

# “The Periphery Rises: Technology and Cultural Legitimization in Belém’s *Tecnobrega*”

**Marcio Bahia**

*Vanderbilt University*

**Abstract:** In the mid-2000s, *tecnobrega*, a popular rhythm from the Amazon region of Brazil, rose to national prominence. This article provides a historical overview of the development of this industry and gives an inside perspective of the stigma *tecnobrega* has carried. It shows how cult of new technology plays a central role in the cultural legitimization of *tecnobrega*, and analyzes a particular case of partnership between mass media and academia that has been decisive in this process. Finally, it presents *tecnobrega* as an example of a larger phenomenon, pointing to the rise of a new *Música Periférica Brasileira*.

**Keywords:** music, popular culture, Brazil, Belém, *brega*

## Brega, The (Almost) Lost Music of Brazil

Odair José, Nelson Ned, Agnaldo Timóteo, Waldik Soriano, Claudia Barroso, Amado Batista, Carlos Santos and Benito di Paula. These are some of the most famous singers in Brazil in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. For Brazilianists specializing in popular culture who did not live in Brazil at the time, as well as younger generations of Brazilians in general, some or all of these names may be unfamiliar. When one thinks of the relevant music produced in Brazil in the 1970s, the names that immediately come to mind are Chico Buarque, Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Elis Regina or Maria Bethânia (representatives of the so-called MPB, *Música Popular Brasileira*). These are artists whose important place in Brazilian history and role in the opposition to the military dictatorship are well known by any person minimally acquainted with recent Brazilian

history and culture. In the 1970s, however, the former group of artists enjoyed as much popularity as the latter, or even more. How can one explain the fact that such massively popular singers are little known today?

Paulo Cesar de Araujo, in his robust historiography of popular Brazilian music, provides a convincing answer. According to the author, the first group of artists is identified with a genre of Brazilian music popularly known in the 1970s as “*música cafona*” and rechristened in the 1980s as “*música brega*” (20). *Brega* or *cafona* can be loosely translated as “tacky” or “cheesy,” so as the name of the genre itself suggests, we are dealing here with musical production considered unfashionable and associated with bad taste and poor quality, basically consumed by the underprivileged population, people with poor schooling, and who lived in urban shantytowns or in deprived rural areas. Paulo Cesar de Araujo remarks that the *Enciclopédia da Música Brasileira* describes *brega* as “cheap,” “sloppy,” “trivial,” “sentimental,” and “mundane” (20). All these derogatory representations can explain why *brega* music has occupied a very marginal, if not completely invisible, position within Brazilian musical historiography. Up until very recently, this kind of music was not deemed worth studying by the Brazilian *intelligentsia*, who chose three genres as the archetypes of national music: *samba*, *bossa nova* and *MPB* (Paulo Araujo 22).

Sean Stroud has established a pertinent comparison between *brega* music and *MPB*, two musical genres consolidated during the same period:

Despite being massively popular, mainly in the peripheral areas of urban centers and in the interior, *brega* has never met with the approval of the official arbiters of taste in Brazil. From the 1960s until the 1980s, *MPB* was an overwhelmingly middle-class product, made by predominantly middle-class artists for a middle-class, often student, audience. Consequently, middle-class music critics have largely ignored *brega* and it has been almost completely airbrushed out of all ‘official’ histories of Brazilian popular music because of its associations with a ‘socially inferior’ public. (52)

As a child growing up in Belém, where *brega* has always been extremely popular, I was raised with values that served to ensure the “invisibility” of *brega*

music within the official historiography and cultural analysis of Brazilian song. We were taught that listening to *brega* was shameful, and that “good, decent” people should not listen to it. Middle class children, or even poor children like me who had some access to education, were expected to listen to MPB. We were expected to learn to appreciate the beautiful lyrics of Chico Buarque and Caetano Veloso, or the *bossa nova* of Tom Jobim, and to avoid, at all costs, the horrors of *brega* music.

In the present article, I address the cultural exclusion pointed out by Paulo Cesar de Araujo and Stroud, and my objective is to contribute to a growing scholarly trend that has investigated and reassessed the importance of subaltern music genres traditionally overlooked by academics. I will focus my analysis on Belém’s *tecnobrega*, a rhythm that rose to national prominence in the 2000s, and that originated from a particular *brega* subgenre that I will call *brega paraense*. Differently from Paulo Cesar de Araujo, who has focused on *brega* singers and their songs, I will concentrate on the development of the *brega paraense* as an industry and its recent strategies of cultural legitimization. It was within the development of this industry in the 1990s that state-of-the-art sound systems (the so-called *aparelhagens*) emerged, and the rhythm radically incorporated electronic and digital instruments, eventually giving birth to what is now known as *tecnobrega*. I claim that this “technological turn” of the 1990s was not restricted to the rhythm itself. It was also paramount in determining how the music would be produced, distributed, and consumed by *tecnobrega* fans. Furthermore, the techno-fascination found in Belém’s *tecnobrega* scene has been projected towards the cultural war of symbolic values. Different actors within the *tecnobrega* industry have used the cult of new technologies as a source of cultural pride, that is, as a discursive weapon against the cultural stigma the rhythm has carried. I argue that this technological turn plays a central role in the industry’s attempt to uproot the value system that has traditionally placed *brega* in the lowest position in the Brazilian musical spectrum. In this sense, I present the TV show *Central da Periferia* (2006), co-written by a renowned anthropologist, as a landmark in the process, since it attempts both to reverse *brega* music’s adverse local cultural status and rescue it from national oblivion.

## The Evolution of a Flourishing Industry

In order to identify better our object of analysis, it is necessary to investigate the term *brega*. In one of the very few works in English dedicated specifically to the topic, suggestively entitled “*Brega: Music and Conflict in Urban Brazil*,” Samuel Araujo provides an overview of the *brega* music industry in Brazil in the 1980s. The author acknowledges the difficulty in defining *brega* purely in musical terms, since the notion is permeated much more by judgments of value, by class-oriented biases, and by subjective associations with the idea of “bad taste” than by rhythmic or melodic criteria (53-55). For analytical reasons, though, he proposes a taxonomy of the genre, which he divides into five subcategories:

- 1) *Brega Rock*, represented by the satirical and iconoclastic Eduardo Dusek (57);
- 2) Simply *Brega*, the type of ultra-romantic music sung especially by popular artists from the North and Northeast of Brazil, such as Amado Batista and Carlos Santos (61);
- 3) Deluxe *Brega*, a subcategory dedicated to Roberto Carlos, whose songs are aesthetically close to *brega* music, but who atypically receives unparalleled attention and recognition and enjoys a central role in the Brazilian music establishment (67);
- 4) *Samba Romântico*, a type of music strongly influenced by traditional *samba*, but blended with some of the ultra-romantic elements of *brega* music; Agepê is the archetypal example in this subcategory (72);
- 5) *Brega Sertanejo*, a subfield that blends musical elements from *brega* with the traditional *sertanejo*—folk music from the rural interior, i.e. the Brazilian *sertão*; Milionário and José Rico are mentioned as the most representative artists of this subfield at the time. (78)

It is important to highlight the position occupied by the *brega* music produced in Belém do Pará in Samuel Araujo’s taxonomy. He places *brega* music produced in the North and Northeast of Brazil in the same category. However, Carlos Santos, the only representative from Belém among his examples, not only had incorporated elements from the *Jovem Guarda* and the “traditional” *brega* produced in Northeastern Brazil, but had also drawn upon “popular

genres from Northern Brazil such as the *lambada*, with its characteristic Caribbean-like rhythmic accent” (65). In fact, Carlos Santos was in the 1980s the only visible tip of a very vibrant, but still hidden, music scene that went beyond Amado Batista’s traditional *brega* by amalgamating different musical influences, from Caribbean rhythms such as *merengue* and *calypso* to popular regional genres such as *lambada* and *guitarrada*—influences that were not so strong in the *brega* music from Northeastern Brazil. In the 1980s, when Samuel Araujo proposed his taxonomy, he had already detected some of the specificities of the *brega* music produced in the Amazon Region, but decided, for analytical reasons, to group both traditions together. In fact, the distinctive musical features that gave birth to *brega* music in Pará justifies a reconfiguration of the taxonomy proposed by Samuel Araujo, as well as the introduction of a specific subgenre called *brega paraense*. Just like Carlos Santos, other singers from Pará such as Alípio Martins, Mauro Cota, Juca Medalha, Roberto Villar, and Teddy Max, to name just a few of the extremely popular regional singers, produced a kind of diversified *brega* music that melodically incorporated Caribbean, Amazonian, and Northeastern music and, later on, radically incorporated electronic beats. For the remainder of this article, I use the term *brega paraense* to refer to this particular music scene, which developed distinct aesthetic, commercial, and technological features.

To understand the evolution of the *brega paraense*, it is necessary to examine a key agent in this particular music industry: the *aparelhagens*. Back in the 1970s, the *aparelhagens* were simply sound systems that traveled from place to place, from one city to another, playing *brega* songs in open spaces known as *bregões* or in clubs called *sedes sociais*.<sup>1</sup> Residents of poverty-stricken neighborhoods listened to the rhythm on their cassette players, and on the weekends they danced to the same songs in *bregões* and *sedes sociais* where *aparelhagens* were playing. Couples danced to *brega* songs, and the dance that developed in these parties was also named *brega*, after the rhythm.

By the early 1980s, *brega* had already become one of the most popular kinds of music and dance in poor neighborhoods in Belém. As the rhythm became increasingly popular, it was renamed “*brega pop*” in reference to international pop music. The rhythm was still highly stigmatized, but it began to

acquire greater economic importance. *Brega* singers and *aparelhagem* owners started to earn substantial profits in an informal circuit based mainly on live spectacles and the commercialization of “pirate” cassette tapes. I place the word “pirate” in quotation marks because there has hardly ever been an “official” distribution circuit for *brega* music in Belém. The *brega* hits produced in the region, with some notable exceptions, could not be found in regular music stores. The songs could only be bought in *camelô* tents.<sup>2</sup> The *brega* industry in Belém created its own mechanisms of production and distribution within its peripheral context, completely detached from the official industry. The singers produced their hits in small studios, first using “pirate” cassettes and later CDs to advertise the songs in the *aparelhagens*. Once successful, the songs could be played on the few radio stations that played *brega* music, but they were both popularized and distributed mainly on the streets. One could listen to successful *brega* songs at private parties, at clubs (*bregões*), on speakers in the street, from the neighbor next door, and mostly wherever there was an *aparelhagem* party.

Musicians, composers, and bands soon understood that their model of production and distribution was very different from the mainstream phonographic industry. Since they had no access to the major music labels—all concentrated in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro—their objective was to achieve a hit song so that they could attract large audiences to their own concerts. These artists never earned any direct profit from the sale of their cassette tapes or CDs. Those who made money from the sale of tapes and CDs have always been the street vendors, who can be found in any popular market in Belém. If *aparelhagens* started playing a song at the parties and it became a hit on the dance floor, it was soon available on the streets in the vendor tents. This informal chain of production and distribution continues to be the predominant model for the *brega* industry in Belém. The street vendors are still those responsible for providing the consumers with “pirate” CDs containing the latest hits. The bands are then hired for concerts, the street vendors sell more CDs, the popular radio stations get more listeners, and the *aparelhagens* can attract bigger audiences.

In the history of *brega paraense*, a notable exception to the standard model took place in the 1980s with the creation of the label *Gravasom*, owned and run by Carlos Santos, who was not only a successful singer, as Samuel Araujo

has pointed out, but also a regional media mogul.<sup>3</sup> *Gravasom* represented an attempt to give regional artists visibility and create a market that would follow the traditional mainstream music industry rules. However, *Gravasom* did not survive the alternative business model that was already at work in Belém, and the label went bankrupt in the 1990s. The collapse of the label hardly affected the local production of *brega* music. On the contrary, by relying on the ever-present business model based on “piracy,” and with the advent of CD technology, *brega paraense* gave birth to an even more dynamic and powerful local music industry. At the turn of the century, while the world was attempting to deal with issues related to copyright, piracy, and illegal downloading (Easley; Ku), the *brega* industry in Belém was thriving by ignoring mainstream intellectual property laws, and by embracing emerging technologies that allowed peripheral regions and subaltern groups to create their own mechanisms of cultural production, distribution, and consumption. Paradoxically, it was precisely the exclusion of a distant and “invisible” subaltern community in the Brazilian Amazon region that created the ideal conditions for new technologies to be appropriated and used in innovative business models.<sup>4</sup> The utilization of technology by the agents of this alternative musical circuit generated a booming entertainment industry that would soon become too big to occupy the stigmatized socio-cultural space within which it was confined.

While the appropriation of new technologies was decisive in the establishment of an alternative music industry, it also had a deep impact within other spheres of the *brega paraense* music scene. In tune with techno and electronic dance music movements that emerged in the United States in the late 1980s, a new generation of musicians introduced at the same time more electric guitars and synthesized sounds to the local *brega* rhythm (Neves). By the late 1990s, this version of the *brega* music produced in Belém was then baptized “*tecno-brega*.” Within this productive chain, the *aparelhagens* acquired an even greater importance. This is so because the *aparelhagens* began to transcend their original function, i.e., that of providing the sound equipment for the songs to be played in *brega* parties. While in the late 1970s and early 1980s they were just traveling sound systems, in the 1990s they began to explore new technological possibilities in order to intensify the sensorial experience

of those who attended these parties. That is, in addition to listening and dancing to the songs, *brega* enthusiasts began to have their senses bombarded by amplifiers, giant TV screens, stroboscopic lights, and laser beams. The *aparelhagens* became trademarks that not only promoted *brega* hits but also started attracting thousands upon thousands of poor people who sought entertainment (dancing and drinking) immersed in a media spectacle that completely captured their senses. In the 1990s, the fierce competition among *aparelhagens* grew more intense, giving rise to a true technological arms race. The quality of an *aparelhagem* began to be measured by its capacity to offer the ultimate experience in lighting, loudness, and media spectacle. The rhythm itself had to follow this escalating trend and needed to become even faster and more frantic. As a consequence, in the 2000s a variation of *tecnobrega* appeared: “*cyber-tecnobrega*.” The vertiginous rhythm and dancing were then accompanied by a cybernetic and technological surround that evoked the sci-fi setting of the movie *The Matrix* or the sensorial spectacle of concerts by world-famous artists. Ever since their technological turn in the 1990s, *aparelhagens* were no longer simply one of many elements that contributed to the *brega paraense* music scene. They themselves became the reason, the center, and the main attraction of a thriving industry.

### Central da Periferia

From its early stages in the 1960s to the powerful industry it became in the 2000s, the local stigmatization of *tecnobrega* has hardly faded away. To counter this, new generations of *tecnobrega* enthusiasts started to organize fan clubs to proudly follow their favorite *aparelhagens*. *Aparelhagem* DJs became local superstars and spokespeople for the movement. In their struggle against cultural prejudice, fans and DJs started to praise the use of new technologies in the parties. The big *aparelhagem* parties began to use increasingly state-of-the-art technology to reach thousands of fans, who turned the *tecnobrega* industry into a multimillion-dollar market. The *tecnobrega* industry had become too big to be ignored by the cultural centers.

In 2006, Globo TV produced a special about the phenomenon for an episode of *Central da Periferia*, a monthly one-hour TV series that explored

the peripheral cultural production, especially music, of big cities throughout Brazil. *Central da Periferia* was then the latest TV product from the partnership between acclaimed Globo actress Regina Casé and the anthropologist Hermano Vianna. They had produced, as early as 1991, a weekly TV comedy showcase called *Programa Legal* that mixed documentary and fiction to chronicle, in a humorous fashion, aspects of everyday Brazilian mass culture, including, among other topics, the funk phenomenon in Rio and even traditional *brega* music from the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to highlight that the *brega* singers showcased on *Programa Legal* in 1991 included names such as Odair José, Valdick Soriano, and Gilliard, all of them belonging to the ultraromantic subgenre simply referred to as “*brega*” in Samuel Araujo’s typology. The specificities of the *brega* industry in Belém, that is, its musical melting pot, its strong Caribbean influences, the growing importance of *aparelhagem* parties, and the “technological turn” that the songs and the whole industry were taking at the time were not covered or even mentioned by the TV show. It was not until 1994 that *Brasil Legal* (a spinoff of *Programa Legal*, also created by Casé and Vianna) showed a small segment about *aparelhagem* parties in Belém do Pará. This segment had little impact regionally and nationally, and the phenomenon was presented as just one more curiosity, among many others, showcased by the program.

The success of *Programa Legal* (1991) and *Brasil Legal* (1994-1998) led Casé and Vianna to create *Central da Periferia* (2006), a series that advanced the cultural critique that was incipient in their earlier TV shows. While *Programa Legal* and *Brasil Legal* showed peripheral cultural movements as something curious or “cool,” *Central da Periferia* explicitly attempted to add a certain sense of empowerment to these peripheries by arguing that poor segments of Brazilian society, all over the country, were producing thriving markets that did not depend on the established mainstream cultural industry. These peripheral music industries, created by and for the peripheries without any kind of formal regulation and without any mediation of the former “centers” of national cultural production (Rio and São Paulo), had long been confined to their respective regions, and the new program had the objective of making these music scenes known all over the country. According to Guel Arraes, one

of the executive directors of *Central da Periferia*, the show was different from its predecessors because the producers realized that “social critique goes hand-in-hand with cultural affirmation” (“Central da Periferia”).

The inspiration to create *Central da Periferia* came from the partnership that had been long established by Casé and Vianna, and the orientation of the new program was firmly founded upon the academic projects then led by Vianna. In 2006, when *Central da Periferia* was broadcasted, Vianna had already created *Overmundo*, a collaborative website that sought to showcase Brazilian cultural phenomena that received little attention, or no attention at all, from traditional media outlets. Furthermore, *Overmundo* had recently partnered with the Center for Technology & Society from the prestigious Fundação Getúlio Vargas in an extensive study titled, “Open Business Models in Latin America.” The objective of this major academic project was precisely to identify and map different cases, in Latin America and beyond, of the so-called “open business models,” or new cultural industries based on the liberalization of (or total disregard for) intellectual property and copyright laws. The TV program *Central da Periferia* was fed directly by the data being collected and interpreted by the project, and Vianna, being one of the head writers of the show, as well as one of the main coordinators of the Open Business project, represented the bridge between academe and television. Therefore, the *Central da Periferia* episode dedicated to *tecnobrega* music presents a curious case of mass media and academe partnering up to disseminate an ideologically charged statement about contemporary cultural production in Brazil.

### The Periphery Strikes Back

The magnitude, effervescence, and dynamism of the *tecnobrega* industry, which had generated millions of dollars and was well established by the mid-2000s even if it was unheard of in São Paulo and Rio, offered a perfect “case” for the TV show *Central da Periferia*. The program was highly anticipated in Belém; after all, a one-hour TV show on the massive Globo network, aired on prime time and completely dedicated to the city, was a rare event. It was *tecnobrega*’s “big break,” the very first time it would occupy the central stage in a broadcast to the whole country on the most powerful national TV network. *Tecnobrega*

enthusiasts welcomed the news with pride and euphoria, while local detractors expressed shame and embarrassment to see their city nationally associated with what they considered such a lowbrow form of cultural production.

The show aired on 3 June 2006, and Belém residents eagerly turned on their TV sets that Saturday afternoon to see how their city would be portrayed on the show. In celebratory fashion, Casé associated the *tecnobrega* industry with innovation and success, more specifically with technological innovation and commercial success. In the show's first scene, when Casé walks onto the stage, she greets the crowds by saying: "Good evening Belém; good evening Pará, good evening Amazon, good evening Brazil." The audience enthusiastically responds to each greeting. The presenter then cries, "Hurray for the laser! Hurray for the laptop! Hurray for the MP3!" After each cry, the crowds respond with a cheer, and when the presenter shouts "Hurray for the technological periphery! Hurray for the slums of Belém do Pará!" the population reacts with an explosion of claps and screams. By greeting the crowds with these words, the presenter skillfully exploits two characteristics of the impoverished urban communities in Belém do Pará. First, she touches upon the resentment of exclusion felt by these populations: exclusion for being poor and for living in a peripheral city. It was their moment to say "hello" to the entire country, to cease to be invisible—to be, for the first time, the main actor on the TV screen. Secondly, the presenter exploits the strong "techno-attraction" that can be found among *tecnobrega* fans. The exaltation of the laser, the laptop, and the MP3 and the response of the crowds indicate how certain forms of technology fascinate these excluded populations. This fascination is acknowledged when the presenter states that, in Belém, "the masses, besides being Catholic, *Umbandistas*, Buddhist, Protestant, or Jew, have another religion. Their religion is technology, state-of-the-art technology" (*Central da Periferia*). After greeting the audience, Casé explains:

Aqui, festa na periferia é sinônimo de festa de aparelhagem. Aparelhagem é o nome paraense para a equipe de som. Essas festas, realizadas nos bairros mais pobres da cidade e sonorizadas por um altar tecnológico, são, há mais de cinquenta anos, um fenômeno de massa, produzido pela periferia e para

a periferia. Em Belém existem aproximadamente trezentas aparelhagens que tocam principalmente brega, techno-brega e cyber-techno-brega.... Apesar de terem surgido nos bairros de periferia, elas chegam a investir quase um milhão de reais para comprar o que tem de mais potente e mais moderno em termos de equipamento de som, luz e imagem....

Casé, backed up by the large database provided by the Open Business project, captures the technological fascination in her words: the *aparelhagem* is considered a “technological altar.” The technological facet emerges again when she mentions the types of songs that the *aparelhagens* specialize in: *brega*, *tecnobrega*, and *cyber-tecnobrega*. Along with the techno-fascination, the industry’s power is emphasized by the imposing numbers associated with it: there are about three hundred *aparelhagens* in Belém, and although they come from poor areas, their investment in technology can reach the impressive figure of “one million reais.” A close analysis of what comes next on the show demonstrates how technological pride is a key element in the *aparelhagens’* self-portrayal. In his presentation on *Central da Periferia*, DJ Dinho of Tupinambá–Treme Terra claims:

A tecnologia das aparelhagens começa pelas músicas. Todas são compactadas em MP3, a gente toca com dois notebooks. Já nem se usa mais o CD, a mesa é digital, o Tupinambá é 100% digital, inclusive hoje estou inaugurando meu cocar que vai acender luzes e tudo mais. Sem dúvida nenhuma, é a maior estrutura de aparelhagem do norte do país....

Following up on DJ Dinho’s presentation, DJ Edilson of Ciclone likewise underscores the central place of technology in his *aparelhagem*:

O Ciclone tem uma das maiores tecnologias das aparelhagens hoje em Belém do Pará. Trabalhamos com laptops, equipamentos de iluminação com *moving heads*, cinco lasers, sistema de telão de um lado e de outro; fora esses telões que temos aqui, nós temos mais dois que ficam na parte externa, periféricos de última geração. Toda a estrutura chega a estar avaliada em torno de R\$600.000,00....

The insistent bragging of these DJs regarding their technological potency can be explained to a great extent by the strong competition among *aparelhagens* in Belém do Pará. In the battle for public preference, major *aparelhagens* are in a constant technological race to provide their fans with the “ultimate entertainment experience.” Their economic success is partly related to their ability to immerse their audiences in a frenetic setting of lights, images, and sounds. The more new technologies they use to mesmerize fans in their spectacle, the more successful and profitable they become.<sup>6</sup>

According to Lemos and Castro, there are four main aspects that define the *tecnobrega* commercial circuit: innovation as a core value, a “cult of technology,” advertisement systems based on informal agents, and the absence of copyright royalties (54). As for the “cult of technology” in *aparelhagem* parties, the authors explain:

O culto à tecnologia é a forma mais evidente e material de inovação. A sacralização da imagem das aparelhagens e dos DJs é reforçada por eles mesmos, nas apresentações e nos rituais preparados para o grande show tecnológico que acontece nas festas. A tecnologia é chave na competitividade entre aparelhagens e, nitidamente, impulsiona o mercado do tecnobrega. (54)

Lemos and Castro point out that the use of state-of-the-art technology in the *aparelhagem* spectacle is an important component for their commercial success. The more an *aparelhagem* can mesmerize its audiences with new technological innovations, the more fans it will attract. However, there is another aspect I would like to emphasize in this “cult of technology.” It is the pride the agents of the circuit have for their “world class” entertainment industry, on par, technologically speaking, with the concerts of renowned national and international artists. In a 2007 interview in *O Liberal*, the largest newspaper in Belém, DJ Dinho invited his fans to a special event in which the *aparelhagem* Tupinambá would present the most modern and updated equipment available: “Vamos usar o mesmo telão que a equipe da produção da Ivete Sangalo colocou no Maracanã, como também a banda irlandesa U2” (“Aparelhagem Tupinambá”). The pride manifested in such comparisons, insistently presented

by the DJ elsewhere, goes beyond commercial advertisement. When DJ Dinho compares Tupinambá's spectacle to those put on by Ivete Sangalo and U2, he also seeks to obtain some of the prestige attributed to those artists. This legitimizing strategy shows how the application of new technologies to "peripheral" entertainment practices can assume a socio-cultural dimension that goes beyond its commercial purposes; that is, it can also be used to create a discourse of cultural legitimization.

This "cult of technology" expressed by the DJs can be understood through a broader analytical tradition that, since the 1970s, with the emergence of British new wave subcultural theory, has investigated how groups in subordinate structural positions collectively try to "come to terms with the contradictions of their shared social situation" (Murdock 213). According to Murdock, subcultures "provide a pool of available symbolic resources which particular individuals or groups can draw on in their attempt to make sense of their own specific situation and construct a viable identity" (213). In the late 1970s, Dick Hebdige sought meaning in the expressive forms and rituals of punkers, skinheads and rockers in the UK in order to understand how their lifestyles—made up of mundane objects and practices—defined and defied their position in relation to the dominant culture. In the case of *tecnobrega*, the appropriation and exaltation of new technologies is a defining trait in the establishment of a style that deeply influences its fans and defies the established cultural *status quo*. According to Raymond Calluori, "subcultures stem from a need for creative autonomy (i.e., 'something to call one's own') and reflect a collective attempt to exert control over one's own life and make meaningful one's social reality" (50). When this basic idea is applied to interpret the statements of *tecnobrega* DJs, what emerges is a sense of how technology serves as the element that allows creative autonomy—the possibility of creating a new and vibrant parallel music industry—and is collectively used to give meaning to a subordinate musical movement that tries to occupy a new place in a broader cultural spectrum.

The concept of technoculture, as appropriated by contemporary ethnomusicology, can be particularly helpful in the analysis of *tecnobrega*, since it complements and updates some of the notions put forth by new wave subcultural theory. René Lysloff and Leslie Gay Jr. put forth a concise concept of

technoculture, which “refers to communities and forms of cultural practice that have emerged in response to changing media and information technologies, forms characterized by technological adaptation, avoidance, subversion, or resistance” (2). Lysloff and Gay Jr. also affirm that technoculture “is concerned with how technology implicates cultural practices involving music, not only technologically based musical countercultures and subcultures, but also behaviors and forms of knowledge” (2). Returning to the TV show *Central da Periferia*, all the complex intricacies of technology, creative autonomy, collective identity, negotiation with, and even potential subversion of dominant structural hierarchies are evident in DJ Juninho’s following statement about *aparelhagem* parties:

A maioria do público que gosta é da classe C, é a periferia que gosta da aparelhagem, a periferia que levantou a aparelhagem e que mostrou para a classe média e para a classe alta o que são as aparelhagens. O público paraense tem esse prazer de ver nas aparelhagens laser, luz, fogos indoor, fogos que não queimam a galera com alta segurança. É um show altamente de primeira classe. VIVA A PERIFERIA TECNOLÓGICA! (*Central da Periferia*)

These statements amount to a celebration not only of the *aparelhagem* parties and the technology they entail, but also of the *population that created them*. The peripheries “showed upper and middle classes” what *aparelhagens* are; that is, poor communities became *agents, producers, and patrons* of a “first-class” entertainment spectacle. DJ Juninho’s exaltation of the highly technological *aparelhagem* spectacle is a subversion of the passive role commonly attributed to underprivileged groups when it comes to the reception of mass entertainment products. In this case, Tricia Rose’s remarks on rap can be applied to *tecnobrega*, as both cultural phenomena constitute “a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless,” where it is possible to “act out inversions of status hierarchies ... and draw portraits of contact with dominant groups in which the hidden transcript inverts/subverts the public, dominant transcript” (100). For *aparelhagem* agents, contestation is expressed through the pride of creating, in spite of its peripheral and stigmatized condition, a

“first-class” (technological) spectacle that is at the core of a booming entertainment industry. There is still the issue of class struggle, there is still the notion that there are mechanisms of symbolic oppression of underprivileged groups; but now, the objective is not to combat socio-economic macrostructures in a neo-Marxist style. In the particular battleground of socio-cultural hierarchies in the *tecnobrega* industry, the focus of the struggle has significantly shifted. There is a micro social battle that triggers a more palpable, urgent, and contemporary discussion, namely the defiance of the socio-cultural *status quo* via the industrial, aesthetic, and discursive appropriation of new technologies by the masses.

In spite of the clearly defiant tone adopted by agents of the *tecnobrega* industry, it is important not to overstate its destabilizing potential. In his assessment of New Wave movements, Calluori observes that:

... the contradictions and intrapsychic oppressions facing youth are “solved” at the cultural level. Despite the inability of youth subcultures to actually radically alter the relations of production, youth subcultures are viewed by the dominant class as politically dangerous for several reasons. First, subcultures interrupt cultural reproduction and threaten the hegemony of the dominant class by outmaneuvering and embarrassing them at a day to day level. (50)

In the case of new technocultures like the one found in the *brega paraense* music scene, it is interesting to note that, differently from New Wave movements, subordinate populations today have access to technologies that enable them to alter traditional relations of musical production. However, this shift is restricted to a specific cultural industry and does not translate into deep alterations of the macroeconomic and political structures of power (Barros 67, Gabbay 147). Despite being actors of an emerging “alternative” music industry, *tecnobrega* agents never aspired to such deep sociopolitical transformations. For *tecnobrega* agents, DJs, and fans alike, the battlefield has always been related to the cultural acceptance of the phenomenon. It is at the level of “intrapsychic oppressions,” as Calluori puts it, that its agents still have to struggle on an everyday basis.

In *tecnobrega's* war over symbolic socio-cultural values, Casé's final remarks on *Central da Periferia's* episode devoted to the form are a historical landmark. She celebrates a subaltern industry that has flourished "without governmental support, without exposure on the big national media outlets, and without the big recording labels"; the victory, as she puts it, is to produce cultural goods and "export" them to other peripheral areas in Brazil even before earning local recognition as a legitimate cultural product. At the end of the show, Casé thanks Belém for teaching the rest of the country how to celebrate their local culture and foster entrepreneurship. Just before she signs off, she emblematically thanks the elated crowd for "giving a lesson in technology" to the rest of the country. A prestigious actress from Globo TV coming to Belém and thanking its underprivileged population for the creation of a vigorous entertainment industry serves as a powerful symbolic moment. It was a moment when the relations of power between the Amazon Region and São Paulo/Rio were inverted and the position of *tecnobrega* at the bottom of cultural hierarchies, locally and nationally, was assertively challenged.

## Conclusion

Since the historic episode of *Central da Periferia*, a lot has happened to the *tecnobrega* industry. In 2007, Banda Calypso, a group that originated in the *brega* music scene, became the most listened-to band in Brazil (Lemos and Castro 16-17), important documentaries focused on the *tecnobrega* phenomenon (Johnsen, Christensen, and Moltke, along with Cunha and Godinho, being among the most famous ones), the Brazilian academy began to show a vivid interest in investigating the *tecnobrega* music scene in Belém, Gaby Amarantos—another artist from the *brega paraense* circuit—earned national prominence, and now the popular music produced in Belém is known throughout Brazil.

As of 2012, Casé hosted a weekly show on Globo TV named *Esquentando*, which celebrated diverse cultural manifestations of the urban masses from all over the country. Other kinds of music and dances like *tecnobrega*, that is, cultural manifestations born under the stigma of the "ugly" and the "bad," effectively had their own show on prime time TV. Because of the possibility of instant remote sharing through the Internet (YouTube, MP3 files, social

networks), the peripheries of the country now have direct channels of communication. As a result, other regional music scenes have become visible. Besides *funk* and *tecnobrega*, the enormous success and visibility of rhythms such as *lambadão* from Cuiabá, *arrocha* from Bahia, and the new *fornó eletrônico* from the Northeast, to name just a few, reveal the contours of a new musical configuration in Brazil. The agents participating in these new kinds of Brazilian peripheral music no longer accept the stigma of “cultural garbage,” and each one of them tries to find his or her own strategies of legitimization (in this regard, once again, the appropriation of new technologies by marginal groups and their discourse about it, as seen in the case of *tecnobrega*, are key to understanding this new reality).

Vianna has recently narrated his travels to Belém, Manaus, and Cuiabá to experience in person how these new entertainment industries work (“Tecnobrega, Fornó, Lambadão”). On his trips, he found vibrant, innovative, and flourishing commercial and cultural circuits that contrasted with the dying official music industry. Vianna also rightly defends the idea that we need to rethink the dichotomies of center vs. periphery, mainstream vs. underground, and official vs. alternative. All these binaries imply that there is a center that has the culture, the means, and the resources that the periphery does not. They also give agency to an imaginary center that could decide to recognize or not a supposed periphery that begs for inclusion. In a way, Vianna is trying to address an old dilemma that the academy consistently faces when dealing with the subaltern. Spivak (“Can the Subaltern Speak,” “Scattered Speculations”) has famously explored the deep and complex questions related to the representation of subaltern groups: can post-colonial studies break free from a paradigm in which the subaltern is always ventriloquized, *spoken for*, and *spoken about*? Can we even ask the question without automatically participating in the colonial project? In parallel fashion, Vianna is asking if it is possible ever to talk about center and periphery without reproducing the old hierarchy of values and relations of power that he is trying to deconstruct. Vianna deals with such a dilemma not by attempting to eliminate the paradigm, but by inverting the positions of power. According to him, the periphery has invented digital cultures and business models that may indicate paths for the future of the center. When it comes

to the use of new technologies in the digital era, the leadership actually comes from the peripheries, since the official industry insists on holding on to increasingly fragile policies of copyright and music distribution (Vianna, “Tecnobrega, Forró, Lambadão” 247-48). In a much more radical counter-discursive stage, the author goes as far as stating that “more and more, the periphery takes everything over. It is no longer the center that includes the periphery. The periphery now includes the center. The center, excluded from the party, becomes the periphery of the periphery” (Vianna, “Tecnobrega, Forró, Lambadão” 249).

The insistent exaltation of the periphery on TV shows like *Esquenta*, as well as on other TV shows aired on TV Globo (*telenovelas* such as *Cheias de Charme* and *Avenida Brasil* are good examples), and the reassessment by academe of marginalized music scenes in Brazil are clear indications that some old value systems and cultural hierarchies are being shaken to their core. Similar cultural paradigm shifts have occurred all over Latin America. In the musical realm alone, the *tecnocumbia* in Peru and the *vallenato* in Colombia are glaring examples of how peripheral music scenes in different parts of the continent have developed legitimizing strategies that have a lot in common with *tecnobrega*. A deep understanding of the cultural, political, social, aesthetic, and material dimensions of such phenomena can open up promising new avenues of comparative research within Brazil and beyond. For Latin Americanists, Brazilianists, ethnomusicologists, critical theorists, economists, and historians, this represents a whole new world of interdisciplinary possibilities. When these fields of study come together we may very well see a significant deconstruction of old hierarchies of value. Then we might finally begin to acquire a new awareness of how deeply engraved the *Música Periférica Brasileira* is in our cultural identities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Bregão* is the augmentative of *brega* (*brega* + the suffix *ão*). *Brega* refers either to the song or to the rhythm described above, and *bregão* refers to the club or open space where these songs are played in night parties. For further information see Lamén, who posts his preliminary findings on the *sonoros*, sound systems that preceded the *aparelhagens* from the 1950s to the 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> *Camelôs* are street vendors who usually sell their products without any kind of legal license.

<sup>3</sup> *Gravasom* followed a more traditional phonographic business model and released albums by local artists who sang regional rhythms such as *brega*, *carimbó*, *lambada* and *merengue*, and who could find no support from the big labels headquartered in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In spite of the relative success of *Gravasom* in the 1980s, the sale of *brega* music by street vendors has always been the dominant business model. For a detailed account of the role of *Gravasom* in the history of *brega* music in Northern Brazil, see Costa.

<sup>4</sup> For a thought-provoking discussion of how new technologies have impacted the global music industry, and their ethical and economic implications in the age of digital reproduction, see the documentary *Good Copy, Bad Copy* (Johnsen, Andreas, et al, 2007). In this documentary, the filmmakers criticize the war declared by the traditional phonographic industry against the use of new technologies to produce and consume music. The *tecnobrega* music scene, along with other global cultural phenomena, is used to illustrate the artistic and economic possibilities in a culture industry that is not subjected to traditional copyright laws and rights of distribution.

<sup>5</sup> The “baile funk” in Rio was one of the first “peripheral music industries” to gain national attention in Brazil during the 1980s. Created by the young poor population of the *favelas* of Rio, the *baile funk* has many common features with the *aparelhagem* party in Belém: both were born under the stigma of social segregation, were consumed and produced by the lowest social classes in big metropolises, and flourished in spite of heavy criticism from dominant social groups. For a detailed analysis of the “baile funk carioca,” see *O Mundo Funk Carioca* (Vianna 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Over the summer of 2009, I conducted interviews with fourteen *aparelhagem* fan club members who gave me an inside perspective of how fans see the phenomenon. The interviews revealed strong correlations between the “cult of technology” and cultural pride. Most interviewees proudly described their favorite *aparelhagens* by highlighting the technological spectacle they offer. João, a prominent member of a fan club named *Equipe Xarope*, mentioned that the key elements for the success of an *aparelhagem* are the “giant LED screens, hi-def screens, the sound quality, and its whole physical structure.” These characteristics make *aparelhagem* parties, as he puts it, better than “bourgeois parties” because the former have the “power to make the crowds participate, to show something new, something never seen before anywhere else.” Due to space constraints, an in-depth analysis of the fan interviews is beyond the scope of this paper. For now, it suffices to affirm that João’s statements were paradigmatic of a recurrent rhetorical strategy in which self-legitimization is achieved through a “techno-proud” discourse. For a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the interviews, as well as their complete transcripts, see Bahia 195-205.

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**Marcio Bahia** is an Assistant Professor of Portuguese at Vanderbilt University. He received his doctorate from the University of Ottawa in 2011. His research focuses on Brazilian cultural studies, cultural mobilities, Brazilian literature and new media, and Inter-American literature with articles published in several journals in Brazil and Canada. He is currently working on the first scholarly monograph in English on the rise of the *Tecnobrega* music scene in Brazil.