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Space, Totality and Method

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Abstract

This article discusses the mediative relationship between geographical space and totality. This is a methodological reflection based on the contributions of the philosophical traditions, known as ontological and critical approaches. The qualitative distinction between the gnosiological and ontological perspective in knowledge production is indispensable in addressing this relationship between geographical space and totality. Accordingly, we first address the relationship between theory, practice, and criticism of the main subject of this article, as well as the specificity of scientific knowledge. Theory should not subordinate practice, nor should practice detract from theory. There is a dialectical reciprocity between the two elements, and theoretical knowledge must be able to translate the essence of real and effective movements. We also present the natural and social functions of the geographic space in its articulations of the totality. We conclude that geographic space must always be analyzed in combination with totality and that this dynamic, in turn, cannot be understood only as a sum of its components. This sum congregates a network of qualitative mediations generated from the reciprocal determinations that are established between the social complexes that constitute and dynamize the sum. In addition, we note the influences that production can exert in space through the predominant mediation of the socio-spatial totality.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is the result of ongoing research regarding the educational and geographical dimensions in historical analyses and the contributions of classic authors in these themes. This article contributes, in an introductory and approximate tone, to the relationship between geographical space, totality, and methods. Specific examples include elaborations on the philosophical tradition understood as an ontological-critical perspective, which ranges from the age of greek philosophers to contemporary philosophers; these discussions are important in the geographic debate on the methodological question, especially Lukács (1981) and Santos (1988;1997; 2007), among others. It is not my aim to demonstrate the entire trajectory of the debate between ontology and geography.

I am not investing efforts in this enterprise; instead, these are detached academic exercises. On the other hand, as a researcher and professor of geography, I understand that an effectively critical understanding of social reality throughout the historical process is an extremely important requirement for understanding space and its associated interventions.

In this respect, I believe that it is worth explaining my understanding of the relationship between theory, practice, and criticism, in the first place, and secondly, the relationships of the comprehensive totality in its historical movements with geographical space. As Aristotle already warned: “each set of principles we must investigate in a natural way and endeavor to express them with precision [...]” (ARISTOTLE, 1979, p. 57).

Consequently, we must understand that ontology concerns the study of being, be it nature or the being of humanity, i.e., the social being. There exist both idealistic ontologies and materialistic ontologies. However, an ontological point of view indicates that “the approach to any object” must have “the object itself as its axis,” because “the capture of the object itself implies the assumption that it is not limited to the empirical elements, but also, and mainly to those who constitute its essence.” In other words, “the central element is the object” and, in effect, “it is not for the subject to create—theoretically—the object, but to translate, in the form of concepts, the reality of the object itself” (TONET, 2013, p. 14).

When we affirm that the centrality is within an object from the ontological perspective, we

are not neglecting the intellectual qualities of the researcher. The subject, in this approach, must mobilize their scientific, aesthetic, philosophical, historical, and geographical knowledge to apprehend, translate, and explain the movement of the phenomenon that they investigate, including their relations with the totality and the particularity. It is also important to note the particularity of nature in the geographical space in its infinite relations with society, as well as the “predominant moment” in these interactions. This paper is mainly focused on this theory.

THEORY AND PRACTICE: LAW AND PARTICULARITY

Our starting point in the ontological approach is human formation, or the process of human self-construction. This is because it focuses our attention on historical movements and the theoretical-conceptual debate. Human beings become the members of the human race and, therefore, create life in society when they begin to perform acts of work. Work allowed the ontological leap from being purely organic to being social, which facilitated the exchange of society with nature for producing goods essential to social life (to protect, to feed, and so on). According to Lukács (1981), work facilitated an effective teleological approach, i.e., a new relationship between consciousness and reality.

To achieve a particular purpose, human consciousness requires analyses and reflections on the natural elements in their innate state so that said purpose (building a shelter, for example) can be satisfied. At the end of this process, several pieces of knowledge, skills, techniques, ideas, and values were generated that can be used in several other situations. This approach facilitates the possibility of developing new social complexes (education, geography, art, science, etc.) that will have different functions in social reproduction. The totality and the historical movement are created. We will increasingly have more complex societies with more complex geographic spaces and more socially developed individuals. This process also increasingly marks the expansion of human domination over the forces of nature, which, in turn, will continue with their own legalities and causalities; however, these forces of nature are now widely known and will be increasingly impacted by socio-spatial human activities.

Finally, human beings have begun to develop spatial practices. A natural area will

increasingly have more geographical objects and human interventions. This is the genesis of the geographical space that will interact with work as well as all other socio-spatial dimensions. Space will suffer interference from the totality and conform as a whole; however, space will equally influence the totality since it is a “factor of social evolution, not just as a condition” (SANTOS, 1997, p. 01). Thus, the space “contains and is contained by the other instances, just as each of them contains and is contained by it” (SANTOS, 1997, p. 01). This ontological-critical interpretation allows us to understand that “the movement of space, that is, its evolution, is both an effect and a condition of the movement of a global society” (SANTOS, 1977, p. 89, highlights our).

The correct knowledge (always in an approximate sense and never absolute or finite) of reality (be it natural or social) will mark the elementary foundation of the science complex according to Lukács (1981). The function of science is the *intentio recta*, or the effective knowledge of reality in itself. Hard work presupposes the effort required to unveil the trends that are manifested in the traces of universalities and in spatial concretions at certain times. In fact, “nothing is easier than judging what has content and solidity; apprehending it is more difficult; and the most difficult thing is to produce your exhibition, which unifies both” (HEGEL, 1992, p. 23).

In the relationship between theory and practice, the two variables do not rank and subordinate each other in a mechanistic sense, nor is there a relationship of equivalence. Theory is the reflection of practice and this, in its essential movement, is the criterion of the truth or falsity of a theory or theoretical proposition. Theoretical knowledge “is the knowledge of the object—of its structure and dynamics—as it is in itself, in its real and effective existence, regardless of the researcher's desires, aspirations and representations” (NETTO, 2011, p. 20). The theory, therefore, is the “ideal reproduction of the real movement of the object by the researcher”; namely, “by theory, the subject reproduces in his thought the structure and dynamics of the object he is researching” and this reproduction means that “the more correct and true the more faithful the subject is to the object” (NETTO, 2011, p. 21).

The intellectual, the philosopher, the theorist are not contemplative personalities who live in the world of ideas, though some may even be. However, the theory that is the most true, i.e., comes closest to the totality and essence of the

object, is deeply rooted in objective reality and in social practice. This does not mean that the theory should be attached to the phenomenal and the apparent. Conversely, according to scientific theory, appearance is overcome in the links of dialectical reciprocity with the essence of the object. A theory that only explains the apparent is a superficial theory.

The researcher's objective of “going beyond the phenomenal, immediate and empirical appearance where knowledge necessarily begins; this appearance being a level of reality and, therefore, something important and not disposable, is”, accordingly, to “apprehend the essence (that is, the structure and dynamics) of the object”. Additionally, this approach always yields an approximation (since reality is much more dynamic than theory) of the essence, as “the researcher reproduces, in the ideal plane, the essence of the object you investigated” (NETTO, 2011, p. 22).

The ontological perspective has the object as its central pole in the knowledge process. This approach starts from an observation where the object is formed by a dialectical reciprocity between essence and appearance. At the same time, the object has an exclusive function in the reproduction process of society. In addition, each object is related to other objects and to the synthesis of social relations that comprise the socio-spatial totality, which are historically constructed and permanently in motion.

Thus, when considering this perspective, it is always necessary to seek the historical and ontological origins and the natural and social functions that a given dimension provides in the reproduction of society, in combination with the totality and the process of human self-construction. Hence, “the action, which is inherent to the function, is consistent with the form that contains it; thus, the processes only gain full significance when embodied” (SANTOS, 1997, p. 02). This represents the relational aspect throughout the historical process in the search for the understanding of current actions and contents, because “the dialectical movement between form and content, which space, the sum of the two, presides over, is also the dialectical movement of the social whole, apprehended in and through geographic reality” (SANTOS, 1997, p. 02). Therefore, space “must be considered as a totality, like the society that gives it life” (SANTOS, 1997, p. 05). We will expound upon this idea when dealing with the geographic space itself; however, it is extremely important to consider that

Space reproduces social totality, insofar as

these transformations are determined by social, economic and political needs. Thus, the space itself reproduces itself within the totality, when it evolves according to the mode of production and its successive moments. But space also influences the evolution of other structures and, therefore, becomes a fundamental component of the social totality and its movements. (SANTOS, 1977, p. 91)

This relationship seeks to apprehend the essence of the object that allows the elaboration of criticism. The critique of “accumulated knowledge consists of bringing it to rational examination, making them aware, their foundations, their conditioning and their limits, at the same time that the contents of that knowledge are verified from real historical processes” (NETTO, 2011, p. 18).

Criticism, from an ontological perspective, will be the confrontation of a given theory with reality. It is “the real that serves as a screen against which the theory is blurred” and the theory “is shown to be false insofar as it is not the faithful reproduction of the real [...]” (CHASIN, 1988, p. 16). The term “faithful reproduction” or the term “reflex” is not simplified or similar to a photographic copy. These terms are instead expressions that seek to translate real trends operating in objectivity. This expression must seek precision, as ARISTOTLE (1979) warns in the quote of this article. The movement, development, ruptures, and continuities of essences in appearances constitute the challenge for scientific activity: “this movement of pure essentialities constitutes the nature of scientificity in general. Considered as a connection of their content, it is the need and the expansion of it in an organic whole” (HEGEL, 1992, p. 39).

Accordingly, in the ontological-critical approach, there is no set of analytical and methodological procedures that the researcher will require to “apply” to their object. Science “is not preceded by a method, but begins with itself;” in other words, “science is not applying a method, but it is discovering the secret of the object”, because “what is sought in science is the substance, that is, one searches for what is fundamental for the entity” (CHASIN, 1988, p. 69). Documentary, philosophical, bibliographic analysis, and associated research techniques will serve as a means for the researcher to discover the real movement of the object and not as an end in itself. In view of this tenet, “a theory, that is, its explanation, is a system built in the spirit, whose categories of thought

reproduce the structure that ensures the chain of facts” (SANTOS, 1988, p. 10, [our highlights](#)).

We have arrived at the fundamental point: the relationship between law and particularity. The general laws of this tradition that we are debating concern the lessons learned from the objectivity itself throughout the historical process. These general laws, therefore, are not rigid and immutable, nor are they creations of subjectivity that built them autonomously a priori; instead, these laws are theoretical expressions of subjectivities that translated them from the essence of reality. For example, the production process currently impacts the entire geographic space. This is a general law that can be found widely through research. However, the concrete manifestation that the laws express in each place or in each territory will demonstrate the specificity of the totality; namely, places and territories are not explained by themselves, but inarticulation. Their social relations with the geographic space as a totality are understood not as a mere sum of the parts, but as a qualitative synthesis of the multiple relations that are spatialized and transformed. Therefore, it is necessary to study these interactions, because “we recover the social totality, that is, the space as a whole and, equally, society as a whole. For each action is not an independent data, but a result of the social process itself” (SANTOS, 1997, p. 07).

This precise perspective demonstrates that “to explain is to rediscover wholeness” and “to understand, to intellectually capture something is to conceptually reproduce a unit that is a whole”, because “each individuality in its isolation does not reveal the integrity that it is”, since “it is the whole that explains” (CHASIN, 1988, p. 72). The totality represents this network of mediations that interferes with the orientation and direction of each social complex. It presents itself as a historical construction and as a field of possibilities for future developments. That is why the totality is dynamic, mediated, alive, imbued with movement, and never static. Specifically, “the concrete totality (as its components) is dynamized through mediations - an immediate totality is an amorphous, unstructured totality” (NETTO, 1994, p. 38). This is dynamic that has taken place throughout history and, accordingly, the “value of the variable is not a function of itself, but of its role within a set. When it changes its meaning, content, rules, or laws, it also changes the value of each variable” (SANTOS, 1997, p. 11).

Next, we consider the “predominant moment” role that the totality plays. In any

social relationship, according to Lukács, there will be a predominant moment. Without this knowledge, we fall into a perspective of inert and dead wholeness. The predominant moment is "the strength of the things in the complex in which they are interconnected" and "complexes integrated by the same things have different accentuation moments" (CHASIN, 1988, p. 82). This is not a rigid, absolute, or impermeable influence; instead, it is an establishment of the real and concrete possibilities.

Work, by creating the possibility of the emergence of the social being, conforms to the predominant moment of the origin of social totality. However, the totality appears with the "mediation function indispensable for the consolidation of the social being" (ANDRADE, 2014, p. 192). Thus, this social mediation must be clarified with the geographical space.

GEOGRAPHIC SPACE: PARTICULARITY AND POSSIBILITY

It is essential to understand the peculiarity of a geographical space. Space is always "a relational reality: things and relationships together" as "an inseparable group in which, on the one hand, a certain arrangement of geographic objects, natural objects and social objects, and, on the other hand, the life that fills them and animates [...]" (SANTOS, 1988, p. 10).

We have already demonstrated the origin of space from the ontological leap to the social being operated by work. Notably, space will not act solely as a receptacle for human action. Instead, it is an expression of the active and interventional socio-spatial multidimensionality of individuals in society in its most diverse objectifications and ideations. "Space is the result of the action of men on space itself, intermediated by objects, natural and artificial" (SANTOS, 1988, p. 25).

The contemporary geographical space, which is strongly complex and interconnected, confronts the future of individuals and depends on the future of mankind. It is no longer possible to resolve local issues solely by operating from places and looking only at territories themselves. Structural issues demand global solutions. This is why "the world has always been a set of possibilities. Today, however, these possibilities are all interconnected and interdependent" (SANTOS, 1988, p. 13).

Despite the reasoning of the Brazilian geographer being correct in the previous quote, he lacked a determination of the decisive

influence of the predominant moment in the relationship of the totality with the geographical space. This is not an attack, as I recognize the importance of his work and the concrete nature of many of his elaborations. However, we should not "sacralize" the authors, but instead establish an honest intellectual relationship based on the comparison of their theoretical propositions with reality in its essence. All totality is simultaneously economic, social, spatial, cultural, and so on in scope. However, the geographical space presents itself as a totality, i.e., a complex, that is managed and guided by a larger complex of an even broader totality. Lukács (2013) accordingly characterizes society as a "complex of complexes", i.e., the reciprocal and eminently dynamic interactions of various totalities in their different social functions and particularities. Santos (1988) correctly determined the existence and importance of the totality, but not the predominant moment:

The geographer becomes an empiricist, and is condemned to make mistakes in his analyzes, if he only considers the place, as if he explained everything for himself, and not the history of the relationships, of the objects on which human actions take place, since objects and relationships maintain dialectical connections, where the object embraces social relationships, and these impact objects. The geographer would be functionalist if he took only function into account; and structuralist if he only indicated the structures, without recognizing their historical movement or social relationship without knowing what produced it. In the analysis, it is necessary to apprehend objects and relationships as a whole, and only then will we be close to being holistic, that is, people concerned with the totality. (SANTOS, 1988, p. 21)

As stated previously, we agree that social complexes are only fully understood in their links with the whole, including the geographical space. Additionally, "the true is the whole. But the whole is only the essence that is implemented through its development (HEGEL, 1992, p. 31). However, even as a totality, the space will be guided by the demands, possibilities, and obstacles created by the totality in which it is inserted as a complex. This is the sense of predominance that the greatest and broadest moment has. From Santos (1988):

What hurts is that we do not know the fact itself, but the interpretations that are

carried out by international agencies. So there is a need, on the part of the intellectual, to read not just one, but the various versions of a fact, so that he can have another view of the world, a real view of the concrete facts, since the world can be seen with many distinct lenses. (SANTOS, 1988, p. 21)

It is essential to know the different positions regarding events. Accordingly, Aristotle stated that:

It is necessary to force ourselves to go in the direction of the opposite extreme, because we will reach the intermediate state, moving as far away from error as possible, as those who try to straighten crooked sticks do (ARISTOTLE, 1979, p. 77)

However, it is not simply the confrontation between different positions that will guarantee “a real view of the concrete facts” as pointed out by the geographer in the previous quote. Thus, the divergent theoretical positions and propositions must be confronted with the reality in its historical process, from the perspective of what is essential. This investigative effort passes, without fail, through the apprehension of the predominant moment. In the study of totality, it is necessary to consider, in addition to the time and scale, the categories of structure, function, and form, since “the notion of process permeates all these categories” (SANTOS, 2007, p. 40). Such categories define the “concrete totality, the totality in its permanent process of totalization” (SANTOS, 2007, p. 40). This opens up the possibility of an explanation that has reached the “depth of the Thing”, i.e., “when at last the rigor of the concept has penetrated the depth of the Thing, then such knowledge and appreciation will have their place in the conversation” (HEGEL, 1992, p. 23).

It is a recognition of an ontological order that, despite not calling attention to the predominance of moments, it manages to capture the real dynamics that is present in the dialectic of totality and geographical space. The mediation between the totality and the geographical space is also performed through the category of social production. This is the relevance of the medium between the socio-spatial totality and the historical-spatial process. In the production of work and economics, as well as the production of human life itself and of life in society in its objective and subjective aspects:

It is evident that production, as a predominant moment, is understood here in the broadest possible sense - in the ontological sense - as production and reproduction of human life, which even in its extremely primitive stages (the Mongolian herding) goes far beyond mere biological conservation, and therefore cannot fail to have an accentuated economic and social character. It is this general form of production that determines distribution in the Marxian sense. More precisely: what is at stake here are men, whose abilities, habits, etc. make certain modes of production possible. These capacities, however, are in turn generated on the basis of concrete modes of production. (LUKÁCS, 2012, p. 336, our highlights)

The way in which human beings, therefore, organize themselves in social production puts the course in front of the socio-spatial totality and establishes the possibilities of organization, distribution, and production of geographical space. Thus, “It is not better distributed without changing the form of production, because distribution is produced by the form of production” (CHASIN, 2018, p. 22). This influence demonstrates the character of the predominant moment in socio-spatial relations.

Thus, the reciprocal determination between the totality and geographical space is evidenced by social production playing the predominant role in laying the foundations for socio-spatial distribution and production. This is an ontological-critical contribution that Lukács, for example, can offer to research and teaching geography.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, we present a broad review of the philosophical tradition that the ontological-critical perspective can offer to the understanding of geographical space and its relationship with the totality. The relationship between theory, practice, and criticism must be first understood. The theory, in this approach, is the conceptual translation of real and effective movements in their essentiality. The practice, in the articulation between essence and appearance, is configured as an indispensable counterpoint for the elaboration of the ontological criticism that verifies the advances, deviations, successes, and gaps of the different social theories.

To understand the genesis of science and geographic space, we start from the observation, along with Lukács (1981), that individuals are not born ready. A human being appears on the face of the Earth when they develop an effective teleological approach that represents a new articulation between consciousness and objective reality that arises, first and not exclusively, from work acts; more specifically, the approach comes from the teleological transformation oriented from natural reality to meet social needs. This process facilitates the possibility for the origins of new social complexes with different social functions in the process of social reproduction. The field enables the emergence of totality as a qualitative synthesis of the various socio-spatial interactions rather than a simple summation of its cumulative dimensions.

In this aspect, we affirm that the totality determines the field of possibilities for the orientation of geographical space. At the same time, the totality itself, when exercising this predominant role, dialectically experiences interference from the manner in which individuals geographically produce life in the society. Social production (in a broad sense), using social totality as mediation, is the predominant moment; for this reason, the ontological priority is found in the distribution, organization, and production of the geographical space as a totality. This does not, however, nullify the interference of space in the social totality. Consequently, this understanding is a case that we address in this article regarding the investigative potential that the ontological perspective can offer. This dynamic reaffirms the position that “the bridge to be launched between half-open possibilities and the act of building a new history will come from the complex domain where these same data are found, according to variable combinations” (SANTOS, 1988, p. 13). Complex domains that originate from our geographic and scientific knowledge will be able to translate the interactions between totality and space in its predominant moments; accordingly, in fact, “it is not difficult to see that our time is a time of birth and transit to a new era” (HEGEL, 1992, p. 26).

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