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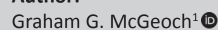
Decolonial cities: Considering the potential of the periphery in Rio de Janeiro



Author:
Graham G. McGeoch[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Faculdade Unida de Vitória, Vitória, Espírito Santo, Brazil

Corresponding author:
Graham McGeoch,
graham@fuv.edu.br

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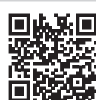

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Augustine has long set the 'gold standard' for any theology of the city. However, in the Americas, Thomas Aquinas' *De regimine principum* exerts a greater practical and political influence as it was the basis for the instructions of Spanish and Portuguese crowns to the conquistadores. Colonial city architecture and urban planning followed Christian medieval principles and deliberately excluded indigenous villages, enslaved peoples, the urban poor and other religions from urban imaginaries in the Americas. This medieval (colonial) theology of the city has failed the peripheries of the Americas, as it has trapped theology in an instinctively negative attitude towards the city. This essay, firstly, establishes the legacy of colonial Christian imaginaries of the city in the Americas and explores the Christian political contributions to that worldview. Secondly, it presents a decolonial concept of the city in the Americas (specifically through a presentation of the city of Rio de Janeiro) – fostering an inclusive and just imaginary – based on the potential of the peripheries and insights from liberation theology. This potential of the periphery resists racist, authoritarian and exclusionary definitions of the periphery which are instinctively negative in the theological literature.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article presents a decolonial critique of the Thomist city. It draws on resources from theology, history and the social sciences and presents strategies for future reflection in urbanism (urban planning) and architecture.

Keywords: transmodernity; coloniality of power; liberation theology; potential of the peripheries; decolonial cities.

Introduction

Enrique Dussel's influential theory on Transmodernity is a useful starting point for our reflections. Dussel's historical, theological and philosophical scholarship notes that the centrality of Europe to modernity is only 200 years old. The omitted majority (exteriority) is beyond (or transcends) European modernity. Transmodernity focusses on the creative value of the omitted majority and investigates how multiple omitted majorities critique and reply to European modernity (Dussel 2002:221–244).

Dussel makes use of Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory (1978) with its centre-periphery model. Dussel adapts this political science theory by adding and emphasising the philosophical contribution of Emmanuel Levinas' 'Other', the exteriority. The periphery and the exteriority are almost one and the same for Dussel. Like Wallerstein and other political scientists, for Dussel, the periphery is at once a location (geographical and temporal) and an epistemology. The same is true for exteriority, although Dussel's knowledge and use of theology and philosophy give greater emphasis to periphery and exteriority as an epistemological critique and reply to modernity.

The city of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil is a creation of what Dussel calls 'first modernity', which he describes as being from 1500 to 1800. Dussel highlights two important aspects of 'first modernity': the annexation of Indian America by Spain and Portugal in 1492; and the fact that Europe was a periphery of the Asian and African cultural and economic world system from 700 to 1500. Importantly, according to Dussel, the period from 1500 to 1800 is the time when the concept of the 'coloniality of power' emerged. Dussel adds the concept of coloniality of power from Anibal Quijano's work to the concepts of World System Theory (Wallerstein) and exteriority (Levinas). The coloniality of power enabled Europe as a periphery of the East (the Hindustani, Chinese and Islamic East) to manufacture its own periphery (the Americas). The annexation of Indian America introduced racism, the myth of European superiority, economic

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exploitation, political domination and the imposition of an external culture.

According to Quijano and Dussel, coloniality of power both denies what exists and imposes what is European on Indian America. For example, there are already human settlements in Guanabara Bay long before the city was named Rio de Janeiro by the Portuguese colonial project. The full name given to the city is Sao Sebastiao do Rio de Janeiro. Several villages and settlements spread near the small rivers hugging the protected coastline of Guanabara Bay. The small rivers drained the waters from the high mountain ranges into the Guanabara Bay. The River Carioca gave its name to one of the indigenous settlements (but there were many scattered along riverbanks and throughout the marshlands leading into Guanabara Bay). The only lasting memory of this settlement is the fact that people from the city of Rio de Janeiro are called Cariocas. Carioca is a Tupi word and designated the location of an indigenous settlement. The village and its inhabitants were annihilated during the annexation by 'first modernity'.

Coloniality of power is internally contested by colonial powers. For example, the first colonial imposition of sustained European settlement in Guanabara Bay was called Henriville in homage to the French King who supported the venture (1555–1570). The commercial and military base established at Henriville (more commonly referred to as France Antarctica in the literature) was a threat to Portuguese colonial interests. The Portuguese sent ships and weapons down from Salvador da Bahia, further North on the Brazilian coastline to recapture Guanabara Bay. Later, seeing a further colonial threat to their southern Brazilian colony from the River Plate basin, the Portuguese decided to move their capital city (and therefore their commercial and military interests) from Salvador da Bahia to Rio de Janeiro in 1763.

Rio de Janeiro: A Thomist city

Theologians have always been interested in the theology of the city. Augustine's *City of God* continues to exert a strong influence on colonial theologies. Augustine's view of the city is at once practical and instinctively negative, set against the experience of the fall of Rome. According to Augustine, the earthly city is understood to exercise a degree of control over human sinfulness and to serve as anticipation of the heavenly city (an eschatological vision). Augustine's theology of the city exerted a huge influence on Western Medieval theology. The prince, the castle, the church and the marketplace demarcated the city in relation to the surrounding fields and serfs who worked the fields and did not reside in the city. Each city functioned as a self-contained world, with a key emphasis on its organised structure and internal order.

Unsurprisingly, Thomas Aquinas developed one of the most influential political and theological tracts about the city and its government. The text guided European political theology during 'first modernity'. *De regimine principum* is the reference text for political theory and political theology in Indian America,[1] helping to establish the coloniality of power in the Americas.

De regimine principum is written to the King of Cyprus. It follows classical political theory by discussing the best forms of government based on Greek political philosophy, Roman practice and Christian theology. It sets out five basic choices of government: oligarchy, democracy, polity, aristocracy and monarchy. Aquinas describes oligarchy as the few who unjustly govern the many. Inversely, democracy is the many who unjustly govern the few. He adds that it is a system where the plebeians oppress the rich. Polity is presented as government by the military through the exercise of lordship. Aristocracy is identified as the virtuous form of government. Monarchy is considered the natural form of government and the desired model. The five models have obvious parallels with Plato's proposals.

Aquinas defends that monarchy is the model form of government for the city and household. He understands that the King is the shepherd of the common good. To support his argument, Aquinas turns to the Hebrew Scriptures and describes some examples of model monarchies. He also borrows Plato's discussion of the One: 'all natural government is by one'. The principle of one (and thereby unity) has radical consequences for cities like Rio de Janeiro. For example, the One (the King) finds the city, and all power revolves around the King and Court. This exercise of coloniality of power by the One distinguishes the different components of the city: city, village, castle, universities, leisure areas, business districts, among others. Through the exercise of the coloniality of power on the geography and architecture of the city, the One exercises coloniality of power on the people by assigning them to their appropriate places.

Jose Comblin has noted that 'the theologian who walks the streets and avenues of Mexico City, Lima, Santiago and other cities has the satisfaction of finding oneself in Thomist landscape' (Comblin 1991:7). This landscape has peculiar consequences for colonial city architecture and urban planning. Thomas Aquinas' political theology deliberately excludes indigenous settlements, enslaved peoples, the urban poor (plebeians) and other religions from urban imaginaries in the Americas. It also clearly defines the relationship between the city population and the rural serfs who provide food and goods for the city. This medieval (colonial) theology of the city has failed the peripheries of the Americas, as it has trapped theology in an instinctively negative attitude towards the city.

Rio de Janeiro is a colonial city shaped by the coloniality of power. By the old port sits the Imperial Palace, the place of power. The Imperial Palace faces the sea, the route to Europe.

1. I recognise that modern scholars have questioned the authorship of this text. Patrick Nold and James M Blythe have dismissed Thomas Aquinas as the author of the political tract, locating it instead within the Thomist tradition. The question of authorship, while important, is not immediately relevant to my essay. During 'first modernity', the text was universally considered to be by Thomas Aquinas. Some 20th century theologians, notably for our discussion, Jose Comblin, continued to attribute the text to Thomas Aquinas. Furthermore, even those who contest its authorship still locate it within the Thomist tradition (political and theological).

The narrow streets stretching behind the Imperial Palace mix houses, businesses, polytechnics, leisure areas (public squares) and churches. This geographical description matches Rio de Janeiro to the Christian principles of cityscape outlined by Thomas Aquinas.

Beyond this small, congested area, the city stretches out to the *fazendas* [agricultural farms], and later more houses: the working class neighbourhoods to the North, the wealthy mansions to the South by Flamengo beach (once designated Henriville in French cartography during first modernity). The wealthy Flamengo and Gloria districts to the South of the Imperial Palace are also built on top of the former Indian American settlements thereby eradicating all traces of Brazilians by the Europeans.

In historical documentation from 'first modernity', the peoples now referred to as indigenous are called Brazilians, while the colonial settlers are designated French, Portuguese, Spanish, among others. The designation is not because of nationality, but because of the leadership of each particular colonial project. For example, 'the French' colonial project at Henriville (1555–1570) included people from France, Switzerland, Germany, Holland, Belgium and Scotland. It was only in the 19th century that there was a significant change in the literature. The colonists become Brazilians, and the original Brazilians become indigenous.

Critique and response to the colonial city

As stated in the Introduction to this article, Enrique Dussel understands that Transmodernity focusses on the creative value of the omitted majority (the exteriority) and explores the omitted majority's critique and response to European Modernity. In the remaining part of this essay, the potential of the periphery will explore exteriority, creativity, critique and response. However, before moving to the periphery (the exteriority), it is worth making explicit the influence of the Thomist city on Rio de Janeiro.

Firstly, most of the population of the city of Rio de Janeiro is black. A Thomist city is racist. European Modernity imposes an ordered hierarchy whereby the only citizens are white. In the case of Rio de Janeiro, this has particular consequences. Jeffrey D. Needell's classic study of the Abolitionist movement in Brazil traces the unusual race relations in Brazil. For example, a freed slave cannot be black, and a gentleman cannot be black. In literature, documents and social mores, Needell notes that class rather than race is a preferred signifier in colonial Rio de Janeiro.

Secondly, a Thomist city is often authoritarian. While Thomas Aquinas demonstrates a preference for monarchy, the Thomist vision is rooted in ordered hierarchy. This ordered hierarchy in Rio de Janeiro is shaped by the Portuguese King and Court. During the Napoleonic Wars, the Portuguese Court transferred from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro (1807–1821). This had a profound impact on reinforcing the Thomist cityscape in Rio de Janeiro.

Even when Brazil proclaimed independence (1822), the movement and declaration were led by the monarch's son and the military. During the first years of independence, the Court and the military continued to exercise power. When the Emperor was finally deposed (1889), it was through a coup d'etat led by military leaders. This model of governance in Rio de Janeiro clearly follows the preferences set out in *De regimine principum*: monarchy, oligarchy and polity. It also clearly sets in motion the authoritarian trends that befell Brazil during its history and underpins the inherent fragility of democracy in the country (McGeoch 2021; Skidmore 1988).

Thirdly, there is no place for the periphery in the Thomist city. Most of the population is not contemplated by the Thomist city and does not participate in the conception of the city. The Thomist city is a centre (in the centre-periphery model of the World Systems Theory). The periphery serves the interests of the city but has no place in the city. As such, the city is clearly demarcated against the countryside (or hinterland) and other peripheries. Agricultural labourers (including indentured labourers) and slaves are not contemplated by the Thomist city. Landowners are because they maintain properties (residences) in the city. The right to citizenship (of the city) during 'first modernity' is linked to property rights. Therefore, even in the city, large parts of the population are not contemplated: women, children, slaves, indentured labourers, workers and artisans.

The exclusion of the periphery gives rise to the multiple omitted majorities in Thomist cities. The periphery critiques and replies to the coloniality of power of the Thomist city – the denial of what exists (the periphery) and the imposition of what is European. In the remainder of this article, I will present a decolonial concept of the city in the Americas – fostering an inclusive and just imaginary – based on the potential of the peripheries and insights from liberation theology. This potential of the periphery resists racist, authoritarian and exclusionary definitions of the periphery which are instinctively negative in theological literature.

Decolonial cities: The potential of the peripheries[2]

Liberation theology famously makes 'an option for the poor' (Gutierrez 2001). This is both an epistemology and a methodology. In the context of a Thomist colonial cityscape, an 'option for the poor' is an option for the multiple omitted majorities, for the peripheries. According to Fernandes et al. (2018), in modern Rio de Janeiro, often the periphery is considered a place of absence.

2. Parts of this section draw on an earlier article of mine published in Portuguese: 'Revisiting the "Theology of the City" in the Perspective of Maré, Rio de Janeiro' (2018). That article focussed on a discussion of Theology of the City in Liberation Theologies in relation to Maré, Rio de Janeiro. This text expands some of those ideas in relation to a wider decolonial critique of the Thomist city.

'It is generally accepted that urban occupations with limited access to infrastructure and public services, and with profiles of low social status (in detriment to low education levels, high levels of unemployment, precarious work situations, poor health indicators and so on), be classified as "devoid", "unfavourable", "underprivileged", "pauperized" and "destitute" … The paradigm of absence does not recognise the strategies of authentic forms of "resilience".' (Fernandes et al. 2018).

The colonially accepted (and promoted) perception of the periphery – as absence – is rooted in a Thomist construction of the city, which imposes absence on the periphery. The centre-periphery model of World Systems Theory, Transmodernity and the coloniality of power explains this presence-absence dynamic between the city and periphery. In Brazilian cities generally, and particularly in the city of Rio de Janeiro, this is popularly expressed as the division between the tarmac and dust, the perception being that the city streets are tarmacked while the peripheries have dust roads (again reinforcing the absence, in this case of infrastructure). However, as Fernandes et al. (2018) state, 'devoid', 'unfavourable', 'underprivileged', 'pauperized' and 'destitute' (all pointing to absence) do not do justice to the 'resilience' of the periphery. The 'resilience' is creative and life-giving.

Considering this, Fernandes, Sousa e Silva and Barbosa propose the paradigm of *paradigma da potência* [potency or potential or power]. The paradigm of potency stands in opposition to the paradigm of absence. 'The inventive power' of the peripheries, rendered as potential, is their capacity to generate practical and legitimate responses, forming counter-hegemonic life forms for society.

A recognition of the inventive power of groups marked by social inequality and stigmatised by violence – and more broadly, of the urban peripheries – must be used as a reference for the construction of the 'Paradigm of Potency'. It is through this mechanism that lifestyle (rather than life conditions) may be recognised by those groups' own terms (rather than compared to the hegemonic forms present in the city) (Fernandes et al. 2018).

The paradigm of potency of the periphery makes an option for the poor. It also focusses on the potential or power of the multiple omitted majorities and draws out the critique and response to the coloniality of power of the Thomist city.

A transmodern periphery critiques and responds to the Thomist colonial city. Primarily, it recognises resistance and lifestyles that are independent of church and state. The liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid (2004) affirms:

> [S]ince the concept of poverty used by the liberation theology came from dependency theory, the popular theologian was defined as independent of church and state structures of control. This is the meaning of the concept of the theologian living among the poor. (p. 130)

Another liberation theologian, Mario Aguilar, has noted that religious changes in 20th century Latin America reflected the social changes of that same period in the region. The influence of itinerant preachers (a consequence of migration waves from the countryside to the cities), the great influx of evangelical congregations reflecting unstable lives and the dissemination of migrants who belong neither to rural hinterlands nor to the Thomist cities paves the way for multiple omitted majorities to join local socially oriented political parties, small churches with pentecostal preachers or base ecclesial communities (Aguilar 2007:3). Aguilar's observation is relevant because it teaches us that a periphery is neither a rural hinterland nor a colonial (Thomist) city (McGeoch 2018).

A decolonial theology of the periphery, inspired by the reflections of Althaus-Reid and Aguilar, emphasises independence (from church and state) and social imaginary (beyond rural-city Thomist categories). Instead, a decolonial theology of the periphery dialogues with the freedom and lived experience of the periphery and its resistance, practical and legitimate responses, forming decolonial life forms for society.

Jose Comblin's *Theology of the City* explores this 'option for the poor' at the periphery. He begins with the question: 'What can a theologian say about the city?' (1991:7). He notes the influence of Augustine and Aquinas on the topic but also states that any theology of the city must begin with the city, not theology. The city, for Comblin and other liberation theologians, is broader in scope than the Thomist colonial city and begins with the potency of the periphery, the decolonial city.

According to Comblin, one consequence of this decolonial approach to the city is that it overturns the sociological assumption that posits urbanisation as a cause of de-Christianisation (Comblin 1991:266). Many theologians continue to base their paradigm of absence in the peripheries on this idea of the colonial city. Jacques Ellul's theology of the city exemplifies this: 'In the city, we are captives … the church is in captivity. And we know this is the same essential objective as the city's – to make all human beings captive' (Ellul 1998:96).

Comblin cares little for this sociological or theological perspective of de-Christianisation or secularisation of the colonial city. Rather, he is interested in the lived, practical and legitimate responses of the peripheries in the construction of decolonial cities. Comblin presents the case of rural workers who have migrated to the city to become factory workers (1991:270). The church and state are unable to integrate these peripheral subjects into their Thomist city. Therefore, a decolonial theology of the periphery must take a different approach. Decolonial theology needs to contemplate human action in the city rather than try to replicate the rural world and the Thomist imagination of the city.

It is also important to point out that when Comblin uses the word 'city' in his book, he is referring to urban centres and peripheries. The periphery is the city for Comblin. The fact that his theology of the city follows the lived experiences of peripheral subjects (rural workers and working class people) demonstrates that 'city' is a word that can be decolonised by the peripheries. A decolonial city is a paradigm of the potency of the periphery.

Another liberation theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, also agrees with Comblin's description of a theology of the city and recognises the same phenomenon in the formation of decolonial cities. However, Segundo questions more deeply the construction of a decolonial city's social consciousness (1978:14). Segundo identifies both the influence of the lost rural imaginary and the urban processes of creating consumers as major challenges to the potency of the periphery (McGeoch 2018). In other words, Segundo wants any decolonial theology of the city to surpass rural structures and rural imaginary, while at the same time combating the city's consumerism, brought about by the mass media and the creation of consumers.

According to Segundo, a decolonial theology of the city needs to resist solutions imposed by the Thomist city and help build a social consciousness that decolonises the Thomist city's will to produce consumers. The decolonial city's social consciousness includes the lived experiences of democracy (not the Thomist perspective of democracy as the many who unjustly govern the few or a system where the plebeians oppress the rich), and the potency of peripheral subjects encouraging participatory citizenship.

Conclusion

Jose Comblin notes that every major city in the Americas foregrounds a Thomist city (Comblin 1991:7) and thereby emphasises the paradigm of absence. However, liberation theology and the paradigm of potency turn to Enrique Dussel's concept of Transmodernity to explore the critique and response to European modernity which denies and imposes. The periphery resists racist, authoritarian and exclusionary definitions which are instinctively negative in the Augustinian and Thomist theological literature. Rather, the omitted majorities – peripheral subjects – construct decolonial cities of potency, resistance and lifestyle beyond the colonial city construct.

Liberation theologies present a decolonial critique of the Thomist city in the Americas. Comblin intentionally includes the periphery as the city, avoiding the more common dichotomy of centre-periphery presented in the social science literature. This enables liberation theologies to contribute to the development of the paradigm of potential advocated by Fernandes et al. (2018). Their analysis seeks to overcome the centre-periphery and presence-absence paradigms enforced by academic literature and urban planning.

Althaus-Reid and Segundo ask liberation theologies to make the option of the poor, underlining the importance of theologians who are independent of church and state. This approach increases the civil society engagement of the theologians at the periphery. Moreover, Segundo's additional call for theology to build critical social consciousness and not to produce consumers pushes any future theology of the city to focus on creativity and not control. This anti-Thomist posture helps to decolonise the Thomist cityscape and recalls James Holston's observations that insurgent citizenship developed in Brazil through the people of the urban peripheries institutionalising their social rights in a context of colonial cities that consistently try to restrict decolonial practices, cityscapes and potentials (2008:147).

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