

# The urban as anti-nation: to understand the crisis of Brazilian metropolises

O urbano como antinação: para entender a crise das metrópoles brasileiras

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## Abstract

How can we resume a development project that embraces urban reform and the right to the city? We seek to outline a theoretical and analytical framework consistent with this possibility, understanding that Brazilian cities can function as vectors for the reconstruction of the nation after the recent period of successive crises, especially the urban crisis. We propose adopting broad horizons for investigating “urban issues”, arguing that they should be considered in the light of the contemporary historical form of dependency and in view of the circumstances emerging from the 2016 parliamentary coup d'état, which imposed an ultra-liberal inflection on the country. Finally, we argue that, after this coup, the “anti-nation” nature of the urban was radicalized, and the return of the debate on dependent urbanization can help its understanding.

**Keywords:** national project; dependence; urban reform; urban crisis.

## Resumo

*Como retomar um projeto de desenvolvimento que contemple a reforma urbana e o direito à cidade? Buscamos esboçar um marco teórico-analítico compatível com essa possibilidade, entendendo que as cidades brasileiras podem funcionar como vetores da reconstrução da nação, após o período recente de sucessivas crises, com destaque para a crise urbana. Propomos adotar horizontes amplos de investigação dos “problemas urbanos”, sustentando que eles devem ser considerados à luz da forma histórica contemporânea da dependência e das circunstâncias abertas com o golpe de 2016, que impôs uma inflexão ultraliberal ao País. Defendemos, por fim, que, após esse golpe, o “caráter antinacional do urbano” foi radicalizado e que sua compreensão pode se beneficiar do resgate do debate sobre a urbanização dependente.*

**Palavras-chave:** projeto nacional; dependência; reforma urbana; crise urbana.



[...] if we look carefully at the hegemony of the liberal project of the 1990s by our economic and political elites and their organic intellectuals, we might even think that it is still one of the most accomplished "modernist" works. In this direction, we can hypothesize that today the country is being led by a truly "anthropophagic" and successful alliance between the "cosmopolitanism" of São Paulo's gardens, linked to "international high finance", and the "localism" of the owners of the "outback" and urban "rascality". This alliance of power was finally succeeding in completing the interrupted construction of a century-old project of international insertion and internal transnationalization of Brazil's decision-making centers and economic structures. (Fiori, 2000, p. 18)

## Introduction

With the text above, José Luís Fiori concluded his brilliant reflection-homage to the thinking of Celso Furtado regarding the interruption of the historical process of building Brazil as a nation. This construction began in the 1930s, with the emergence of a developmental coalition supporting the country's need for industrialization, the homogenization of society, and the affirmation of national sovereignty in the face of the forces of domination of global capitalism. This is a pessimistic conclusion, given the destructive consequences of the neoliberal project experienced in the 1990s. However, this pessimism is relativized by the author himself in his conclusion, when he takes over from Celso Furtado himself the hope that Brazilian democratization could create a popular pole of resistance to the liberal project and push towards the elaboration of an "alternative nation project".

This historical possibility almost took shape with the cycle of popular democratic governments in the 2000s, despite the

numerous and well-known ambiguities marking the national development trials in the period. But after the 2016 parliamentary coup and the victory of the ultra-liberal-conservative coalition in 2018, the process of deconstructing the nation restarted with even greater force. The allegorical and sociological image proposed by Fiori and transcribed above seems to describe, with just a few nuances, the "anthropophagic" forces, interests, and dynamics that today are accelerating our transformation into a country prone to internal and external tendencies aimed at the destruction of our ability to direct our historicity. In other words, a country founded on a national economy, institutions, and social protection policies that ensure the homogenization of opportunities and the distribution of wealth and income at a level necessary to maintain its cohesion as a collective that shares a sense of nationality and, above all, a political system with the capacity for popular participation in decision-making centers.

Such a postulate places two interrelated themes at the center of our reflection: democracy and the city. For this reason, the basic motivation behind this text is the interest in reflecting on the political possibilities of resuming a national development project as a way of implementing urban reform and, at the same time, as a strategy for resuming Brazil's growth. Today, there seems to be some room for a synergy to emerge between two goals: the reform of the cities and the transformation in the pattern of capitalist development. This would respond not only to urgent issues (unemployment, hunger, loss of income, etc.), but also to strategic issues (growth with reduced inequality, increased well-being, and innovation) and the contemporary challenges arising from the energy and climate transition. In other words, the questions are: how can Brazilian cities be rebuilt and transformed within the framework of a new national project? And who would lead this Project and be its subjects?

This motivation is linked to the efforts of the INCT Observatório das Metrôpoles to explore knowledge mobilization and information accumulated in its last two Research Programmes (2007-2016 and 2007-2022) on the urban order of the Brazilian metropolises to support the debate on these issues. At the same time, this text expresses the results of the collective efforts made by the members of the Metropolis, State, and Capital research group who have been developing readings and reflections on the transformations in the Brazilian urban order resulting from the current configuration of dependency relations. A configuration in which the main characteristic is the country's active submission to the rentier-

financial logic of global capitalism's pattern of accumulation reinforces the hypothesis that the Brazilian bourgeoisie has relinquished control of the spatial and temporal matrix of urbanization.

As classical urban sociology has already established, it is only through the action of the state that, under the capitalist mode of production, it is possible to reconcile the function of the city in social reproduction, in capital reproduction, and in the underpinning of the bourgeoisie's power legitimacy, which is usually done through regulatory policies and the direct or indirect provision of facilities and services. To this end, the state's capacity for action must be based on its relative autonomy from the immediate interests of the various fractions of capital. In these terms, what could be called, following Oliveira (1977 and 1978), the "antinational" nature of the state stems precisely from the loss of this relative autonomy in the current period, under the new conditions of dependency.

But how can we analyze Brazil's current urban crisis to tackle it based on the resumption of a national project? How can its forms of manifestation be reduced to the fundamental determinations that lie at its origin? How can we escape a simple "phenomenology of urban problems"? Finally, in what way is it possible to explain the underlying processes and reconstruct the structures, or the order, that articulate these forms of expression of the crisis as a whole?

First and foremost, we argue that the attributes of the urban order, its contradictions, and its development should be framed within broader scales and space-time horizons of investigation. For us, this opens the way to

new perspectives on cities and metropolises. In other words, it paves the way, above all, for a perspective that opposes what has been a very widespread bias in urban research excessively focused on the local sphere and the present time. We are therefore looking for more comprehensive arguments and totalizing explanations.

In our opinion, understanding the reality of Brazilian cities and metropolises requires not only describing and analyzing their crisis and problems but also considering how these cities and metropolises have been transforming in line with the characteristics of the current phase of capitalist expansion. It should be noted that, since this is a situation of dependency, it is necessary to consider Brazil's peripheral and/or semi-peripheral position in the international division of labor and the interstate system, both in the past and in the present. This peripheral insertion is widely considered by the tradition of Latin American critical thinking. In other words, since Brazil has, over time, occupied subordinate positions in the global networks of wealth and power accumulation, this is decisive, in our view, for understanding the contemporary crisis and urban order.

With this article, we want to revive a way of thinking that approaches urban spaces and problems more comprehensively. In other words, we are trying to recapture the spirit of the debates on dependent urbanization,<sup>1</sup> which, in the 1960s-1970s, sought to identify the relationship between the constitution of the urban and the functioning of capitalism, emphasizing the role of forces both internal and external to Brazilian territory. However, before outlining the links between the Brazilian

urban order and the recent development of dependent capitalism, it is necessary to better define what we are calling the urban crisis, highlighting its main forms of manifestation.

## Brazilian urban crisis and its forms of manifestation

There is no doubt that in recent years Brazil has experienced successive crises. First and foremost, among them have been the economic and institutional crises. As for the former, we can mention, for example, not only the prolonged effects of the 2015-2016 recession but also the repercussions of the paralysis of economic activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These repercussions were aggravated by the lack of national unity in combating the health emergency, which led to another crisis: a health crisis and, ultimately, a humanitarian crisis. All of this was exacerbated by high inflation rates, especially in the energy, fuel, and food markets.

Regarding the institutional crisis, the repeated attacks by former president Jair Bolsonaro, his government, and his allies on the other powers of the Republic, especially the Judiciary, stood out, leading to questions about the legitimacy of the electoral system and threats of democratic rupture. After his electoral defeat in 2022, this situation peaked in the attempt to carry out a coup d'état, which was evident in the episode of the invasion of the headquarters of the Three Powers in Brasilia on January 8, 2023. All this expresses, in our opinion, the fraying of the social pact crystallized in the 1988 Constitution. Hence

the relevance of referring, also in line with Araújo and Belinelli (2022), to the Brazilian constitutional crisis.

In addition to these and other crises, the purposes of this article need to delimit the meaning and forms of manifestation of the current Brazilian urban crisis.

The urban crisis is a widely used expression. However, most of the time it is not clear what meanings are attributed to it. Here, following the seminal arguments of Castells (1980), we define this crisis in terms of the inability of large urban agglomerations, especially metropolises, to provide, in quantity and quality, the minimum conditions to support the reproduction of social life. This translates, more specifically, into the inability to guarantee the production and distribution of collective equipment and services (physical and social infrastructures) that are indispensable not only for the reproduction of the workforce. In some cases, this inability affects the very functioning and expansion of the different circuits of capital valorization. In other words, the effects of the contemporary urban crisis affect both capital and labor, albeit unevenly. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that this crisis becomes even more complex in a situation where the state loses the capacity or renounces the capacity to coordinate the articulated rhythms of economic and social development, on the one hand, and urban development, on the other.

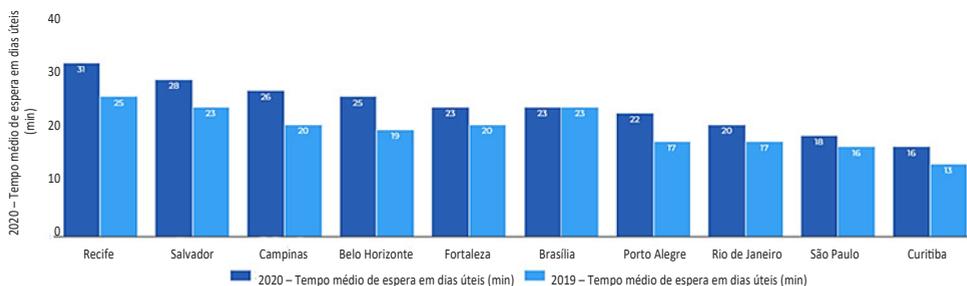
Having delimited the meaning, that is, the definition of urban crisis that serves as a reference, it is important, as stated above, to establish what we see as its main forms of

contemporary manifestation. Among them, considering the case of Rio de Janeiro in particular, we would highlight the following:

1) The tendency for urban mobility systems to collapse. Undoubtedly, one of the most emblematic cases is that of the city and metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro. Their bus fleets have been drastically reduced and disorganized, especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Its BRT (bus rapid transit) corridors, part of the so-called Olympic legacy, have reached a deplorable state, especially under former mayor Marcelo Crivella (2017-2020). Transportation on rails (trains) is constantly interrupted due to damaged/stolen cables and/or the poor management of the concessionaire Supervia. The metro system, in turn, in addition to its insufficient territorial reach, is visibly overloaded. In short, this is a trend that, both in Rio de Janeiro and in other capitals, translates into long waits and average travel times, as can be seen in Graphs 1 and 2.

2) The high unemployment rates and low-income levels of urban workers, who are increasingly structurally displaced from the world of wage-earning and subjected to precarious working and reproduction conditions. It should be noted that this displacement, which can be framed in terms of the process of social disaffiliation, as described by Castel (1998), has been used by authors such as Brandão (2002) to highlight the expansion of urban poverty in Brazil. In any case, according to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the country's unemployment rate in the first trimester of 2023 was 8.8%. A declining

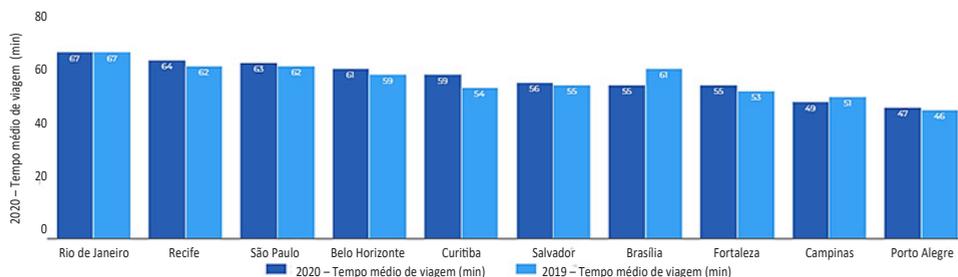
Graph 1 – Average waiting time\* (minutes)



Source: Moovit Global Report on Public Transport, 2020. Available from: <https://moovitapp.com/>.

\*Average amount of time people wait during a trip. If the trip includes transfers, the waiting time at different stops/stations is also calculated.

Graph 2 – Average waiting time\* (minutes)



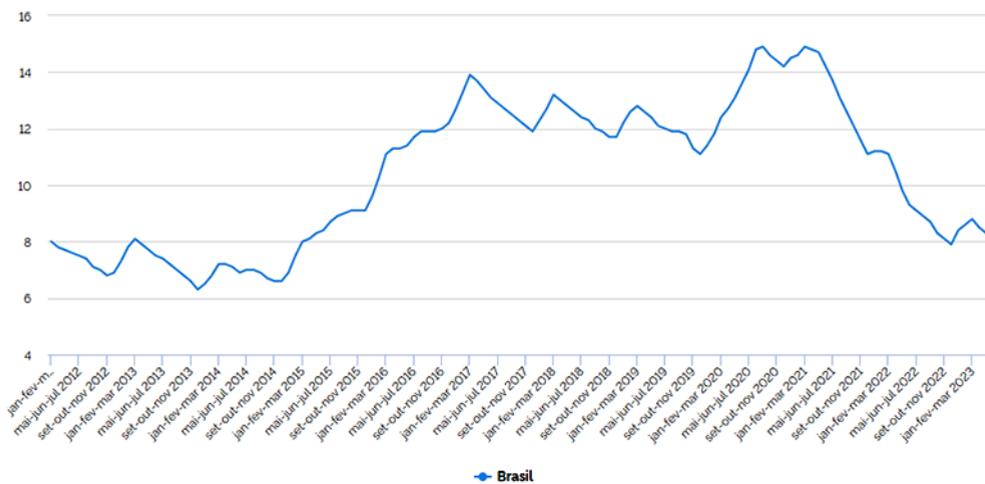
Source: Moovit Global Public Transport Report 2020. Available from: <https://moovitapp.com/>.

\* Average amount of time people travel in one direction (to or from home/work). Includes walking, waiting, and commuting time.

rate is true, after the most critical recent moments: 13.9% in the first trimester of 2017 and 14.9% in the first trimester of 2021 (Graph 3). Despite this, there are still 9.4 million unemployed workers in Brazil, and the number of informal workers in July 2022 reached a record of 39.3 million people. It is also important to note the growing number of workers, both formal and informal, whose pay does not exceed the minimum wage. We can also consider the number of discouraged

workers, i.e., people who are no longer looking for a job because they believe they will not find one - 3.9 million in the first trimester of 2023. Finally, it is possible to indicate the so-called underutilization rate of the workforce, which includes the unemployed and those underemployed due to insufficient hours, of 18.9% in the same period. It should be noted that surveys on unemployment in Brazil, such as the IBGE's, show that this phenomenon is particularly sensitive in large cities.

Graph 3 – Unemployment rate in Brazil (2012 – first trimester of 2023)



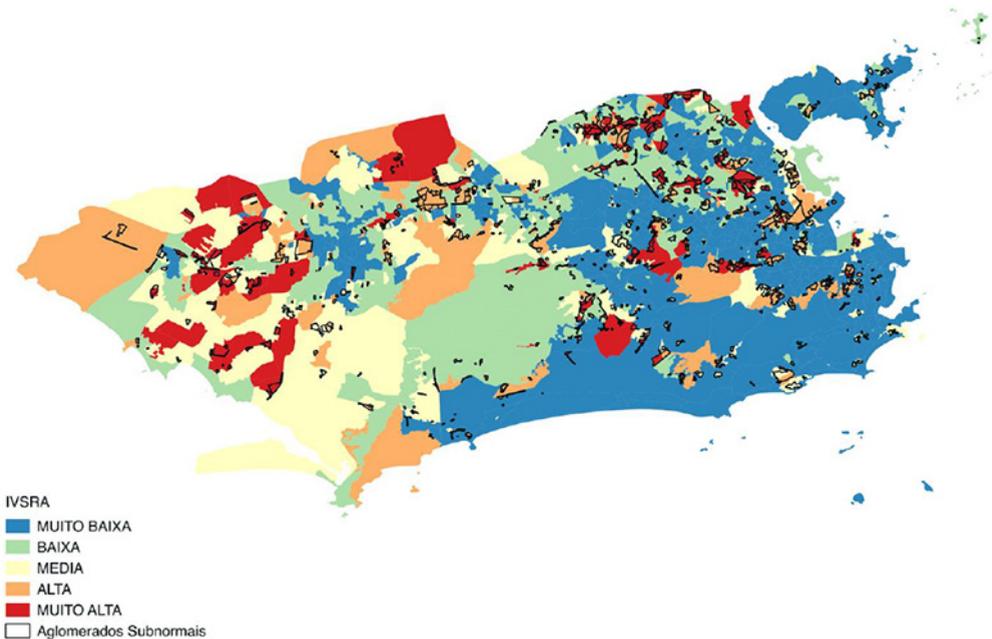
Source: Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE).  
Available at: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/explica/desemprego.php>.

3) The recurring urban socio-environmental tragedies. Tragedies caused by the combination of extreme events and historical patterns of land use and occupation. These patterns concentrate most of the poor population of Brazilian cities in risk areas (hillsides and spaces susceptible to flooding, among others). It is also worth emphasizing the marked racial trait of these patterns, which highlights the importance of the debate on so-called environmental racism. Consider Figure 1. As you can see, there is an explicit relationship between social vulnerability and environmental risk, especially in the case of Rio de Janeiro. At least this is the conclusion when, for example, indicators such as that of Malta, Costa, and Magrini (2017) are mobilized, using

geoprocessing techniques to superimpose the Social Vulnerability Index (Índice de Vulnerabilidade Social - IVS) of the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea) on a cartographic base of areas susceptible to the phenomenon of landslides. According to this indicator, landslides occur mainly in subnormal urban agglomerations, in other words, slums and working-class neighborhoods.

4) The expansion of urban violence. Here, it is first necessary to consider not only the actions of criminal organizations traditionally responsible for drug trafficking but also the practices of armed groups known, in the case of Rio de Janeiro, as “militias”. These groups are matched by other forms and names of paramilitary associations in other Brazilian

Figure 1 – Social vulnerability and environmental risk index (IVSRA)

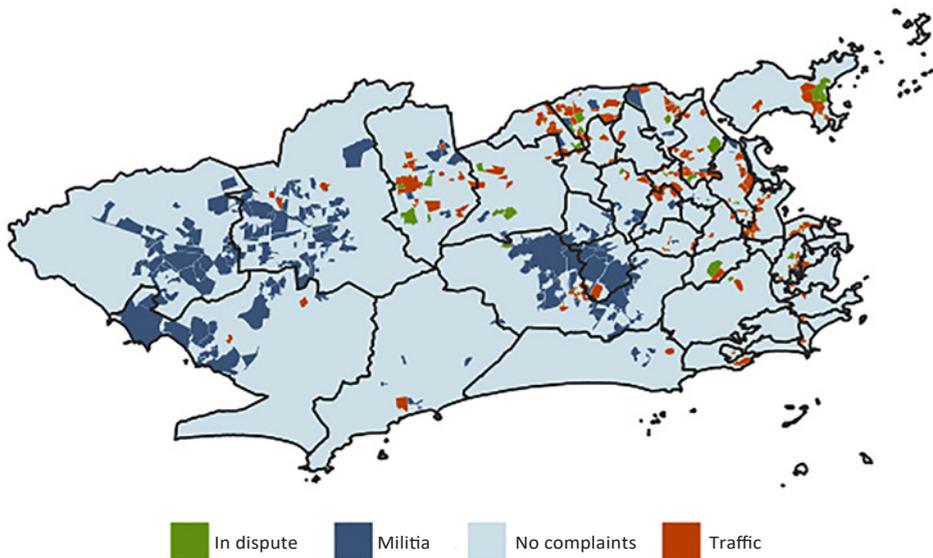


Source: Malta, Costa e Magrini (2017).

cities and metropolises. These are criminal organizations that control various territories, originally under the pretense of protecting them by selling security, in a similar way to mafias. However, more recently, their activities have expanded in various ways, interacting with, and altering the dynamics of various circuits of the urban economy. Currently, these groups act, for example, by monopolizing and imposing illegal/informal services in transport, housing construction, gas supply, telephony, and internet, among others. This has even led some authors, such as Santos Jr., Ribeiro, and Barbosa Filho (2022), to introduce the distinction between the “militarization” and “militialization” of cities in the debate on urban violence. From our point of view, this results

in the formation of something like an “illegal/informal conglomerate of urban businesses”, which enters into a relationship with the legal/formal circuits of accumulation in cities. It should also be noted that this formation accentuates and stimulates the frequent conflicts and territorial disputes between criminal organizations, as illustrated in Figure 2. According to the study from which the figure was taken, 57.5% of Rio’s territory was controlled by militia groups in 2019, 15.4% was in the hands of drug trafficking factions and 25.2% was in dispute between various groups. Disputes and conflicts are also crossed by a pattern of state action and/or omission. **Figure 2 - Territory of criminal groups in Rio de Janeiro**

Figure 2 – Territory of criminal groups in Rio de Janeiro



Source: ISP-RJ, GENI-UFF, NEV-USP, Fogo Cruzado, Disque Denúncia, Pista News and Pindorama. Available from: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/cada-crime-no-seu-quadrado/>

Table 1 – Percentage distribution of households by levels of food security and levels of food insecurity and number of residents by these levels

Brazil and household location	Food Security (FS) and Food Insecurity (FI) Levels							
	Households – % 2021-2022				Residents (per one thousand inhabitants) 2021-2022			
	SA	IA Low	IA Moderate	IA Severe	SA	IA Low	IA Moderate	IA Severe
Brasil	41,3	28,0	15,2	15,5	88.160	59.667	32.387	33.103
Urban	42,2	27,9	14,9	15,0	77.158	51.031	27.212	27.405
Rural	36,2	28,3	16,9	18,6	11.032	8.635	5.165	5.681

Source: 2º Inquérito Nacional sobre Insegurança Alimentar no Contexto da Pandemia da COVID-19 no Brasil (Rede Penssan). Available from: <https://pesquisassan.net.br/2o-inquerito-nacional-sobre-inseguranca-alimentar-no-contexto-da-pandemia-da-covid-19-no-brasil/>.

5) Growing food insecurity. According to data from the Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutritional Sovereignty and Security (Rede Penssan), there were 125.2 million people in a situation of mild or moderate food insecurity in 2022. There were also 33 million people in a situation of hunger, expressed by severe food insecurity. As can be seen in Table 1, in percentage terms, food insecurity rates are higher in rural areas, but the number of hungry people in the cities was enormous, approximately 27 million people. This scenario has become explicitly visible in the urban landscape in recent years, especially at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In short, from our perspective, these are the main forms of manifestation of the contemporary Brazilian urban crisis, which is above all a crisis of the big cities. Of course, more in-depth, and territorially comprehensive research is needed to achieve a precise and systematic characterization of this crisis, which

has only been sketched out here. In any case, we argue that understanding and responding to it, within the framework of resuming a national project that includes the agenda of urban reform and the right to the city, requires an analytical effort that considers this crisis and the urban order that corresponds to it within the framework of the current historical form of dependency to which Brazil is subject. Dependency that, in our view, has deepened in the wake of the 2016 coup.

## The current historical form of dependency

There is a long tradition of Latin American social thought that has sought to highlight the relationship between the general dynamics of the capitalist world system, dependency relations, and urban processes. According

to this tradition, spatial transformations in peripheral societies must be understood in conjunction with the forms taken by dependency at each historical moment. This is the perspective, for example, of Castells (1973), for whom understanding the characteristics of Latin American urbanization must necessarily involve: 1) establishing the different types of dependency that have characterized the history of Latin American societies; and 2) demonstrating the effect of each of these situations of dependency on the organization of space. Quijano (1978), while pointing out that the process of urbanization in Latin America is inseparable from relations of dependency, also stresses the need to identify, historically, the relations between the internal power structures of dependent societies and the dominant interests in metropolitan societies, since “each period of change in the concrete nature of these relations also corresponds to changes in the concrete nature of the power structure of our societies, appropriate to the requirements of these relations” (p. 15).

In this sense, we can first turn to Dos Santos (2011[1970]) to argue that the successive historical forms of dependency have resulted from 1) the basic forms assumed by the world economy; 2) the types of economic relations dominant in the centers of capitalism and their modes of expansion; and 3) the types of economic relations found in the peripheral countries, which have been combined and incorporated into the process of expansion of the capitalist world-system. In addition, various authors who have developed and/or appropriated the so-called dependency theories, including Dos Santos (2011[1970]), Castells (1973), Marini (1973), Quijano (1978), Fiori (1995) and, more recently, Paulani (2021),

have presented periodizations to distinguish the different phases or historical forms of center-periphery relations. Our synthesis of these periodizations highlights the existence of the following phases:

1) Phase of colonial dependency (or domination): when political sovereignty and direct administration of the territory were under metropolitan control. A phase characterized by the export of raw products, in which the metropolis (colonialist state) monopolistically dominated economic relations with the colonies.

2) Phase of financial-industrial dependency (Dos Santos, 2011[1970]) or financial-commercial dependency (Quijano, 1978): consolidated at the end of the 19th century, when investment by big capital from the hegemonic centers (especially the British) set up a productive structure in the periphery focused on exporting primary products. The purchase of extractive products and the sale of industrialized products founded an international division of labor between agro-extractive and industrial countries. The primary export position and the deterioration of the terms of trade in international trade allowed the transfer of values to the central countries.

3) Phase of the new dependency or technological-industrial dependency (ibid.): from the 1950s onwards, multinational companies expanded into the periphery, investing in industrialization, and forcing the internationalization of their domestic markets. The transfer of value to the center results mainly from the “remuneration of factors of production”, via profit remittances. However, it is worth mentioning that Paulani (2021) identifies the emergence of new trends at the end of this phase, especially from the end of

the 1970s onwards, with the remuneration of monetary capital invested, for example, in public debt securities, becoming increasingly important. In other words, the transfers of value from the periphery to the center began to take on a more clearly rentier character. In his opinion, this moment was marked by the US central bank's interest rate shock in 1979, which was the most decisive factor in the Third World's external debt crisis in the 1980s.

4) Phase of the very new dependency (Fiori, 1995) or dependency 4.0 (Paulani, 2021): an updating and radicalization of the characteristics assumed at the end of the previous stage of dependency. This contemporary historical form of dependency would be based on globalization, the process of financialization, the control of innovations and cutting-edge technologies exercised by the large multinational corporations and the states that make up the core of the capitalist world-system, as well as the subordination of peripheral countries to the macroeconomic policies defined in the center. Also, according to Paulani (*ibid.*), this phase is characterized by great advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs), which have reinforced the concentration of decision-making processes and the spreading of production structures. In this context, the ownership of "knowledge goods" or even "payment for the brand", for example, become key elements for the extraction of income by large capitalist corporations.

Considering the characteristics of this last phase and taking Arrighi's (1997) terms as a reference, we argue that the peripheral "illusions of development" are now completely shattered. The new concentrated financial-technological-political power or, in Oliveira's

(2003) terms, the molecular-digital revolution has resulted in the following: a pattern of relations of domination based on the exclusion of the countries of the periphery, especially those previously referred to as semi-peripheral, from access to the conditions that in the past allowed for significant returns from their insertion, albeit subordinate, in the international division of labor and the cycles of capital expansion. At the same time, the condition of brand-new dependency has accentuated the pattern of relations of exploitation and extraction of wealth from the periphery and its transfer to the big companies and states of the organic core of the system, mainly because it has significantly reversed the minimum margin of autonomy that the periphery and semi-periphery had achieved.

This is precisely why some authors, such as Pochmann (2021) and Fernandes (1995), describe this new phase or historical form of dependency as the "restoration of the colonial condition" or "neo-colonial" stage. Following Paulani (2016 and 2021) and considering the Brazilian case, we argue that the main cause of this restoration is Brazil's active subordination to the logic of accumulation based on rentierism. As we know, the fundamental feature of rentierism, as a pattern of accumulation, is the increase in the power of capital over the processes of generating and extracting surpluses, without needing to directly control the sphere of production. The power of hegemonic capital, or big capital, is now exercised, in particular, in the sphere of the circulation of value, controlling the new "factory floors" from a distance. This significantly altered the nature of the capitalist system, as accumulation began to take place under the imperatives of ownership rather

than production. What stands out now is the power of brands, how knowledge is mobilized through the institution of intellectual property protection systems (patents), which operate nationally and globally, as well as contemporary forms of fictitious capital (derivatives, securitized securities, etc.). All of this generates wide margins for the capture of rents.

In short, the pattern of capitalist accumulation based on rentier logic is currently being radicalized. According to Paulani (2013), for example, Brazil has been transformed into an international platform for the circulation and valorization of global rentier capital. A clear expression of this process is the ever-increasing volume of resources that are subtracted from the national economy to pay the rents of foreign capital, which, once invested in the periphery, return to the center in the form of dividends, interest on public and private debt, interest on credit assets, patents, etc. At the same time, rentier-financier domination is associated with the extractive dimension of the process of reaffirming the peripheral condition. In this case, it is the direct connection of various scales and geographical regions to the operations of large global capitals, which, by controlling logistical and financial circuits, and not necessarily the sphere of production, insert local and regional economies in Brazil into long and complex value chains. Above all, these chains are aimed at supplying the needs of the central economies, dismantling the synergy of the territorial/regional division of labor created during industrialization. We are referring here, for example, to the insertion of the country's hinterland into the productive-extractive circuits of agribusiness and energy and mineral resources.

From our perspective, the penetration of the current rentier logic in Brazilian capitalism, which reinforces its subordination to global capitalism, has the consequence of structurally blocking the possibilities of resuming national development, i.e. development based on internal dynamism and transformations in the productive bases. In terms of political economy, the consequence is the constitution of an internal segment of rentier interests that assumes the condition of hegemony in the dominant power bloc and sustains macroeconomic policies oriented towards Brazil's insertion into the dynamics of contemporary capitalist accumulation. All of this is expressed, among other phenomena, in the form of the multiple crises underway in the country, of particular interest to us is the urban crisis, as described above. In other words, from our point of view, the forms of manifestation of this crisis, outlined above, should be investigated from their links with the dynamics of the dependent condition.

For example, how can there be 33 million hungry people, most of whom are concentrated in urban areas, in a country that stands out precisely because of its highly competitive position in the international animal protein markets? As we know, it is precisely this integration that compromises what happens at home, which is very sensitive to the dynamics of international markets. Recently, for example, there has been a tendency for beef prices to rise in Brazil when Chinese demand for the product increases.

But, as already suggested, we need to continue with this effort, going beyond how this crisis manifests itself and finding its fundamental determinants. From our

perspective, this can be done, in the name of a comprehensive and structural explanation of urban problems, by taking up Oliveira's (1977) considerations not only on the "antination state", but mainly on the "urban antination", linking them to an understanding of the new historical forms of capitalism, both inside and outside Brazil, and contemporary dependency relations.

### The ultra-liberal inflection and the return of the urban antination

The theme of the formation of Brazil (the economy, the state, the nation, etc.) has been a central concern in the history of Brazilian social thought. This concern dates back at least to the 1930s-1940s, especially since the contributions of Gilberto Freyre, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, and Caio Prado Jr. We refer here respectively to the publication of *Casa-grande e senzala* (1933), *Raízes do Brasil* (1936) and *Formação do Brasil contemporâneo* (1942). For Antonio Candido ([1967] 2004), for example, these books expressed "the mentality linked to the breath of intellectual radicalism and social analysis that erupted after the 1930 Revolution and was not, despite everything, stifled by the Estado Novo" (p. 9). In any case, from then on, various authors, in different disciplinary fields, sought both to explain the specific nature of Brazilian social formation and to formulate a national project.

It was a multifaceted movement of research, action, and reflection that resulted, among other things, in what Sampaio Jr. (1999) calls the "democratic tradition of thinking about the Brazilian nation". For him, this tradition includes the work not only of Caio Prado Jr.,

already mentioned, but also of authors such as Florestan Fernandes and Celso Furtado. (ibid.), this tradition understood the project of building the national state as "a means of submitting development to the designs of a society united in a common destiny for its citizens" (p. 416). Thus, the affirmation of nationality corresponded to the necessary crystallization of "a homogeneous society, bearing the humanist values of Western civilization, based on moral links between social classes and the existence of organic ties between the different regions of the country" (ibid.). According to the author:

Those who reflected on the challenges of education from a democratic perspective, in one way or another, linked the construction of the national state to the integration of the population as a whole, under conditions of relative equality, with the technical advances and humanist values of the modern era. (Ibid.)

In other words, in the terms of Sampaio Jr. (ibid.), this democratic tradition argued that the "national form" should be thought of as a center of power capable of condensing the political will of the collectivity, thus becoming a means for subaltern societies to control their historical time. It should be noted, therefore, that this tradition, or at least the authors listed by Sampaio Jr. (ibid.), were equally concerned with the issue of dependency. In this sense, it can be said that the democratic tradition of Brazilian social thought envisioned the possibility of the national space (and we can think specifically of urban spaces) functioning as an instrument whose main function would be to "protect the community from the destructive effects that radiate from the center of the world capitalist system" (ibid., p. 417).

Protection that would require “planning the internalization of the structures and dynamics of Western civilization”, which should finally be carried out “in a way that is consistent both with increasing the autonomy and creativity of society and with increasing the wealth and well-being of the people” (ibid.). The following passage, in which Fiori (2000) summarizes Celso Furtado’s contributions to “national economic formation”, helps us to understand what is at stake:

[...] the formation of a Brazilian national economic system would have three indispensable conditions: the first would be the creation and strengthening of “endogenous decision-making centers” capable of giving us “the faculty to order the accumulative process according to priorities established by ourselves” (Furtado, 1984, p. 108); the second would be for this process to be accompanied by a growing homogenization of society, capable of opening up space for the realization of the potential of Brazilian culture; and the third, finally, for the very idea of “formation” to become a “collective will” and a political project capable of accumulating the indispensable force to transform the agenda of national priorities into the political dimension of economic calculation. For Celso Furtado, this was a process that had been in full swing – at least since the 1930s – which was disrupted by the global transformations that deepened from the 1970s onwards and interrupted by the liberal policies and reforms carried out by the Brazilian governments of the 1990s. (ibid., p. 2)

In short, from our point of view, based on this tradition, it is possible to frame the formation of the nation-state in general, and the Brazilian one in particular, in terms of a

complex and contradictory process of fusion between territory, society, economy, and state. A process guided by a “national project”, during which the following should be established: 1) minimum levels of social homogenization; 2) democratic mechanisms for regulating/stabilizing internal social conflict; 3) territorial ties leading to the integration of the country’s different regions; and 4) capacities to respond to the forces of disarticulation operating within the world system (national sovereignty). Of course, in the case of Brazil and dependent formations in general, these aspects have not always been achieved or have been achieved at unequal rates, depending on the circumstances. In other words, we never had a fully constituted nation-state. This is because the very nature of dependent capitalism prevents this constitution. In other words, because on the periphery of the world system, there is a contradiction between the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, which is increasingly internationalized, and the dynamics of the formation of the State-nation, which acts in this direction, in other words, blocking and interrupting the attempts to build a nation.

Finally, based on the reading of this democratic tradition defended by Sampaio Jr. (1999), it can be said that dependent societies, such as Brazil’s, face a dilemma. A dilemma that opposes, on the one hand, the condition of barbarism and, on the other, the possibility of a civilizing project. In this disjunctive, barbarism is linked to the social changes that signal the reaffirmation of dependency or, in the author’s words, the neo-colonial reversal (anomie, fragmentation, marginalization, heteronomy, instability, underdevelopment). In turn, the civilizing project is associated with progress and national construction (organization,

unification, integration, autonomy, stability, and development). The treatment of this dilemma, although not necessarily placed in the terms of this disjunctive, is present in the work of various authors of Brazilian social thought. This is the case, for example, with Francisco de Oliveira's characterization of urban phenomena, especially in the classic text entitled "Monopolistic Accumulation, the State and Urbanization: the new quality of class conflict".

Writing at the end of the 1970s, Oliveira (1978) defended the idea that it is in the "urban that the problems of the expansion of capitalism in Brazil begin to be synthesized in any direction" (p. 67). This is because, in his opinion, there is "no dimension of national life that is not immediately reflected in an urban problem or in a problem that explodes as urban" (p. 68). And, after listing a series of "problems" of this type, in a similar way to what we did above, in the section on the contemporary urban crisis, the author establishes that it is necessary to overcome this simple "phenomenology of urban problems", seeking a totalizing explanation and a periodization of the "urban" in Brazil.

After analyzing the colonial, imperial, and Old Republic periods, in which agrarian interests prevailed, Oliveira (ibid.) proposes that in the period of the "surge in industrial accumulation", which began in the 1930s, the urban became the expression of "so-called horizontal-vertical mobility, which socially legitimized industrial growth and offered individual and even class perspectives" (p. 72). Hence the large population influx towards Brazil's largest cities. In other words, the growth of these cities accompanied the relative development of Brazil and, in general, opened opportunities for upward social mobility. What

was underway, in his opinion, was a period in which "the horizon of possibilities seemed to offer everything to everyone" and in which, exceptionally, there was a "fusion between the nation and the state", the state growing "by affirming the nation" (p. 72).

It was, in the author's terms, a phase of "structural ambiguity of the state", in which the industrial bourgeoisie not only had to admit the existence of the proletariat but also incorporate it into a political project that opposed the interests of the rural oligarchies. All of this resulted in an attempt to build a nation, or rather, a Brazilian State-nation, the synthesis of which was given by the characteristics that urban life then assumed: the predominance of large cities, which were increasingly prosperous.

According to Oliveira (ibid.), this period of accelerated urbanization was replaced by another, immediately afterward, coinciding with the advent of typically associated capitalism, which the author identifies with the "Kubitschek Restoration" and, above all, with the regime imposed by the 1964 military coup. It was during this period of metropolization, that the urban became the "antination", that is, "the definitive settlement of production and social-political control in the city", which meant, above all, "using repression, to leave all the working masses without their pants" (p. 73). Urban problems become increasingly complex, and their effects hit the working classes especially hard. If there is still synergy between capitalist expansion and urbanization, its benefits are captured by the elites and part of the middle classes. Cities become increasingly dualized and polarized agglomerations, the characteristics of urban and metropolitan spaces expressing growing social inequality.

It was precisely during this period that the Brazilian bourgeoisie became denationalized, both in terms of capital ownership and in terms of defending a development project. This would have eliminated the structural ambiguity of the state, which began to act centrally for the benefit of the “international-associated” bourgeoisie. Therefore, it was during this entire period that what had been a nation-building experiment was interrupted, overcoming the need to bring the popular classes and layers into the structuring pact of the Brazilian state, economy, and capitalism, with urbanization playing a decisive role.

Inspired by this horizon of interpretation, we suggest delimiting two periods that were not considered in the author’s initial proposal: the period we call the “long 1980s” and the period between 2016 and 2022 which began with the parliamentary coup that overthrew Dilma Rousseff’s second government, paving the way for an “ultraliberal inflection”.

In the first case, we are referring to a phase that extended from the end of the 1970s, particularly from the ABC strikes in São Paulo and the political reopening that characterized the final moments of the military dictatorship, to the 2016 coup, going through the fundamental milestone of the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution. For us, this Constitution should be understood as the legal expression and contradictory crystallization of the social pact that was beginning to be built to replace the forms of power and domination that had been in force in Brazil throughout the dictatorship, that is, between 1964 and 1985. This is because it was in the context of the political and economic crisis of the 1980s that the social forces fought, in the

Constituent Assembly and the following years, for the possibility of inscribing the demands of organized labor, urban and rural social movements in the new legal system, as well as broader demands for rights and citizenship. In other words, forces that sought to give the new social and power pact a progressive and distributist nature.

However, it was at this time that neoliberal ideas and experiences spread around the world, influencing what was happening in Brazil. Thus, what happened from then on, at different scales and levels of government, expressed the contradiction between implementing the mechanisms, principles, and social guidelines of the 1988 Constitution and adjusting to successive waves of neo-liberalization. As Araujo and Belinelli (2022) observe:

The 1988 Constitution had enshrined a material program of a social-democratic nature, precisely at a time when the ideological hegemony of this arrangement was undergoing profound questioning by an alternative in formation, neoliberalism, fueled by the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the crisis of the European Welfare State. [...] It is worth noting, however, that the social program of the 1988 Constitution did not represent simple adherence to a fashion that was about to be overtaken. On the contrary, it was rooted in the country’s economic and social conditions. The high growth rates experienced during the military regime were achieved at the cost of intensifying social inequality. Once the dictatorship was over, it was to be expected that not only would a regime of civil power and democratic freedoms emerge, but that the so-called “social debt” would be actively repaid.

[...] the Constitution seemed to be rowing against the tide of international winds. The issue was decisive, posing the problem of the very viability of the social pact it intended to express. (p. 69)

In this sense, it can be said that, especially after the 1990s, a new phase of structural ambiguity began for the State, in which attempts to implement part of the social program crystallized in the 1988 Constitution came into contradiction with the core of Brazilian macroeconomic policy, which was increasingly neoliberal. In other words, the question was: how could this program be implemented if the loss of autonomy in macroeconomic management led in the exact opposite direction?

From an urban point of view, this had repercussions, for example, in the approval and attempted implementation of the mechanisms of the Statute of Cities, starting in 2001; in the creation of the Ministry of Cities, in the first government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2006); and in the housing policy of the second Lula administration (2007-2010), as in the case of the My House, My Life program (Minha Casa, Minha Vida program) (2009), which in itself is an excellent indicator of the acute contradiction between the social-liberal pole and the openly neoliberal pole of the Workers' Party (PT) governments. On a general level, the debate on developmentalism has been resumed, especially since President Dilma Rousseff's terms in office (2011-2016), in the updated forms of neo-developmentalism and/or new developmentalism, while at the same time seeking to consolidate the macroeconomic tripod established in the 1990s (inflation targets, primary surplus, and floating exchange rate).

Thus, like what happened in the periods originally discussed by Oliveira (1978), the structural ambiguity of the state has increasingly become an irreconcilable contradiction. And, in our opinion, it is in these terms that the period that opened with the parliamentary 2016 coup should be understood, when the aforementioned ambiguity was completely replaced by the program represented by the "Bridge to the Future" of the Temer government (2016-2018), which radicalized the previous neoliberal experiments, constituting the leap in quality that allows us to speak of the ultraliberal inflection. An inflection that, under the Bolsonaro government (2019-2022), has been taken to its ultimate consequences, accompanied by increasingly autocratic tendencies. And it is to this period that the return of the "urban antination" undoubtedly corresponds. Once again, an experiment in nation-building came to an end, in the sense and according to the aspects highlighted above, an even more timid experiment when compared to the previous experience of the developmental period. One example of this is the closure of the My House, My Life program and its replacement by the Green and Yellow House program (Casa Verde e Amarela program), which resulted in the radical dismantling of housing promotion and financing policies.

In short, at the stage of the ultra-liberal turn, the minimum of democratizing and redistributive experiences, which operated, for example, in the field of urban planning and housing policy, was replaced by a project that could only lead to what it led to, that is, the worsening of the urban crisis. A crisis that had already been brewing, it is true, but whose most acute forms of manifestation, described

above, allow us to conclude the following: “the urban”, in the current phase of dependency and the period of ultraliberal inflection, could not have been anything other than this very serious “urban crisis”. This leads us to the following fundamental question, which is the basis of the research and reflection effort guiding this article: faced with this extremely serious crisis, what can be done to rebuild the nation?

## Conclusion: reforming the city, rebuilding the nation

In our opinion, the Brazilian urban crisis must be understood far beyond its main forms of manifestation, commonly referred to as “urban issues”. This crisis expresses, above all, the anti-social, anti-democratic, and anti-national nature of the rentier accumulation pattern that characterizes the current stage of development of dependent capitalism in Brazil. It is in this sense that we argue that to better understand this crisis, it is necessary to consider that contemporary dependent capitalism corresponds to patterns of dependent urbanization that need to be systematically identified and analyzed. For example, it is possible to say that a significant part of the unemployment seen in Brazil’s big cities is due to very low rates of economic growth, which, in turn, are the result, among other factors, of the financialization of the country’s economy, which has paved the way for the expansion of different forms of rentierism, typical of the sphere of high finance and which blocks investments in the circuits of productive valorization. In other words, as far as this

dimension is concerned, there are strong links between Brazil’s conversion into a platform for financial valorization and urban life.

Arguments like these defended throughout the text, lead us to postulate the centrality of the urban issue in the current debate on the possible resumption of a national development project. This debate tends to gain strength in the context of the defeat of the ultra-liberal and conservative coalition that benefited from the 2016 coup to govern the country between 2019 and 2022. As already mentioned, in terms of the discussion proposed here, we are striving to develop a theoretical-analytical framework to guide the development of public policies and inspire struggles that contribute to transforming cities into vectors for rebuilding the nation. In other words, starting from the urban crisis and problems, we urgently need to describe and analyze the urban order that sustains them. An order that reflects Brazil’s subordinate insertion into the capitalist world system and whose tendencies to break up the nation have worsened in the face of what we call the ultra-liberal inflection.

A final question thus emerges, which is of the utmost importance and needs to be considered in subsequent research, action, and reflection efforts. How could taking up the agenda of urban reform and the right to the city contribute to unleashing processes of social homogenization and the construction of historical subjects capable of forming the political and social basis of a national development project?

In our view, this is even more relevant when we know that the Brazilian ruling classes have long since given up any role in

commanding the country's spatial matrix, which is essentially urban. Therefore, the agenda of urban reform and the right to the city, which has been under discussion in Brazilian society since at least the second half of the 1980s, has the potential to be a decisive vehicle for galvanizing the social classes committed to overcoming the current stage of dependency and rebuilding the nation.

Here, it is essential to bear in mind the links that have been established today between social inequalities, precarious forms of work, and urban inequalities. As we have seen, today's urban crisis manifests itself above all as a crisis of social reproduction, which affects broad sections of society and not just the segments that make up the active workforce. Therefore, we need to think about how these precarious and marginalized sectors can be brought, via urban policies and struggles, into the sphere of defending a national development project. In this sense, the conclusion with which Oliveira (1978) ended his analysis of the emergence of the "urban antination" seems even more pertinent. According to the author:

If the city was the space par excellence of the class conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat, the urbanization of the economy and society expands this space; if this urbanization has in the State captured by the international-associated bourgeoisie its main agent and simultaneously its main obstacle, this space not only expands: it redefines itself to place the State itself at the center of the contradiction. (p. 75)

For us, this brings up once again the necessary "democratic revolution" postulated by Fernandes (1981), whereby the entire population should be integrated into the processes of economic, sociocultural, and political development. In other words, in the author's opinion:

The destruction of privileged social strata and groups constitutes the first structural and dynamic requirement for the constitution of a national society. Where this historical condition does not or cannot materialize historically, neither does an action emerge, much less a nation that can rely on a "collective will" to determine, by its own means, its position and degree of autonomy among the other national societies in the same circle of civilization. In this respect, the democratization of income, social prestige, and power seems to be a national necessity. The fact is that it – and only it – can give rise and support to a "collective will" based on a democratic consensus, in other words, capable of nurturing images of "national destiny" that can be accepted and defended by all. (pp. 174-175)

Undoubtedly, as much as it is "democratic", this revolution should be "urban", in the sense that it is apparently possible, by addressing the set of demands corresponding to the problems of Brazil's big cities, to pave the way for the formation of this "collective will" and the aforementioned historical subject. But, as we have said, it is necessary, first, to understand that processes

of transformation like this depend on more comprehensive views and explanations of their foundations, which is precisely what we have tried to outline with this approach to the Brazilian urban crisis, based on its connection with the contemporary dynamics of dependent capitalism. Finally, we would like to emphasize, in conclusion,

that the reconstruction of the nation must be accompanied by efforts to reconstruct theoretical thinking on the urban question in Brazil and Latin America. In doing so, we can, as we have done here, rescue and update a vast tradition of critical perspectives not only on dependency but also on Brazilian and Latin American-dependent urbanization.

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## Note

(1) For a reference work on this debate, see Castells (1973).

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Received: July 7, 2023  
Approved: August 2, 2023

