cultural characteristics of urban space in present-day Latin America[2]. The problem, rather, is grounded in *how these conceptualizations of urban space are employed in methodological terms* – at least in regard to recent Brazilian urban studies that rely on sociological notions of city in order to explain social or cultural characteristics of the present-day cities of Brazil.

Indeed, research I finished in 2010 with a Brazilian colleague (Frehse/Leite 2010) made me realize that urban studies conducted in Brazilian academia between 1998 and 2008 specifically by social scientists (sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists) have a wealth of conceptualizations of urban space inspired by works publicly associated with the sociological discipline. It does not matter here that the presence of sociology is not exclusive, as it is sometimes combined with accounts from other disciplines, especially geography and anthropology. What is meaningful, rather, is that these

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[1]   All translations from languages other than English are my own.
[2]   As José de Souza Martins (2008a: 96, n. 13, original italics) emphasizes, referencing Henri Lefebvre (1955), a "notion" is an "*open*, non-classificatory conception, that refers to […] the fact that the object of sociology (and of history) is the historical and social process, open to the possible and thus, above all, to the unclassifiable".

sociological conceptualizations are vividly mobilized in methodological terms in order to develop explanations about Brazilian present-day cities. However, this is insufficient reason for these undertakings to always result in conceptualizations that bring to the theoretical foreground the *differences* between present-day Brazilian cities and the (often foreign) urban contexts that inspired, in empirical terms, the sociological conceptualizations of urban space that Brazilian research often relies on in order to explain the social or cultural characteristics of Brazilian urban space in the early twenty-first century.

When one considers that sociological conceptualizations, in particular of urban space, have played a major role in the theoretical consolidation of Latin American urban studies since the 1950s[3], then what I am suggesting here is that one major difficulty in the recent Brazilian sociological debate on the cities and/or metropolises of this country concerns its epistemological effectiveness in conceptualizing the empirically existing and commonsensically discernible *difference* that the Brazilian (and Latin American) urban space still represents, at present, in the international urbanization process, despite the homogenizing pressures of current economic globalization. By assuming, with Lefebvre (1970: 63-65), that "difference" refers to "reciprocal, conflictive and conciliated relationships" between "qualities" of locally given "particularities" that "survived" these relations, I hope to show here that, depending on the methodological ways in which Brazilian social scientists use sociological notions of urban space, their conceptualizations result in a greater or smaller amount of knowledge about the social or cultural traits that cause Brazilian cities and/or metropolises to *differ* from the ones of Los Angeles, New York or Paris etc., cities that precisely underpin the sociological conceptualizations Brazilian researchers employ to develop their explanations about present-day urban space in Brazil.

To prove this statement, I will turn to the Lefebvrian reflections on representations (Lefebvre 1980), particularly the utopian ones, in order to bring to the analytical foreground the representations of urban space that underpin in a *prospective* way the methodological use that Brazilian researchers have made of the sociological notions of city to explain the social and cultural traits of present-day cities and/or metropolises of this country between 1998 and 2008. Indeed, by mobilizing specific notions of urban space as *conceptual paradigms*, *counterpoints* or *indications* (Frehse/Leite 2010: 219ff), the social scientists whose urban studies I have analyzed in the aforementioned study involuntarily propose, as supposedly valid for present-day urban space in Brazil, nine conceptual associations between this country's cities and/or metropolises and the ones implicit in the notions that these social scientists use in their conceptual undertakings. However, only four of these representations successfully heighten what may distinguish, in social and/or cultural terms, urban space in present-day Brazil from the other contexts. As we shall see, it is precisely this aspect that causes the other five representations to reveal a specific *utopia* of present-day Brazilian urban space in the Lefebvrian (1980: 94) sense: "a prospect and representation of the future" grounded in historical possibilities that exist in the present due to the historical contradictions this same present carries, i.e. due

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3   Four keywords here are modernization, over-urbanization, marginality and dependency theory, not to mention further appearances of Marxist methodological references (Valladares 1988, 1997; Valladares/Coelho n.d.; Schteingart 2000; Valladares/Freire-Medeiros 2002; see also, though less explicitly, Henry/Sachs-Jeantet 1993; Stren 1995; Gorelik 2005).

to the currently vivid presence of social relations and representations whose historical date of emergence is not a contemporary one, lying indeed in the past (Lefebvre 1970: 179). In fact, what emerges, in these five representations, is the still unaccomplished historical possibility of *this country's present-day urban space as a conceptual difference* in relation to those that inspire, in theoretical terms, current Brazilian sociological debate.

To elucidate this argumentative structure, this paper follows three steps. Based on the accounts that I analysed in the aforementioned research, I first point out two conceptual and one methodological trait of Brazilian sociological debate on current urban space in Brazil that help to identify a specific sociological imaginary, in the Lefebvrian sense of the French '*l'imaginaire*'. As we will see in the second section, this imaginary contains nine representations forged in the conceptual associations that the respective researchers established, whether voluntarily or not, between Brazilian and mainly foreign urban spaces. These representations, in turn, reveal the aforementioned utopia of Brazil's current urban space. In the third section this peculiar utopia invariably leads us back to the beginning of my paper. After all, one can evaluate from an alternative – utopian – point of view the dilemmas of the intrinsically interdisciplinary urban research on Latin America in this region in the early twenty-first century.

Two conceptual and one methodological trait of Brazilian sociological urban studies

The empirical basis of my reflection comprises 122 studies published from 1998 to 2008 in books, scientific journals and as academic abstracts and papers in the proceedings of the main Brazilian conferences on sociology and the social sciences[4]. Although sociological notions of city are used in these texts in order to conceptualize present-day urban space in Brazil, the respective authors only seldom relate their accounts explicitly to the label 'urban sociology'. Moreover, not all authors are institutionally involved with sociology in professional terms, as lecturers, professors or researchers. Still, they are all social scientists, i.e. undergraduate or graduate scholars of the social sciences. Furthermore, all of them base their explanations about cities and/or metropolises in Brazil on sociological notions of urban space proposed by local or foreign social scientists that publicly associate the conceptual schemes that underpin these notions with the sociological discipline.

By examining this range of sociological accounts on urban space in search of the conceptual efforts employed each time, with more or less direct reference to Brazilian present-day cities and/or metropolises, one can recognize a specific conceptual characteristic of the debate in Brazil. Sociological 'city' notions are used to address two theoretical problems: on the one hand, there is the problem of the social production of urban space in the country, amid the socio-economic, political and social transformations linked to the historical process of economic globalization in the late twentieth century;

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[4] I am referring to the biennial congresses of the Sociedade Brasileira de Sociologia (SBS) and to the annual meetings of the Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Ciências Sociais (ANPOCS). Both institutions publish the complete versions and abstracts of the papers presented in their events in online and printed proceedings.

on the other, there is the problem of the attributes of urban space in Brazil brought to the surface by its social and cultural practices in the midst of globalization.

Both issues have two dimensions that are decisive for the sociological understanding of space. One need only bear in mind, with Lefebvre (2000: xx), that space is a social product that, at the same time, interferes with the production of life in its simultaneously social and economic aspects. In this light, the two problems that permeate the recent sociology of urban space in Brazil concern the mechanisms of production and of reproduction of social relations through the mediation of space (in this case urban space), respectively.

What is significant for this paper, and for the second conceptual trait of the debate, is that these two problems are conceptually addressed through the sociological notions of city developed by researchers in very different national and above all international academic settings, at very different times: Max Weber and Georg Simmel, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, Louis Wirth and Herbert Gans, Henri Lefebvre, Manuel Castells and Michel de Certeau; Ruth Glass and Mark Gottdiener, Richard Sennett, Saskia Sassen and Sharon Zukin; Edmond Préteceille and Pierre Veltz, Yves Grafmeyer, Alain Tarrius and Hartmuth Häußermann; and Francisco de Oliveira, Lúcio Kowarick and José de Souza Martins, among others, sometimes combined with the reflections of philosophers like Paul Virilio, geographers such as David Harvey and Edward Soja, Neil Smith, Peter Marcuse and Milton Santos; journalists such as Mike Davis, historians such as Lewis Mumford, and anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Gilberto Velho (Frehse/Leite 2010: 218-229).

However, these notions are not used indiscriminately – and so we reach the methodological trait that is relevant here. Their use in the respective studies follows a logic grounded in three different methodological paths. First, internationally consolidated concepts coined by various Brazilian and foreign thinkers throughout the history of sociology are combined, regardless of the respective interpretative schemes to which they belong, with 'city' notions brought about by history, geography and anthropology. Thus, authors ranging from Weber (1962[5]) to Sassen (1991), and including Burgess (1929), Sennett (1990), Gottdiener (1993), Mumford (1991), Peter Marcuse (1997) and Lévi-Strauss (1955), etc., are brought together in order to conceptualize Brazilian present-day cities and/or metropolises[6]. This is what I call a merely indicative methodological use of different 'city' definitions.

However, some of these current and mainly Anglo-Saxon notions of city are also addressed – secondly – as conceptual counterpoints, as contrasting references that help to disclose local social and cultural traits, due to their distance from the empirically given Brazilian cities and/or metropolises. This methodological use arises in two different argumentative contexts: on the one hand, it comes to the fore when the aim is an interchange with the Anglo-Saxon 'post-modern' debate specifically, such as what Harvey (1992) and Soja (1993) have worked on in an interchange with Lefebvre's (2000) sociological reflections on the "production of space", but also such as developed respec-

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tively by Sassen in her thoughts on "global cities", by Castells (1989) in his reflections on the "space of flows", and by Zukin (1991) in her "landscapes of power" (Caldeira 2000; Frúgoli 2000; Rubino 2003, 2005, 2006). On the other, 'city' notions figure as conceptual counterpoints when the issue at hand is to advocate the conceptual relevance of the empirical "diversity" and "heterogeneity" of urban space in Brazil, both being associated with empirical studies strongly grounded in quantitative and qualitative methods (Marques/Torres 2000, 2005; Frúgoli Jr. 2000; Rubino 2003, 2005, 2006).

The third methodological way of employing sociological 'city' notions to conceptualize present-day Brazilian cities and/or metropolises is to turn them into conceptual paradigms. This implies that Brazilian urban space, in the respective studies, is taken as a socio-spatial reality to which the theoretical and methodological approaches implicit in the respectively addressed notions apply as conceptually more or less productive methodological perspectives. In other words they are accounts that underpin in a more or less limited way the whole research (and conceptualization) process. Thus the 'city' notions have what I term different methodological densities. Again, two argumentative contexts are usual. On the one hand, 'city' notions of limited methodological density, developed in particular in the context of the recent Anglo-Saxon debate on the so-called 'post-modern' and 'global city' dynamics of spacing of macro-social processes, turn into conceptual models that paradigmatically guide the interpretative contributions of Brazilian researchers to the discussion of urban segregation (Caldeira 2000) and to the debate on the political use of urban space (Arantes 2000), as well as to the discussion on 'gentrification' as the term was coined by Glass (1964) in the 1960s and further developed by Smith (1996) in the 1990s (Leite 2004; Gondim 2007). Likewise, but with the critical aim of addressing the conceptual insufficiencies of the 'global city' concept, notions such as the "*décrochage des êxtrèmes*" by Veltz (1996) and the types of diversified spatial polarizations conceptualized by Préteceille (1993) are also used as conceptual paradigms in Brazilian urban research.[7]

On the other hand, some Brazilian researchers resort to sociological notions of city with an especially strong methodological density, as models of thought, in order to conceptualize present-day urban space in this country. These notions may have been developed in Brazil or abroad. Methodological categories such as "urban spoliation", for instance, coined in the 1970s (Kowarick 1979) and re-applied thereafter (Kowarick 2000, 2002, 2009), derive from conceptual interchanges with the Castellsian (2000) notion of "urban contradictions". Categories like these co-exist in the Brazilian debate with peculiar re-readings of the Lefebvrian dialectic method, resulting in an emphasis on the "residual" character of the Brazilian megalopolises (Martins 2008b; see also Martins 2000a, 2008c), a trait that is implicit in the "personal circulation" discernible today in Brazil's urban space (Frehse 2001, 2006, 2007). These Castellsian, Lefebvrian and other local developments of the dialectic method (by De Certeau 1994 and Zukin 1991, in Leite 2004; by Lefebvre 1979, in Ribeiro 2006) go hand-in-hand with the paradigmatic use of 'city' conceptualizations derived from the interactional approaches of Chicagoan sociology (Gans 1962, Park 1979) inspired by readings of Simmel (1973), and later rein-

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7   Préteceille/Ribeiro (1999); Ribeiro (2000), (2002), (2004); Ribeiro/Lago (2001); Marques/Torres (2000), (2005); Carvalho de Souza (2000); Véras (2001); Freitag (2002), (2006).

terpreted in Brazilian academia by Velho (1973) (Moura 2003, Kuschnir 2006). A third referential methodological approach is the Weberian (1962) typical-ideal one, which helps bring to the interpretative foreground typologies of cities that include the Brazilian ones (Freitag 2006). Finally, one must mention recent paradigmatic exchanges that have evolved with a conceptual emphasis on the "mobility" concept, as voiced by Grafmeyer (1994) and Tarrius (2002) (Telles/Cabanes 2006).

Taking into account these conceptual and methodological traits of Brazilian academia, the tripartite logic involved in the mobilization of 'city' notions, evidences something unrecognizable at first sight. I am referring to a sociological imaginary mediated by nine representations of urban space in Brazil that reveals a sociological utopia which helps explain, from an alternative point of view, the conceptual timidity that supposedly characterizes contemporary Latin American urban studies.

When representations of urban space reveal a sociological utopia

By making an indicative, contrapuntal or paradigmatic use of the aforementioned plethora of 'city' notions, Brazilian researchers always, voluntarily or otherwise, disseminate in their academic writings definite images of urban space in their country. One only has to recall, with Lefebvre (1961: 288), that images are individual symbolic oeuvres located in the "realm of sensitiveness" ("*le sensible*") and that they articulate individual and group emotions of the past with the present and the future. From this point of view, the conceptual connections established in various urban studies cannot be dissociated from the sensitivity of their various authors as to what they (symbolically) conceive the Brazilian cities and/or metropolises to be.

As this sensitivity is not due merely to these researchers' everyday lives in the country's urban space, but also to the depth of their respective academic formations within the sociological discipline, the 'Brazilian city' images that they propagate in their works are highly specific. They are sociological representations, i.e. "presences of absences" (Lefebvre 1980: 124); in this case, they are presences of a peculiar absence: urban space in Brazil.

In the light of these reflections, the Brazilian debate expresses a peculiar sociological imaginary on urban space in Brazil. Representations, after all, are "born" in the form of symbols in what Lefebvre (1980: 53, 56) terms as "*l'imaginaire*": a special "relationship of the (reflected, subjective) conscience with reality" ("*le réel*"). It is an imaginary mediated by representations that make Brazilian urban space "present" by means of an intense indicative, contrapuntal and paradigmatic interchange, especially with Anglo-Saxon and French-speaking sociological 'city' images. The conceptual associations of the empirically given Brazilian urban space with the conceptualizations of other – mostly foreign – urban spaces thus evidence that the sociological imaginary at hand comprises at least nine representations of the empirically given urban space in present-day Brazil.

A first representation is suggested by the indicative use of a very comprehensive plethora of 'city' notions, mostly of European and North American origin – which, incidentally, are sometimes brought together despite theoretical incompatibilities between the respective authors (such as Burgess and Marcuse, in Taschner/Bogus 2000). The empirically given present-day Brazilian urban space is supposed to have characteristics

that are 'receptive' to the application of 'city' concepts of the most diverse theoretical origins. Brazilian urban space is represented as *conceptually plural*[8].

In turn, the contrapuntal use of notions of city to heighten the empirically investigated urban settings points to the representation that Brazilian cities and/or metropolises can be conceptually disclosed only in the wake of thorough empirical research. Thus, Brazil's urban space is seen as *empirically diverse*.

Last but not least, the paradigmatic use of 'city' notions of stronger or weaker conceptual density, i.e. with a respectively lesser or greater proximity to the empirically scrutinized historical and social processes of the Brazilian cities and/or metropolises, indicate that the investigated urban space is also sociologically conceived as integrally 'receptive', on the one hand, to the "global city" approach and to the alternative conceptual approximations to the empirical diversity of globalized urban contexts; on the other hand, to interpretation methods developed around the dialectical, interactional, typical-ideal and "mobilities" approaches. In sum, present-day Brazilian cities and/or metropolises are sociologically represented as *conceptually post-modern, global or globalized*, as well as *conceptually dialectical* or *interactional*, *typical-ideal or mobilized*.

When one realizes that the sociological imaginary at hand is mediated by these nine different representations of empirical Brazilian urban space, it becomes easier to face the methodologically crucial question of this paper, namely, to what extent these representations favor or not sociological conceptualizations of the empirically given *differences* of today's cities and/or metropolises regarding the urban contexts that underlie the conceptualizations used by Brazilian researchers to theorize this country's urban realities. Or, in brief: what is the conceptual 'place' of the empirical difference that Brazilian urban space represents in Brazil's recent sociological imaginary about the said urban space? As I hope to show, in five of the nine representations, this place is a 'non-place': the *utopia of the conceptually different Brazilian urban space*, whether the respective authors know it or not. The four other representations favor, on the contrary, the conceptualization of a 'place': empirically given Brazilian urban space.

When examined through the lens of the representation of conceptually plural Brazilian urban space, the empirically extant cities and/or metropolises of Brazil are social-spatial entities virtually receptive to 'everything' in conceptual terms. To come to theoretical grips with their empirical social and/or cultural processes, there is nothing like transiting through various 'city' notions and scientific disciplines. Thus, the representation of the conceptually plural Brazilian urban space reveals a sociological imaginary underpinned by the proposition, among others, that this country's empirically existing cities and/or metropolises are marked by traits *shared* with the urban spaces addressed by the mostly foreign authors of the notions of 'city' that are employed indicatively by Brazilian researchers.

Not surprisingly, what remains unaddressed in conceptual terms are the empirically given differences of Brazil's urban space. Thus researchers invariably end up contributing to the consolidation of an alternative representation. However, this time it is a utopian one, when one recalls the Lefebvrian reflections on this issue. The utopia, i.e. the

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8   This heuristic label and the others that follow address more precisely, via the inclusion of the term 'conceptually', the analytic categories developed earlier (Frehse/Leite 2010) for classifying the respective representations of Brazilian urban space propagated in this country's recent sociological production.

'non-place' implicit in representational propagation of the conceptually plural urban space, is indeed the conceptually different Brazilian urban space.

Surprisingly enough, this utopian representation reappears when one focuses on the representation of the empirically diverse Brazilian cities and/or metropolises that also underpins the current sociological imaginary on urban space in this country. Although the main investigative aim of the authors who focus on advocating, in a methodologically contrapuntal way, the diversity of present-day Brazilian urban reality, is to broaden the conceptual horizon of urban studies, the conceptualization of the country's urban diversity essentially remains an effort to be accomplished in the future with the help of the present-day thorough description of the empirically given social and cultural processes related to the production of urban space in Brazil. Underscored by this characteristic, the representation of the empirically diverse urban space carries in itself the utopia of the conceptually different Brazilian urban space.

Last but not least, the utopian character of the representation of the conceptually different Brazilian urban space also reaffirms itself when one focuses on the representations of the Brazilian urban space as being, respectively, a post-modern, a global or a globalized one. The paradigmatic mobilization of 'city' notions with historical and social contents that emphasize post-modern, global and alternatively global socio-spatial dynamics brings to the theoretical forefront traits that bring together the Brazilian and the foreign cities and/or metropolises that are undergoing similar processes.

In search of conceptual difference, there is nothing like making a paradigmatic use of 'city' notions of a strong methodological nature. This is the case of the Lefebvrian and Castellsian, the Kowarickan and Martinsian 'city' categories that underpin the representation of the conceptually dialectical Brazilian urban space; but also of the Parkian and Gansian notions of city implicit in the representation of the conceptually interactional Brazilian cities and/or metropolises, not to mention the Weberian 'city' notion that underlies the representation of urban space that I termed a conceptually typical-ideal one, and the Grafmeyerian notion implicit in the representation of a conceptually mobilized Brazilian urban space. In the analyzed studies, the notions implicit in these three representations have methodological statuses that are quite similar to the one Pierre Bourdieu (1989: 27) recognizes in the "notions" to be employed in the construction of a sociological object: they are "conceptual shorthand of a way of constructing an object". This characteristic turns the 'city' notions that evidence the aforementioned four representations into methodological devices whose specific historical and social contents do not even begin to correspond to what urban space empirically *is* in present-day Brazil. These notions' respective contents favor conceptualizations of the extent to which this country's actual cities and/or metropolises *differ* from those that underpin the Lefebvrian, Castellsian etc. conceptualizations that have inspired the Brazilian researchers in question.

What hence – and finally – gets a 'place' in the interpretative endeavor is the conceptually different Brazilian urban space. This representation becomes especially evident in the conceptualizations proposed by Kowarick and Martins respectively as to the "urban spoliation" (Kowarick 1979: *passim*) character of urban development in cities like São Paulo, which goes hand-in-hand with its significant present-day "social-economic and civil vulnerability" (Kowarick 1979: *passim*), and to this city's current "residual" character (Martins 2008b: *passim*). Conceptualizations like these evidence a sociological

imaginary mediated by the representation that the empirically given difference in Brazilian urban space necessarily deserves a 'place' in the conceptualization efforts that are evolving in this country's current academic scenario.

Difference as a recent conceptual difficulty

From an etymological point of view, the word 'utopia' reveals its intimate link to the imaginary on space. After all, the word 'non-place' cannot be dissociated from a representation of space: in this case, the "absence" is a non-place, made "present" by the prospective kind of representation that is the utopia (Lefebvre 1980).

From this utopian point of view, the Brazilian sociological debate between 1998 and 2008 points to one specific 'non-place': the conceptually different Brazilian urban space. Indeed, the investigative focus on empirical differences forms part of Brazilian academic common sense. However, urban research in Brazil does not always address this empirical richness conceptually. When the issue at hand consists of explaining qualitatively or quantitatively apprehended empirical diversity, there is a strong temptation to focus on what links the country's cities and/or metropolises with those that empirically underpin the (mostly foreign) conceptualizations of urban space used to inspire Brazilian sociological urban studies. This temptation therefore invariably goes hand-in-hand with a second one: the temptation to not even address the challenge of conceptualizing what empirically distinguishes Brazilian cities and/or metropolises from contexts such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago or Paris amidst present-day globalization.

Shunning both temptations, my analysis here suggests that a fruitful alternative is to mobilize in a paradigmatic way 'city' notions that are strongly referential in methodological terms. If four diverse representations of Brazilian urban space hence come to the fore, they share one common trait. They all favor methodological approaches to the existing cities and/or metropolises that translate, in conceptual terms, certain empirically given social and cultural traits that distinguish these social-spatial entities from the North American and European ones that vigorously inspire the Brazilian sociological production on Brazil's urban space.

When thus examined through the lens of the utopian representations it bears, the recent Brazilian sociological debate is evidence that the conceptualization of difference in Brazil's current urban space is a historical possibility that is still seldom explored. Moreover there is a specific reason for this state of affairs. The analysis brings to the fore a sociological debate that rarely explores in a systematic way the methodological possibilities and limitations implicit in the 'city' notions it employs when it comes to conceptualizing current urban space in Brazil.

Then again, dealing with sociological methods of interpretation is more than just a methodological difficulty that underpins the country's present-day sociological urban studies. There is also a historical contradiction in this debate, when one considers that up to the 1970s Brazilian sociology nourished Latin American urban studies with very innovative conceptualizations which flourished in the wake of a more comprehensive trend that characterized urban research accomplished in the region at that time (Valladares/Coelho n.d.; Schteingart 2000). When considered in the light of this research dynamic, the current representations of a conceptually dialectical or interactional, typi-

cal-ideal or mobilized Brazilian urban space arise as accounts that explore one definite historical possibility contained in the present due precisely to that past: the possibility of conceptualizing the empirically given differences that distinguish the country's cities and/or metropolises from those that underpin in conceptual terms the present-day urban studies that inspire the Brazilian sociological debate. Indeed the representations at hand put forward a relatively established Latin American tradition, but in an innovative way, in a vivid interchange with the current urban studies' theoretical issues.

In the light of these analytical outcomes, one can re-address from an alternative – utopian – sociological standpoint the issue of the alleged conceptual parsimony of Latin American urban studies as of the 1980s. The nine representations of Brazilian urban space that result from the three distinct ways in which different sociological 'city' notions are employed in methodological terms to conceptualize the country's empirically given cities and/or metropolises suggest that the difficulty may lie less, as I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, in *the initiative* of conceptualizing than in *how it is done*. Indeed, the biggest difficulty seems to be to ensure a 'place' for difference in the respective conceptualizations. Its place is usually a 'non-place', which strongly helps to transform conceptually different Brazilian urban space into a utopia.

If addressing the reasons for this difficulty transcends the purpose of this paper, what I am interested in emphasizing in these concluding remarks is an intriguing fact. If a significant number of the resulting sociological conceptualizations about this issue are mere variations of conceptual innovations produced abroad – mainly in Anglo-Saxon and French-speaking academia –, they go hand-in-hand with very original innovations at the empirical research level, due to the recent multiplication of means of quantitative data collection regarding the spatialization of social-economic indicators, and to the proliferation of urban ethnographies.

Thus, one is led to the first conclusion that I would like to present here, regarding the supposedly conceptual timidity of current Latin American urban studies. A significant amount of research that I analyzed here, in its own way, joins the main result of a recent critical overview of the approaches to social theory of a major Brazilian social sciences journal between 1986 and 2010: "Brazilian sociology tends to produce theoretical improvements on the fringes of empirical research" (Costa 2010: 45). Nevertheless, there is more at play in Brazil's urban studies. The very innovative character of some of the Brazilian accounts owes a lot to submitting methodologically referential 'city' notions to the absolutely diversified social and cultural traits of Brazilian urban space.

This leads us to the second and last conclusion I would like to highlight here. Although I have concentrated on a very specific fraction of present-day Latin American urban studies, i.e. the conceptually laden sociological accounts recently produced in Brazil (between 1998 and 2008) ,the Lefebvrian way in which I approached this segment discloses one conceptual limitation and one possibility of urban research on this region in this region at the start of the twenty-first century. Overall assessments of Latin American urban studies indicate, in a fairly unanimous manner, that their historical consolidation owes a lot to the theoretical approach to cities and/or metropolises developed in sociological thought.[9] In the light of this very distinguished role of sociology as a disci-

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[9]   Stren (1995), Schteingart (2000), Reynoso (2003), Gorelik (2005), Ricárdez (2006).

pline at the (conceptual) core of the interdisciplinarity that still prevails in the region, when the issue at hand is conceptualizing urban space, scrutinizing the sociological representations of Latin American cities and/or metropolises such as the Brazilian ones in search of the conceptual utopias they bear, is a synthetic way to emphasize a specific challenge for sociological accounts today. For sociological accounts to recover the conceptually innovative role they had in Latin American studies until the 1970s, there is nothing like conceptually addressing *difference* in the region's present-day urban space.

Now, the analysis also points to one possibility as to this issue, contained in the researchers' active interchange with the various *methods of interpretation* of urban space developed in sociological thought. By the way, was it not, after all, affection for the method that led the researchers of Latin America to make original contributions to urban studies up to the 1970s?

Concluding with issues such as these, the reflection carried out here has essentially aimed at the sociological imaginary of Latin America urban researchers on the cities and/or metropolises in this region. What place is there in it for the *difference* that currently particularizes urban space in Latin America in the midst of the immense homogenizing and fragmenting pressures of globalization? The analysis here suggests that, at least in Brazil in recent times, this place is, above all, a non-place, a utopia. Unfortunately.

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