Interconnections between Socio-Spatial Justice Theories and Social Housing Production in Brazil

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GJHSS-C Classification: LCC: HD7287.96.B6

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I. Introduction

When examining housing policies in Brazilian cities, it becomes evident that housing production has been intertwined with financial capital through mechanisms of land rent extraction, reproducing the dynamics of capital expansion and accumulation—even in the context of social housing. Such practices have significantly contributed to the formation of fragmented cities or cities undergoing socio-spatial fragmentation processes (SPOSITO & SPOSITO, 2021; HARVEY, 2013; HARVEY, 1993).

Public policies are fundamental institutional tools for addressing the logics perpetuated by capitalist agents, aiming to mitigate socio-spatial inequalities arising from accumulation processes and foster the consolidation of fairer cities. According to Muller and Surel (2002, p. 14), public policy is not merely a set of decisions made by governing bodies but represents a normative framework of actions and guidelines that reconcile the interests of involved stakeholders, grounded in social constructs, research, and the ethical and moral principles inherent to each society.

Focusing specifically on housing policy, Silva (2014, p. 50) argues:

One challenge in formulating and implementing housing policies is the difficulty in perceiving housing as a public service. While policies such as education and healthcare have been universalized and provided free of charge to the population, the same approach has not been applied to housing policies. Most housing programs rely on financing, subsidies, and outsourced construction of properties.

This observation is critical, as it highlights the subordination of housing policy to the interests of large capital holders—a condition reinforced ideologically, given that housing is not viewed as a collective good but rather as property to be "earned" through labor, a "deserved reward."

Considering these aspects, we question how access to housing can achieve a balance among urban residents, overcoming antagonisms between economic agents and society at large. In other words, how can public policy act as an intervention favoring vulnerable populations or those affected by housing deficits, thereby democratizing access to homeownership, reducing inequalities, and ultimately contributing to the creation of a more just city?

Thus, the research objective is to analyze the intersections between key theories of justice and spatial justice (or socio-spatial justice, as termed by some scholars) and their alignment with public-sector actions in Brazil. Methodologically, this involves systematizing and connecting bibliographic reviews from academic databases and literature, alongside surveys of documentary archives and public-domain sources. Our aim is to contribute to reflections on housing policy as an instrument for promoting socio-spatial justice through coordinated urban planning.

II. The Concept of Justice and Geography

We outline key approaches to constructing the concept of justice and its intersection with geography, given its varied applications across scientific disciplines. Our focus is not on criminal or penal justice but on justice within a socio-spatial framework, as proposed by Legroux (2022). The author explores justice through questions about the nature of injustice, its ethical dimensions, and its spatial manifestations in a critical review. Central to his inquiry are: "What is unjust? Why is it unjust? For whom is it unjust? At what scales is it unjust? Where is it unjust?" (LEGROUX, 2022, p. 4).

Legroux begins with Rawls' theory of justice (RAWLS, 1971), which rests on three principles:

(i) *The principle of equal liberty (guaranteeing freedom for all),*

(ii) *The principle of fair equality of opportunity, and*

(iii) *The difference principle, termed maximin (permitting inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged) (LEGROUX, 2022, p. 7).*

Rawlsian theory advocates wealth redistribution to reduce inequalities and promote social justice. Legroux (2022) critiques Rawls for neglecting to

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interrogate the structural origins of inequality or historical-material contexts, rendering individuals as passive, atomized entities.

To complement this, Legroux (2022) draws on Maric (1996), who argues that redistribution alone is insufficient without empowering individuals to utilize resources effectively. Similarly, Harvey's Social Justice and the City (1993) marks a Marxist turn in geographic thought, challenging the quantitative and theoretical schools dominant during the Cold War. Harvey critiques liberal formulations of spatial systems and social processes (SILVA, 1976), integrating Marx's labor theory of value to analyze land rent and absolute land value—key to understanding territorial social justice. As Legroux (2022, p. 8) notes, this perspective positions justice as "a tool for consciousness-raising among the exploited, within conflicts and struggles."

Legroux (2022, p. 15) further links justice to spatiality, emphasizing how socio-spatial injustices materialize in urban forms and functions under neoliberal urbanization, where cities become commodities. Lima (2020) aligns with Lefebvre's right to the city (1968), advocating democratized urban access. However, Jouffe (2010, p. 50) warns against reducing this right to mere accessibility, which risks legitimizing neoliberal urban governance while erasing participatory city-making.

Young (1990) defines justice as the absence of oppression, critiquing Rawls for upholding "bourgeois values." Fraser (1996) advances redistribution and recognition as dual strategies for just urban planning. Affirmative redistribution addresses immediate inequities, while transformative redistribution restructures socio-economic systems. Recognition, meanwhile, entails emancipating individuals through critical engagement with cultural and spatial identities.

Though these theories diverge, they collectively inform criteria for socio-spatial justice in housing policy. While distributive justice addresses wealth disparities, recognition and empowerment are vital to dismantling oppression. Citizens must transition from passive policy recipients to active agents in shaping equitable cities (RAWLS, 1971; HARVEY, 1993; MARIC, 1996; YOUNG, 1990; FRASER, 1996; LEGROUX, 2022).

III. THE CITY AND THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

There is consensus among scholars in Urban Geography regarding the origins of cities—not merely as population agglomerations but as products of socio-spatial relations. The accumulation of agricultural surpluses enabled the territorial division of labor, paving the way for exchange-value commodification and the first industrial revolution (SINGER, 1977; SOUZA, 2003). Singer (1977, p. 11) defines urban civilization as:

[...] one in which the production or capture of a food surplus allows a portion of the population to live clustered in non-agricultural activities. [...] The relations between urban and rural dwellers are evident, with the former supplying goods or services in exchange for rural products.

Souza (2003) similarly argues that agricultural surplus shifted societies from subsistence-based production to surplus-driven trade, revolutionizing social structures. However, these transformations unfolded unevenly across civilizations.

Stotz and Natal (2015) outline three historical phases of urbanization:

Originary Cities: Emerged alongside primitive accumulation, territorial labor division, and class relations.

Industrial Cities: Coincided with the second industrial revolution and capitalist production, where cities became "*expressions of capital itself*" (STOTZ & NATAL, 2015, p. 44).

Postmodern Cities: Marked by flexible accumulation since the 1980s, prioritizing financial capital over productive capital and neoliberal state withdrawal (SANTOS, 2016).

Santos (1994, p. 24) describes the postmodern urban milieu as a "techno-scientific-informational" landscape:

[...] geographic space is now reconstituted through science, technology, and information. It is neither natural nor merely technical. These elements underpin spatial utilization, new biological processes, and species creation—a scientization, technicization, and informatization of space.

The 21st century has solidified this framework, with cities increasingly shaped by neoliberal ideologies promoting minimal state intervention (SANTOS, 2016).

Socio-spatial fragmentation—a hallmark of postmodern urbanism—intensifies class segregation, restricting encounters with difference and eroding the right to the city (LEGROUX, 2021; SPOSITO & SPOSITO, 2021). As Jouffe (2010, p. 44) notes:

Urbanity rests on the encounter of differences, requiring the dissolution of boundaries and discrimination to ensure universal urban access.

Cities have shifted from monocentric (center-periphery) structures to polycentric configurations, reinforcing class segregation through stigmatized spaces (WHITACKER, 2017a; 2017b). Gated high-end residential complexes exemplify autosegregation, legitimized by discourses of urban fear and insecurity (SPOSITO & GÓES, 2017).

Postmodern cities reflect the interplay of accumulation-driven coalitions and counter-hegemonic agents. Digital algorithms now mediate urban experiences, perpetuating ideologies of individualism, meritocracy, and entrepreneurialism (BAUMAN, 2001; HAN, 2015; FOUCAULT, 1999).

Nunes (2019, p.18) critiques the "homeowner-ship paradigm"—a bourgeois ideology propagated via media to uphold power structures, reducing collective demands to consumerist aspirations. Bonduki (2017, p. 92) adds:

Capital promotes homeownership to instill bourgeois moral and cultural norms among workers, framing property as symbolic of material progress.

This ideology, deeply embedded in Brazilian housing policy, exemplifies how neoliberal urbanism subjugates social equity to market logic..

IV. Housing Policy in Brazil

Since colonization, Brazil has never undergone agrarian reform. The first national social housing policy emerged in 1964 with the creation of the Banco Nacional da Habitação (BNH, National Housing Bank) under the Housing Financial System. This system pooled resources from the Fundo de Garantia por Tempo de Serviço (FGTS, Severance Pay Fund) and the Sistema Brasileiro de Poupança e Empréstimo (SBPE, Brazilian Savings and Loan System) to finance housing construction. Earlier, public housing credit was managed by Institutos de Aposentadoria e Pensão (IAPs, Pension Institutes), which, as Silva (2014, p. 52) notes, prioritized capitalization over housing provision for low-income workers:

[...] [IAPs] always had an ambiguous role in housing: as pension institutions, capitalization overshadowed housing provision for low-income workers.

Loureiro *et al.* (2013) argue that the BNH failed to target the lowest-income strata. Within a decade, only 3% of beneficiaries earned less than five minimum wages, revealing a misalignment with vulnerable populations. Partnerships with the real estate sector diluted the program's efficacy, compounded by authoritarian, centralized governance. Bolaffi (1979) highlights that while the BNH minimally addressed housing for the poor, it significantly boosted the construction sector through stable credit lines.

The distributive nature of these policies lacked transformative potential, serving more to placate social movements demanding agrarian reform and housing during the military dictatorship. As Bolaffi (1979, p. 47) critiques:

[...] the "popular housing problem," unresolved despite ample resources, was a political artifice to address conjunctural economic issues.

Regional entities like Companhias Habitacionais (COHABs, Housing Companies) emerged, constructing large-scale housing complexes with minimal infrastructure—often disconnected from urban grids. Bonduki (2008) criticizes the BNH's one-size-fits-all approach, ignoring Brazil's diversity. Namur (2004) emphasizes that these developments' peripheral locations hindered accessibility. Silva (2014, p. 43) adds:

[...] housing complexes divorced from urban networks, lacking sanitation or transport, stem from disjointed territorial and policy planning.

Such issues reflect profit-driven strategies prioritizing land rent and developer capital (capital incorporador), which, per Smolka (1987, p.47), "organizes private investments in the built environment." Logan and Molotch's (1987) "growth machine" theory further contextualizes urban expansion via land rent extraction, while Carvalho and Góes (2021) detail developers' tactics to bypass regulatory constraints.

The 2000 Constitutional Amendment (No. 26) enshrined housing as a social right (SENADO FEDERAL, 2014). Law No. 4.591/1964 mandates private developers to lead housing production, yet irregular constructions persist (BRASIL, 1964). Post-BNH, the Caixa Econômica Federal (CEF, Federal Savings Bank) inherited housing policy, but federal efforts remained fragmented (MARICATO, 2006, p. 214).

Under President Itamar Franco (1993–1994), programs like Habitar Brasil and Morar Município emerged, requiring municipal councils and dedicated funds. President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002) expanded credit via the Sistema Financeiro Imobiliário (SFI, Real Estate Financial System), linking housing to financial markets.

Lula da Silva's administration (2003–2010) established the Ministério das Cidades (Ministry of Cities) to address housing, sanitation, and mobility. However, budget constraints and competition with financial capital limited its impact (MARICATO, 2011; SILVA, 2014).

The Programa Minha Casa Minha Vida (PMCMV, My House My Life Program), launched in 2009, consolidated earlier initiatives like the Fundo Nacional de Habitação (2005, National Housing Fund) and Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento (2007, Growth Acceleration Program). PMCMV offered subsidies and credit for first-home purchases across income brackets (see Table 1).

Table 01: Benefits Granted by the Minha Casa Minha Vida Program by Income Bands

Features	Band	Income (Monthly)
Up to 90% subsidy on the property value. Paid in up to 120 monthly installments of up to R$ 270.00, interest-free	1	Up to BRL 1.800
Up to R$ 47,500.00 in subsidies, with 5% annual interest	1,5	Up to BRL 2.600
Up to R$ 29,000.00 in subsidies, with 6% to 7% annual interest	2	Up to BRL 4.000
8.16% annual interest (no direct subsidy)	3	Up to BRL 9.000

Source: Ministry of Regional Development (2017).

The PMCMV revolutionized housing production in Brazil, reaching various segments of the population whose household income did not exceed BRL 9,000 under the band 1, modality, targeting families within comes up to BRL1,800.00, subsidies covering up to 90% of the property value were provided. Between 2009 and 2019, over 4.3 million housing units were delivered, as reported by Abe and Lima (2019).

Furthermore, the "Entidades" modality (PMCMV-E) was specifically designed for social movements advocating state intervention to secure housing rights. Established as an appendix to the legislation in response to grassroots demands and formalized by Resolution No. 141/2009, this modality created a channel for federal funds to be allocated through PMCMV to nonprofit entities organizing low-income families. This model emphasized self-management, with land ownership assigned to the entity while families acquired ownership of individual units.

Self-management and collectivism represent strategies for urban citizens' emancipation, enabling them to assert their societal position and defend their interests beyond capitalist ideologies. This housing model challenges hegemonic frameworks; however, its implementation encountered conflicts between organizing entities and dominant market actors. Teixeira (2017, p. 26) notes that entities became hostages in this process, termed by some movements as "surrogate motherhood" ("barriga de aluguel"). Without technical expertise to manage construction, entities relied on private developers, yet legal and financial risks ultimately fell on the entities: "If the contractor abandons the project, the responsibility lies with the organizing entity, not the company or the state bank [Caixa]." This structural flaw contributed to the modality's discontinuation.

Evaluating PMCMV policies through the lens of socio-spatial justice reveals their affirmative redistributive character, with substantial subsidies and low-interest rates enabling homeownership for many families affected by housing deficits. Nevertheless, social distinction persists, reproduced through housing attributes such as location, infrastructure, mobility networks, sanitation, proximity to services, employment, and consumer hubs.

The siting of social housing remains dictated by capital investments in land and urban (re)organization. Vulnerable social groups are often relegated to areas with limited prestige, inadequate services, and peripheral locations. This dynamic underscores the need to reimagine housing policies. Admittedly, confronting real estate interests to build social housing in central or high-value areas—even with state support—is a complex, near-impossible task. Thus, social housing policies must integrate broader socio-territorial development strategies, ensuring access not only to urban spaces but also to public and private amenities that promote health, convenience, and well-being.

Notably, class distinctions perpetuated through housing—though not exclusively—can be understood as mechanisms of domination and oppression. Socio-spatial differentiation and segregation undermine effective access to urban spaces, reinforcing stigmatization of certain areas. As Elorza (2019, p. 95) argues:

Stigmatized neighborhoods symbolically degrade their inhabitants, who reciprocate this degradation; territorial stigmatization reinforces the 'anchoring' of low-capital classes to marginalized urban zones. This process actively segregates, excluding residents of low-prestige areas from material and symbolic resources, thereby deteriorating their living conditions.

Carvalho and Góes (2021) highlight implications for residents of peripheral social housing in medium-sized cities. Mobility and accessibility challenges dominate, exacerbating stigmatization and hindering employment opportunities. They argue that, in the absence of public intervention, citizens resort to individualized solutions—private vehicles or ride-hailing apps—reinforcing neoliberal logics and individualism.

However, dismissing PMCMV's contributions would be misguided. The program democratized homeownership for millions of vulnerable and lower-middle-class families. During President Jair Bolsonaro's administration (2019–2022), PMCMV was discontinued in 2021 and replaced by the Casa Verde e Amarela Program (PCVA). The PCVA retained PMCMV's mechanisms but restricted access through tighter credit policies, reduced subsidies, and higher down payments, prioritizing real estate market interests and excluding low-income groups—a regression in socio-spatial justice.

In 2023, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva reinstated PMCMV, introducing reforms such as new

investment funds for housing production, increased income eligibility thresholds, elimination of the "Faixa 1.5" category, and the revival of PMCMV-E (Ministério das Cidades, 2023). These changes aim to realign the program with its original redistributive goals, though structural challenges persist in addressing socio-spatial inequities.

V. Author's Considerations

Analyzing the current socio-political landscape, establishing a set of guidelines for a social housing policy capable of fostering more equitable cities—as emphasized throughout this work—inevitably involves confronting the clash between social demands (rooted in necessity and rights) and the profit-driven interests of hegemonic actors.

The production of housing, whether through public policies or social housing initiatives, remains subordinated to the logic of differential land rent, perpetuating spatial inequalities and reshaping urban spaces through socio-spatial differentiation and segregation. Urban fabrics thus appear fragmented, with social differences increasingly disengaged from meaningful interaction.

A critical question arises: How can these forces be confronted in coalitions against hegemonic actors and their vast resources? The answer, though seemingly straightforward, is complex. Communities possess the capacity to organize and advocate for their interests, provided they achieve collective recognition and emancipation—in this case, centered on housing rights.

Examples include rural landless movements fighting for small plots of land for housing and urban associations mobilizing around irregular settlements or informal urban clusters. Civil society engagement—through social movements, cooperatives, local committees, and consortia—strengthens demands for legal and institutional reforms, pressuring public authorities to uphold essential rights despite systemic opposition.

Furthermore, the state must assume an active role as a mediator in advancing socio-spatial justice. This entails investing in education and awareness to empower citizens, transforming them into proactive agents of spatial production through participatory governance. Effective communication channels between communities and policymakers are vital to this process.

Equally urgent is the equitable redistribution of wealth via programs that subsidize housing access without imposing excessive burdens, while ensuring new developments meet social demands for infrastructure, mobility, sanitation, healthcare, and leisure. A just housing policy cannot be imposed vertically, prioritizing market logic over human needs, nor can it reinforce territorial stigmatization. Achieving this requires concerted efforts across public and private sectors, ideological shifts toward collectivism, and a renewed commitment to collective well-being.

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