

## **PERIPHERAL CONTEXTS OF ARTISTIC CREATIVITY: THE ANGOLAN CASE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

After describing and discussing the conditions of artistic production in peripheral contexts, the course of the Angolan visual arts from the end of the colonial period to the present time is analysed, a period when these enjoy a relative international projection. This projection is the result of a double sustainability: on the one hand, the material conditions for creation and artistic production and, on the other hand, the sustainability or maintenance of an aesthetic pattern rooted in the tradition and history of the country.

### **KEYWORDS**

Angolan art, artistic production, periphery

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## **CONTEXTOS PERIFÉRICOS DE CRIAÇÃO ARTÍSTICA: O CASO ANGOLANO**

### **RESUMO**

Depois de se descrever e discutir as condições de produção artística em contextos periféricos, analisa-se o percurso das artes plásticas angolanas desde finais do período colonial até à atualidade, momento em que as mesmas desfrutam de uma relativa projeção internacional. Essa projeção é o resultado de uma dupla sustentabilidade: por um lado, as condições materiais de criação e produção artística e, por outro, a sustentabilidade ou manutenção de um padrão estético enraizado na tradição e na história do país.

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Arte angolana; produção artística; periferia

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Contrary to the optimism of some analysts (Marchart, 2014), the contexts of artistic production continue to reproduce the current asymmetries in the world economy and in the international system, so that, akin to economies and states, such contexts can be classified as central, peripheral and possibly semi-peripheral<sup>1</sup>. The Angolan artistic context, object of the present paper, is, following this nomenclature, peripheral. It is based

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<sup>1</sup> In reference to the space of the countries with Portuguese as an official language, and characterising language as specific context for the production of knowledge, culture and art, Moisés Lemos Martins (2017) draws the attention to the fact that in that context lies the issue of hegemonic language and of scientific domination.

on social and aesthetic experiences that, for historical and colonial domination reasons, end up presenting similarities, interconnections and commitments to both the Portuguese reality and the geo-cultural situation of other countries and regions formerly colonised by Portugal. The analysis that will be carried out constitutes accordingly a part of a postcolonial reflection, revealing the extent/dimension of a domination that persists, namely in what concerns culture and aesthetics. It will focus on experiences and achievements within the so-called high culture, whose protagonists have benefited from the formal education implemented by the colonial system. This educational system, promoted in the context of modern colonialism, had, in turn, a double and ambivalent purpose: on the one hand, to form local interlocutors and technicians to enable the domination<sup>2</sup>, and, on the other hand, to avoid that the knowledge transmitted could equate the colonised with the colonisers, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the dependence, which those that legislated and governed always bore in mind.

Rethinking the artistic activity of Angola under this prism is tantamount to rethinking the respective context of cultural and artistic production in the light of its autonomy and sustainability, a purpose which not infrequently clashes with the relation of dependence inherited from the colonial system and prevailing in the postcolonial environment. The concept of “artistic context” matches with the one of artistic scene, and, at a more elaborate level, with that of “artistic field” introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (2012), and the idea of “art worlds” developed by Howard Becker (1984). The former, evidencing a more structural point of view of the relations among the elements that compose it, serves better the purpose of my argument<sup>3</sup>.

Therefore, I understand by artistic context the relations, both of an economic and aesthetic nature, which are established between the various actors who contribute to the achievement and affirmation of the work of art, from the moment of its production to that of its consumption or fruition. Sustainability refers in these terms to the economic autonomy of the production process of the work of art, understood as a normal professional activity, and the preservation of an aesthetic meaning rooted in the society that hosts it.

Among the functions of art I count that of personal fulfilment and self-esteem, which contributes to the psychological well-being not only of the artist itself but also of those who enjoy or contemplate his work as well, possibly contributing, in some circumstances, to their identity construction process, for personal fulfilment cannot be grasped separately from the construction of identity, either in the personal or social dimension. The latter, can be related to territorial contexts, referring, in such situation, a national, regional or local dimension, or simply be related to more global and cosmopolitan referents. The two references are not mutually exclusive, they usually coexist (Venâncio, 1998).

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<sup>2</sup> This specific concern is not new in Angola. Although in the XVII and XVIII centuries the Jesuits already educated their slaves in various manual trades, so as to increase their value in the South and Central American destination markets, they provided them with no intellectual skills whatsoever.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept thinking about the positioning of art and artistic creativity in European and / or Western contexts. It is, in fact, a concept that functions, above all, in free market situations, and the tensions and social hierarchies that characterise it are of an infrastructural nature, as Evelyn Nicodemus (1999) writes. However, this does not mean that we can not use it in an open and relational perspective, involving close and hierarchical production contexts, such as those arising from the colonial relationship.

The social dimension conditions the act of creation in two ways: through the personal and subjective motivation, expressing previously acquired identities and ideological predispositions, or by external imperatives imposed through of political doctrines, public policies (developed in many circumstances in accordance with these doctrines) or through diffuse and indeterminate influences resulting from the internationalisation of the economy, markets and ways of life. Whatever the case may be, the creative act is conditioned and valued by social and aesthetic practices (in the sense of the Marxist *praxis*) that serve as a paradigm, serving an important function of integration in the society, notwithstanding the differences and inequalities that the latter reflects. Such differences, of social and educational nature, can be lessened or eradicated with the contribution of public policies, leading to a deeper consolidation of the respective artistic contexts. I mention at this point the so called public policies since it is in fact difficult to understand the development of such spaces of creativity independently from the policies that condition and regulate them.

Art (whether popular, erudite or academic) and development are parts of the same binomial. All be it that they have been always important in the lives of people and societies, never was the relation of causality between one and another so evident and exploited as nowadays. In this regard, Andreas Reckwitz (2014, p. 133) points out the process that led to the aestheticisation of the economy through the creativity and the spirit of innovation that emerged as a paradigm around 1980, replacing the post-Fordism and the precepts that involved the so-called disorganised capitalism. It was a process of transformation that, in turn, is not to be understood, following Reckwitz (2014), as a pure reaction to the economic and financial crisis of the early 1970s. The turning point is brought about by the creative industries and the design economy, phenomena that have recently led to the emergence of the so-called creative, intelligent or liquid cities (Baumann, 2015). Such achievements and the critical cultural tourism (valuing the citizen more than the consumer) have provided a social development from which also the artists have benefited. The potential market for their works has thus been enhanced.

There are many artistic modalities and artistic circuits benefiting from this paradigm shift. Music and the visual arts are probably the greatest beneficiaries, although the so-called conventional plastic arts, painting, drawing, engraving, and sculpture should not be excluded. Notwithstanding the prevalence of a modernity which, being liquid, is tempted to privilege, in art and in other manifestations of life, the ephemeral, the disposable, to the detriment of the enduring (the fruit of a consumerism foretold by Marx two centuries ago), the works of art, especially those of painting, tend, owing to their lasting nature, to become financial assets, in a process to which many players contribute and which is based on a supposed aesthetic and technical quality. It is, in fact, a process which, in its essence, is similar to that which the economic anthropology (Schneider 1970) developed in relation to the characterisation of the primitive money. In addition to the aforementioned durability I refer the mobility, divisibility and, above all, the rarity, resulting from the artisanal and unique nature of the production process in the plastic arts (Sontag, 2015)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> These characteristics are also present in other artistic modalities, for example in photography, each shot always unique and unrepeatable, depending on factors such as the photographer's disposition, light conditions and so forth. Yet, what

Obviously, the consistency and sustainability of the fields or worlds of art depend on other factors, such as the educational and professional level of artists and other actors involved in the commercial circuit of artistic objects (gallerists, museum directors, artistic agents, collectors, etc.) and on the nature of the internal market of the countries or regions to which they belong. Thus, unstructured economies and / or markets can hardly match a structured art and circuit market. It's a matter of homology. The fragilities in the production, commercialisation and consumption of the national or regional markets naturally end up being reflected in the circuits of art.

This is, to a certain extent, the situation of a significant part of the countries of the so-called Third World, a term coined by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy and the sociologist Georges Balandier after World War II, to designate the group of countries and people living on the periphery of the industrialised world or in a position of subalternity in relation to it. This position is due to various factors. The fact that many of these societies have been colonised by European powers since the sixteenth century is understood, especially in the perspective of Marxist theories (I refer to the theories of dependence, of the world-system, as well as to the recent postcolonial theories<sup>5</sup>), as the determining factor of the positioning that has been mentioned.

Portugal was one of the referred colonial powers. From its Atlantic expansion and subsequent colonial relationship emerged the Angolan society, whose characteristics are reminiscent of both the nature and dynamics of the colonial empire that lasted over five centuries<sup>6</sup>, as well as of local geographic and demographic conditions.

Angola reflects a process of colonisation that is not exactly identical to that of most of the countries of continental Africa, in that the Portuguese territorial occupation was effective in the region since the sixteenth century, i.e., during the mercantilist period. Luanda was founded in the year 1576 and Benguela 1617.

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happens with the technical reproduction is quite different. The value that certain photographs reach on the market, at a time when technology allows the replication of the photographs, is, in fact, the result of a convention – as is the case of the non-use value objects used as primitive money, which translates a compromise of the parties involved, in which the previously numbered photographs will not (or should not be) reproduced. On the relationship between photography and painting, see Barthes (2006), and especially Sontag (2015). The latter author draws attention to a characteristic, that of presence, which Walter Benjamin had restricted to the work of art before its technical reproducibility, but which, according to Sontag, although “no photograph is an original in the sense that a painting is always, there is a great difference between what we can call originals – prints made from the original negative at the time (...) that the picture was taken – and subsequent generations of the same photograph” (Sontag, 2015, p. 140). Digital photographs do not change the logic of this argument, because there is always a moment in which the photographer, even after computer editing, finishes the photograph and that moment, like that of its recording, is also, irreversible.

<sup>5</sup> In such theories, inspired by the concept of primitive accumulation of capital, as the concept was reviewed by Karl Marx, it is understood that there is a structural causal relationship between colonial action, colonialism and the underdevelopment of such societies.

<sup>6</sup> There is not consensus within historiography regarding the extent of European colonialism in Africa at the sixteenth century. There are, however, situations of colonisation and domination, such as the islands of Cape Verde and the urban centres of Luanda and Benguela and their respective hinterlands, where, in fact, the European presence was felt in an integrated way, conditioning the life of dominated populations in a way that changed little in relation to the subjugation that ensued after the division of Africa at the Berlin Conference (1884-85). In order to highlight the difference between one period and another, historians and anthropologists have adopted the term “archaic colonialism” for the first period and that of “modern colonialism” to identify the occupation of the second period, which took place under industrial capitalism (see Venâncio, 2009)

It was a confrontational presence, a conquest marked by a constant war effort that led the greatest Portuguese chronicler of this period to reside in Angola, António de Oliveira Cadornega (1623-1690), to entitle the book in which he describes it the *General History of the Angolan wars* (1681). The latent and explicit conflict did not impede the emergence of a hybrid society, which, like the Cape Verdean and Sao Tome island societies (constituted at the base of slaves coming from the continent), can be understood as Creole, designation that, however, remains controversial. It is not accepted by a part of the Angolan intelligentsia, especially by those who are close to the MPLA (Movement for the Liberation of Angola), for reasons related to the fact that the leaders of the other movements of liberation imputed to them the stigma of non-belonging to the country. The reaction to the designation translates, in these terms, an effort towards their legitimisation as “Angolans”, which has become so much more pressing because a part of them, to which also mestizos and whites belong, constitutes a long “westernised” elite, with weak ethnic ties, constituting, in this condition, a status group culturally and historically differentiated from the majority of the population.

The Angolan art field, as it happens with the literary one, expresses, as expected, this and other idiosyncrasies, which appear associated to either the production, mediation or even the internal consumption of artistic and cultural goods.

Literature had in lusophone Africa an important and differentiate role in the awareness of colonialism. The differentiation was a reminiscence of the colonial rule itself. The geographical location of each colony, the human and cultural composition of each colony, its importance to the economic vitality of the empire are factors, among others, that have been taken into account in such differentiation. One characteristic, however, was common to all: the absence of higher education structures until the early 1960s, when the first universities were instituted in Angola and Mozambique. Many young people were, therefore, forced to move to Portugal to continue their studies, where they met with their colleagues from other colonies and, also owing to the contribution of the anti-fascist sectors of the Portuguese society, became aware of the injustices of the colonial system. The information available to them in the Portuguese academic milieu, though scarce due to the prevailing dictatorship, was much more varied than that which had been available in the colonies.

The Casa dos Estudantes do Império [House of the Students of the Empire], based in Lisbon and Coimbra, was one of the spaces where this political maturation, transforming “overseas students” into nationalistic leaders, took place. And such transformation became later a determining factor in the formation of liberation movements such as the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde), MPLA, Frelimo (Liberation Front of Mozambique) and MLSTP (Liberation Movement of São Tomé and Príncipe), all constituting, for reasons of coordination of the anti-colonial struggle in international terms, the CONCP (Conference of Nationalist Organizations of the Portuguese Colonies).

As a common feature, these movements had, on the one hand, the fact that their leaders had a Portuguese experience and, on the other hand, the adherence to the

Marxist ideological universe, to the Soviet bloc and, in African terms, to the group of countries aligned with Casablanca<sup>7</sup>. After the independence, it was these organisations that assumed the political power and their leaders, aiming at their self-legitimation as “genuine” African politicians, promoted the integration of the territorial peripheries and corresponding ethnic groups into the national space, founded such socio-professional organisations linked to literature and art with the explicit purpose of contributing to the constitution of a national consciousness. The experience they brought from the Portuguese academic milieu and the House of Students of the Empire helped them achieve such objectives. Also important was the knowledge (scarce but meeting its purpose) they had of the Soviet revolution which, by virtue of Marxist aesthetics and socialist realism (the imposed style by the Communist Party after 1932), had put art and literature at the service of the revolution and politics.

In conformity with those political intentions, one month after the country’s independence, in a context of political instability that foretold the long civil war that followed, the Angolan Writers’ Union (UEA) was created, whose general assembly was presided by Agostinho Neto, the first president of the then called People’s Republic of Angola. The influence of political power was more than evident.

In pursuance of the same objective of socio-professional framing of artists and writers, the National Union of Plastic Artists (UNAP) was founded two years later, on October 8, 1977, and a few years later, on September 9, 1981, the National Union of Artists and Composers (UNAC)<sup>8</sup> was proclaimed as a public institution, with the participation of singers such as Rui Mingas, Waldemar Bastos and Filipe Mukenga<sup>9</sup>, among others.

Notwithstanding this common path as to the professionalisation, protection and implementation of the cultural and creative activities by the constituted powers, significant differences within the scope of the 40 years of independence were registered. These differences have to do, above all, with the artistic modalities in question and with their respective world-views and *praxis* of creativity. Among these modalities, the literature, was undoubtedly the one that was longest committed to the political project of the MPLA, which, however, did not conduce to an aesthetic impoverishment. Such is the case of, among others, Henrique Abranches, Costa Andrade and Luandino Vieira, one of the most

<sup>7</sup> The opposite group of countries, of a pro-Western political orientation, became known as the Monrovia group. The later constitution in 1963 of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) is the result of a compromise between the two groups, although the ideological division continued to be felt practically until the end of the Cold War, until the so-called democratisation processes. These processes have been, in fact, more formal than real, so that, with some irony, they were known as “Paristroika” in the French-speaking countries.

<sup>8</sup> Currently UNAC-SA (National Union of Artists and Composers – Society of Authors)

<sup>9</sup> Although the post-independence political process of the Portuguese-speaking African countries known as the PALOP (African Countries of Portuguese Official Language) had been essentially identical, some differences in cultural policy prevailed. If Mozambique, which gained independence two months before Angola, had a path similar to that of Angola in the establishment of the art world, differences are to be found in the case of Cape Verde. The political line adopted (in this country and in Guinea-Bissau), under the aegis of the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde), although close to that of the MPLA and Frelimo, distinguished itself, exhibiting a greater openness and a greater neutrality with regard to the two blocs of the Cold War. The influence of the political thought of Amílcar Cabral, founder of the party, assassinated in 1973, and certainly the most politically prepared of the Portuguese-speaking African leaders, was felt at the moment of the independence of the respective countries.

renowned Angolan writers. They initiated one of the mainstreams of the Angolan plastic arts. The presence in Angola of Portuguese plastic artists, such as Neves e Sousa, Cruzeiro Seixas and Alfredo Margarido (Pereira, 2011) during the colonial period, allowed the constitution of another mainstream, more exogenous, that also played a significant role in the formation of the Angolan contemporary art. This path, namely the influence of foreign artists and masters, especially Europeans, has been pointed out as the most important factor for the emergence and affirmation of contemporary African art (Kasfir, 1999).

Another mainstream, equally significant in the consolidation of contemporary art in sub-Saharan Africa and Angola, is the popular art, which by its nature turns out to have a close relationship with the so-called traditional art.

This type of art is often confused with handicrafts and, in the specific case of Angola, considering the career of two artists described by Pepetela in his last novel (*Se o passado não tivesse asas*, 2016), does not necessarily imply an absence of aesthetic quality. The plastic artists in appreciation, prevented from reaching dominant circuits of the Angolan art market, were confined, for the sale of their works, to the local market of Benfica, located south of Luanda, at the time a reference in the sale of handicrafts.

Many of the artists exhibiting in this local market are of foreign origin, as is incidentally the case of one of the artists characterised by Pepetela. And regarding this particularity, it is worth mentioning that Angola became a migratory destination of people coming mainly from Central and Western Africa, in a flow of difficult control owing to the extension of the borders. On the other hand, the country also benefited from the experience of artists coming from these regions, especially with regard to crafts and popular art. In addition to Pepetela's reference, it was not by chance that Edson Chagas introduced Luanda, which houses more than six million inhabitants, as an "encyclopedic city" in the awarded exhibition he presented at the Venice Biennale.

From a first phase, marked by ideological and aesthetic principles identified with Marxism and socialist realism, in which the foundation of UNAP occurred, the artists, especially those from the mainstream, have evolved into parameters less committed to the politics nationalist paradigm. Politics, especially the immediate one and the one that has to do with the vicissitudes of the national construction, ceased to be a concern and *leitmotiv* of their creations. This was the turning point for the group of young artists, that identified themselves as "Nationalists", who in the late 90s of the last century renewed the art scene in Luanda, defending, among other values, the autonomy of artistic production. Without neglecting the effects of the colonial past on the Angolan society and identity, the problems that afflict this generation have become more universal and, as such, less dated in time. It is the Western discretionary discourse on Africa (see Nástio Mosquito, cited in *My African mind*, 2009), the effects of capitalism on local identities (see the work of Edson Chagas) or those of a pernicious globalisation that worry the artists of the new generation. The internationalisation of the careers, in this context, emerges as an important goal to be achieved.

This goal has been in part achieved. The positioning of the country in the international system, even if highly supported by an economy overly dependent on oil, has

helped the internationalisation of its artists. Public policies in support of art and creativity have also helped. In the end, the rulers of today are the same ones who, after some ideological redemption continue to support the culture and the arts, following the Marxist and Soviet model, even if not always with due transparency (Cowcher, 2014) and, as such, in a way susceptible to generate injustice.

A substantial part of the support is provided by the Ministry of Culture, which, in cooperation with ENSA – Seguros de Angola, contributed with financial support to the presence of Angola in 2013 at the Venice Biennale, collecting, as a national representation, the Golden Lion by project *Luanda, encyclopedic city*, consisting of 23 photographs of the artist Edson Chagas. The award-winning pavilion also hosted the exhibition of painting and sculpture *Angola in movement*, composed of works from the ENSA collection, which included artists such as Francisco Van-Dúnem, António Ole, Fineza Teta and Marco Kabenda.

Another major sponsor of the arts in the country has been the aforementioned ENSA – Seguros de Angola, a state-owned company that, within the framework of its social obligations, has implemented the teaching and revealing of new talents in Luanda and in the provinces. There are also some foundations, which, even though their primary function is not the artistic promotion, end up contributing, in one way or another, to the implementation of art. This is not the case of the Sindika Dokolo Foundation, created in 2004 with the explicit purpose of artistic and cultural promotion<sup>10</sup>. Sindika Dokolo presides over the foundation and Fernando Alvim, a plastic artist, is the vice-president. The foundation has one of the largest collections of contemporary African art<sup>11</sup> and has recently promoted the return to the country of two tshokwé masks and a statuette in an initiative that can be understood as a recovery of lost heritage. This action silenced the voices critical about the principles of the foundation and its promoters<sup>12</sup>. At the hands of Fernando Alvim, the foundation also participates in the organisation of the Luanda Triennale, an event that has helped project the Angolan culture and plastic arts internationally.

Portugal was the first country chosen for the international projection of the foundation. It began by sponsoring two exhibitions on contemporary African art, the first, entitled *No fly zone. Unlimited mileage*, was curated by Fernando Alvim, Simon Njami and Suzana Sousa and took place in Lisbon at the Berardo Collection Museum from January 30 to March 31, 2013; the second, entitled *You love me, you love me not*, took place in Porto, at Galeria Municipal Almeida Garrett from April 19 to May 17, 2015. It was also curated by Fernando Alvim. The foundation recently acquired the house of the Portuguese filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira to set up its European headquarters and to provide, from this space, reflection and artistic production for a dialogue between Europe and Africa.

<sup>10</sup> In particular, the Pavilion of Africa at the 2007 Venice Biennial (*Check-List Luanda Pop*), designed and supported by the foundation.

<sup>11</sup> One of the criteria that has guided the collector of Congolese origin, the son-in-law of the former President of Angola, Eduardo dos Santos, and the husband of one of the richest women in Africa, the businesswoman Isabel dos Santos, is not to circumscribe his collection to African art.

<sup>12</sup> Among the criticisms targeted at him, those related to the African Pavilion (*Check-List Luanda Pop*) are to be found, as uttered by Ben Davis in an article entitled “Art and corruption in Venice” (Cowcher, 2014).

By understanding the sustainability of an economy or a society as its capacity for autopoietic reproduction (Luhmann, 2002; Vermeer, 2006)<sup>13</sup>, the artistic context in focus does not fail to present fragilities and imbalances that are in line with the weaknesses of the country's own economy, excessively dependent on oil production. As can be verified by the testimony of several artists highlighted by the press, the crisis in the price of crude oil has been fatal for the sector, both in terms of market and state aid.

These economic weaknesses with repercussions on the quality of life of professional artists, have not been directly translated into the aesthetic quality of what is produced. Central markets usually play an “anthropophagic” role in peripheral markets, impoverishing them aesthetically due to the effort that their actors are tempted to develop in order to adapt to the aesthetic forms of collectors and other players in the central markets, which was not the case of the Angolan artists, especially those of the mainstream. They did not neglect the established powers (both political and economic), but they have been able to maintain the autonomy that confers aesthetic and cultural authenticity to their work. Adriano Mixinge (2017), one of the Angolan critics of art with greater projection, has come to value, in this sense, what he considers as “painting of wall”, the guiding thread of a trajectory that, starting in the cave paintings of Tchitundu Hulu, ends up with contemporary artists like António Ole and Yonamine, without forgetting the contribution of colonial artists like Neves e Sousa.

In fact, the same thing has happened, in general, with writers and musicians. Critical spirit and aesthetic authenticity continue to be an important reference for the development of their creations, characteristics that, even in situations of greater political commitment (during the validity of the single-party political regime), were not neglected, as confirmed by the emergence of a very incisive social and political satire in the case of the literary creativity.

In conclusion, it is worthy of note that, despite its weaknesses, the Angolan artistic production context presents an advantage that is perhaps the most important of all its characteristics: the posture of its artists. The importance that the first generation of nationalists, influenced by the Marxist ideology, attached to the culture and artistic production perpetuates and helps today the artists face structure and conjuncture related setbacks, preserving forms and styles that provide their production with authenticity and identity. The single-party regime of the period immediately post-independence was thus sufficiently flexible to value and support the cultural authenticity of the country. ✍

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<sup>13</sup> The origin of this designation is not to be found in the social and / or human sciences. It was appropriated by Luhmann (2002), and became an essential element in his definition of social system. Regarding the many criticisms and reviews to the concept of social system in Luhmann, see Vermeer (2006), who has the peculiarity of coming from the linguistics and theory of communication areas, a central element in the definition of the concept.

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