

**THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF MARIA ANGELA D'INCAO:
SENSITIVITY AND COMPLEXITY IN URBAN SOCIABILITY**

***A ATUALIDADE DE MARIA ANGELA D'INCAO: SENSIBILIDADE E
COMPLEXIDADE EM SOCIABILIDADE URBANA***

***LA ACTUALIDAD DE MARIA ANGELA D'INCAO: SENSIBILIDAD Y
COMPLEJIDAD EN LA SOCIABILIDAD URBANA***



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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the relevance of Maria Angela D’Incao’s work to the field of Urban Sociability. The discussion is grounded in doctoral research that used D’Incao’s works as central analytical references. In the research, which drew on empirical data based on Autoethnography and other related research methods, D’Incao’s theories regarding the shift from Broad Sociabilities to Restricted Sociabilities in modern cities became key not only in the author’s scientific analyses but also in his own socio-spatial reality. These theories by D’Incao, written in the mid-1990s, engage with current debates on sociability, as seen here in the author’s correspondence with scholars such as Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Ana Clara Torres Ribeiro, and others. Thus, Maria Angela D’Incao’s contemporary relevance and sensibility in Urban Sociability are highlighted here, even amid increasingly complex perspectives on the subject.

KEYWORDS: Maria Angela D’Incao. Sociability. Urban Sustainability.

RESUMO: Este ensaio sugere a atualidade de Maria Angela D’Incao no tema da Sociabilidade Urbana. A base da tratativa se dá a partir de uma pesquisa de doutorado que tomou obras de D’Incao como referências analíticas centrais. Na pesquisa, que contou com empiria baseada na Autoetnografia e outras bases de investigação associadas, as teorizações de D’Incao sobre mudanças de Sociabilidades Amplas para Sociabilidades Restritas em cidades modernas se mostraram chave não apenas nas análises científicas do autor, mas também em sua própria realidade socioespacial. Essas teorizações de D’Incao, escritas em meados da última década de noventa, dialogam com debates atuais da Sociabilidade, como se vê aqui em correspondências da autora com autores como Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Ana Clara Torres Ribeiro e outros. Identifica-se, assim, a atualidade e a sensibilidade de Maria Angela D’Incao no estudo da Sociabilidade Urbana, mesmo em meio a perspectivas sempre mais complexas sobre a temática.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Maria Angela D’Incao. Sociabilidade. Sustentabilidade Urbana.

RESUMEN: Este ensayo sugiere la relevancia de Maria Angela D’Incao en el tema de la Sociabilidad Urbana. El enfoque se basa en una investigación doctoral que tomó obras de D’Incao como referencias analíticas centrales. En esta investigación, apoyada en datos empíricos basados en la autoetnografía y otros métodos de investigación asociados, las teorizaciones de D’Incao sobre cambios de Sociabilidades Amplias a Sociabilidades Restringidas en ciudades modernas resultaron clave no solo en las investigaciones analíticas del autor, sino también en su propia realidad socioespacial. Estas teorías de D’Incao, escritas a mediados de los últimos años noventa, dialogan con debates actuales sobre Sociabilidad, como se evidencia en correspondencias con autores como Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey y Ana Clara Torres Ribeiro. Se identifica, así, la relevancia y sensibilidad de Maria Angela D’Incao en el estudio de la Sociabilidad Urbana, incluso en perspectivas más complejas sobre este tema.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Maria Angela D’Incao. Sociabilidad. Sostenibilidad Urbana.

Introduction

Brazilian sociologist and writer Maria Angela D’Incao passed away in March 2023 at the age of 82. The author of a significant body of academic and literary work—which may not be extensive or widely renowned, but is above all insightful and diverse—D’Incao left a unique legacy in the production of knowledge and critical thought in Brazil! Among the topics she explored were issues concerning women, the family, modernity, and—central to this essay—urban sociability. More than thirty years after the publication of two of her major papers on this subject (D’Incao, 1992a, 1992b), Maria Angela D’Incao’s thought proved fundamental to a doctoral dissertation titled *Desenvolvimento Urbano Sustentável: autopoiese e sociabilidade, conceito último e possibilidade primeira* (Carmo, 2024), which investigated the socio-spatial dimension of sustainability. After all, while sociability is already a familiar theme in urban studies, D’Incao’s writings, through their sensitivity, allowed for an understanding of a complexity that is often overlooked by other authors. In particular, D’Incao suggests that a process of transformation of urban realities from “Broad Sociability” to “Restricted Sociabilities” occurs in the course of urban modernization, and also enables us to grasp the intricacies of this process, which prove to be more complex than can be understood through separate social or urban analyses alone, but only through integrated socio-urban perspectives sensitive to everyday life. D’Incao’s theoretical framework is first presented in her paper *Modos de Ser e de Viver: a sociabilidade urbana* (D’Incao, 1992b). Later, in the paper *A Casa, a Família e Modos de Vida* (D’Incao, 1992a), the author offers an even more sensitive and in-depth perspective on this probable transformation of sociability, drawing on an analysis of 19th and 20th century Brazilian literary works and examining the authors’ interpretations of changes in ways of life. The purpose of this essay is to explain the relevance of this content today, illustrating how these two works by D’Incao were seminal for the aforementioned research.

Methodologically, to investigate the socio-spatial dimension of sustainability, the research drew on theoretical and empirical foundations that cut across the biological, social, and urban sciences. The aim was to move beyond conventional discourses on sustainable development, which are often still focused on ecological aspects and lack depth regarding social issues, and to turn directly to a social phenomenon, launching objective investigations into correlations with socio-spatial sustainability. Notably, in the field of biology, the concept of Autopoiesis provided a theoretical foundation that correlates with the social dimension (Maturana; Varela, 1995; Capra, 2010; and others). In the field of urban sciences, references to urban design have enabled direct inferences to be drawn regarding the role and impacts of

sociability on the sustainability of cities (Gehl, 2013; Appleyard; Appleyard, 2020; and others). And in the social sciences, authors other than D’Incao have provided a general and critical understanding of Urban Sociability in its multiple modern and contemporary dynamics (Lefebvre, 1991; Jacobs, 2011; Cordeiro, 2003; Velho, 2011; Caldeira, 2003; Ribeiro, 2005; Frúgoli Jr., 2007; and others).

Regarding the empirical aspect of the research, it is important to mention that D’Incao’s theories provided inspiration for the application of the Autoethnography method, for which specific authors were also consulted (Chang, 2008; Ellis *et al.*, 2011; and others). This is because, upon learning of D’Incao’s arguments regarding the shift from Broad Sociabilities to Restricted Sociabilities in the wake of modernization, the author of this study realized that he himself had been the target of a “Process of Restriction of Sociability”—as he chose to call this process to facilitate analytical references to D’Incao’s theory. Furthermore, the aforementioned doctoral research began at the start of the COVID-19 social isolation measures in 2020, which influenced the author’s decision to select empirical objects from his own socio-spatial reality—accessible without significant physical travel, but which also proved to be closely linked to the sustainability of the built environment, as discussed below.

In short, the author’s paternal grandparents—immigrants from small towns in the 1950s—were responsible for building up a modest built heritage at their current home place on the outskirts of Recife, starting from very humble beginnings: a small grocery stall, which later expanded into a small general store and grew to some extent, leading to the purchase, sale, and construction of several properties. Over the generations, this growth was combined with the work of the author’s parents—the first generation of the family to hold salaried jobs in a major urban center—and enabled the author’s generation to receive a formal education, which led to his enrollment in higher education. Having earned a degree in Urban Architecture and as a researcher in sustainability, it was also at the start of his doctoral research in 2020 that the author began to devote greater attention to his family’s heritage—and that D’Incao’s insights proved to be key. Due to the economic limitations of his lower-middle-class family, as well as the constraints imposed by the social isolation of the pandemic, the author observed that very little of his formal knowledge of sustainability applied to the maintenance of his family’s-built heritage. Instead, it became necessary to turn to the possibilities offered by the local community itself—a community with which he had not yet developed “proximity”, or meaningful relationships, due to the investment in his formal education, which had led him to spend years of his youth and early adulthood in high schools and universities. He then came to understand,

through the perspective advocated by D’Incao, not only the restriction on sociability he had experienced, but also a broad sociability that still existed in his place of residence and that could be reclaimed to ensure the socio-spatial sustainability of his family’s-built heritage. In what follows, therefore, we see this sensitivity of Maria Angela D’Incao, which allowed for both a scientific and a personal understanding of sociability in complex scenarios such as the one experienced.

The Sensitivity of Maria Angela D’Incao

D’Incao (1992b, p. 95, our translation) defines Broad Sociability as “coexistence with different social groups, a broad relationship with the streets, and an absence of privacy regarding bodies and spaces,” whereas Restricted Sociability, on the contrary, “distances people and social manifestations from the street, relegating social contacts to those based on social class, thereby fostering the cultivation of domesticity and the privacy of social spaces, the mind, and the body.” D’Incao argues that this process has continued throughout the modernization of cities, accompanied by the rise of bourgeois ways of life, which she defines as devoid of “ties to the community and to those who are different” (D’Incao, 1992a, p. 75, our translation). According to the author, many processes have contributed and continue to contribute to this transformation: technological changes, such as the advent of television, which “keeps people at home, impoverishing cities at night [...], as well as putting an end to gatherings and home visits”; the use of the telephone, which “both brings people closer and drives them apart,” and the automobile, as a “shield that protects its user from strangers”; as well as changes in family habits, such as middle-class children being occupied with schoolwork at home, and other activities such as sports, art classes, and language classes, which eliminate leisure time and the old habit of playing in the street (D’Incao, 1992b, p. 100-102, our translation). Going even deeper, D’Incao suggests that this transformation occurred through both social and urban processes. From an urban perspective, she cites sociologist Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz to illustrate the phenomenon of “the adoption of an urban lifestyle even before the onset of industrialization” in Brazil’s interior regions (D’Incao, 1992b, p. 98, our translation), as well as the influence of urban architectural typologies—such as buildings and apartments—in small towns that, *a priori*, do not require concentrated spaces. From a social perspective, D’Incao suggests that even small changes in ways of life—such as shifts in labor conditions—can influence the restrictive changes in sociability. She illustrates this with a situation she witnessed

in the Alta Sorocaba region of São Paulo, which until then had been sparsely unindustrialized and had not undergone urbanization:

The farmer's son I met there, when I would go to the farm, on he way back from boarding school, used to play with the children of the farmhands. Friends, schoolmates or boarding-school companions—peers, in other words—who happened to arrive together also interacted with the servant class. Today, many of these people who were born or raised on farms—riding horses, swimming in streams and ponds, hunting and fishing with the employees' children—adopt a different lifestyle for their own children. [...] Their children today, when they go to the farm, bring friends from the same social class. They ride horses for sport rather than to learn a trade; they swim in pools and maintain with the staff nothing more than relationships of domination, albeit often cordial ones. This is also because, of course, the nature of the employment contract has become capitalist. It is worth remembering that the relationship of domination also existed in the past, but the fact that people were in closer physical proximity certainly created a different kind of sociability from the present one, in which camaraderie and affection were a given (D'Incao, 1992b, p. 99, our translation).

These explanations by D'Incao proved to be quite consistent with the knowledge and experiences of the author of the research referred to here. Having been a target of the Process of Restriction of Sociability, he understood that the previous generations—his parents and grandparents—experienced broader forms of sociability in the terms described by D'Incao, with greater interaction among social groups and contact with the street. In contrast, the author devoted a significant portion of his life to educational activities, sports, languages, and other pursuits, the vast majority of which took place far from his home place, thereby significantly reducing his sociability with different social groups and on the street. In other words, a process of change took place at the expense of more traditional ways of life—in the sense of pre-existing broad forms of sociability—and in favor of bourgeois habits, which influenced the transformation of the author's potential relationships with his place of residence and his family's-built heritage, in terms of the concepts, services, and resources to be sought. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate this scenario, highlighting the expansion of modern ways of life in the city of Recife during the second half of the 20th century, while traditional ways of life—including those with rural characteristics—prevailed in suburban areas.

Figure 1 – New habits and modern spaces between the 1960s and 1970s in Recife.



Source: Authors' collection.

Figure 2 – Rural customs in the suburbs of Recife between the 1960s and 1970s.



Source: Authors' collection.

Maria Angela D’Incao’s sensitivity to urban sociability is evident not only in her capacity for academic analysis and observation of everyday life, but also in her cross-cutting, transdisciplinary ability to explore the subject through 19th and 20th century literature—a period in which, in Brazil, as D’Incao explains, the modernization of cities and the rise of bourgeois lifestyles intensified. Drawing on works of fiction such as *Sargento de Milícias* by Manoel Antonio de Almeida (1831–1861), comedies by Martins Pena (1815–1848), and novels by Machado de Assis (1839–1908) and José de Alencar (1829–1877), D’Incao identifies apparent shifts from “Broad Sociabilities” to “Restricted Sociabilities” through an analysis of plots, settings, characters, and even stylistic innovations in the texts. In *Sargento de Milícias*,

for example, a work from the early 19th century, D'Incao (1992a, p. 66–67, our translation) highlights the continued absence of “domesticity” and the “cultivation of childhood, motherhood, and fatherhood” as understood today, that is, the absence of “authority over one’s offspring” and “private love”, responsibilities that, on the contrary, D'Incao suggests were distributed among various adults. In simple ways of life, according to the author, “the family, the police, the neighbors, the city, and public officials all interact with one another for one reason or another, and everyone ends up knowing everything about everyone else’s lives” (1992a, p. 66–67, our translation). The same would hold true in Martins Pena’s comedies, in which, according to D'Incao:

The great disparity in the characters' economic statuses—as they sometimes interact within the same play, leads us to infer that social classes were not yet clearly defined in Brazil—at least regarding to ordinary day-to-day interaction. [...] a sense of community remained strong during this period, even though the bourgeois lifestyle had already been embraced as a counterpoint to the traditional rural way of life (D'Incao, 1992a, p. 68, our translation).

In works closer to the 20th century, D'Incao identifies the emergence of two characteristics of the bourgeois family and society: within the family, the cultivation of “domesticity,” and in society, that of “domestic privacy and domestic spaces” (D'Incao, 1992a, p. 73, our translation). This is said to have resulted from phenomena such as individualism and the free choice of marriage partners, which, according to D'Incao, gave rise to new socio-familial dynamics, such as shifts in political and economic alliances. For example, in José de Alencar’s *Senhora*, D'Incao (1992a, p. 73, our translation) identifies a “more clearly defined urban social structure,” with a “clear distinction between the poor and the rich”, a point she also makes regarding Machado de Assis, although she did not analyze works by that author. In summary:

The first opposition between the individual and society—the community—is expressed in Brazilian urban novels primarily through the personal choice of marriage. The second opposition between the individual and the community is seen through the rise of the bourgeois family, with the adoption of attitudes of privacy and domesticity. The descriptive focus in the novels shifts, gradually and more intensely, toward the interiors of the home, the minds of the characters, and the relationships between parents and children (D'Incao, 1992a, p. 74, our translation).

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Contemporary Relevance and Complexity in Sociability

Obviously, D’Incao’s discussions on sociability do not encompass the entirety of the discourse on the subject. Since the issue first emerged with Simmel in the second half of the 19th century, the debate on sociability has taken on different dimensions, including situational and microsociological perspectives—based on interpersonal associations—as well as relational and macrosociological perspectives, such as those involving globalized forms of sociability. According to Frúgoli Jr. (2007), this debate has always oscillated between particular and general processes of sociability, and even Durkheim—the founder of sociology and a contemporary of Simmel—disagreed with Simmel on this point. Other authors, such as Ferdinand Tönnies, also contributed to the discussion, addressing “Sociability in Community”—which he viewed as organic to social relations—and “Sociability in Society,” driven by commercial interests; and revealing, even at that early stage, parallels with what is observed in D’Incao’s distinction between “Broad Sociabilities”—within the context of traditional, premodern ways of life—and “Restricted Sociabilities”—within the context of modern bourgeois ways of life. Furthermore, directly within the sciences of the built environment, this debate began to be fostered primarily in the early 20th century by the Chicago School—eager to promote the potential for modernizing society—and by the Manchester School, concerned with the impacts of modernity on traditional socio-urban realities.

More recently, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, the entire discussion was further enriched by the emergence of new postmodern and contemporary forms of socialization: for example, with the rise of new private and semi-private spaces, such as shopping malls and gated communities; by the emergence of digital social media, as well as by new urban configurations in general, such as the intensification in verticalization of spaces; and furthermore, by broader economic transformations that continued to reshape bourgeois ways of life. Nevertheless, despite this growing complexity surrounding the issue of sociability, the discussion of it in Maria Angela D’Incao’s work remains relevant, especially regarding the

central dialogues identified in this study in relation to other theories of sociability, as discussed below.

First, we can draw on the work of fellow Brazilian sociologist Ana Clara Torres Ribeiro (2006) to understand that the critical discussion of urban sociability is highly relevant today. Although the bourgeois ways of life studied by D'Incao—which date back to the early 20th century—were also impacted by other innovations in the global economy, such as Fordism, Keynesianism, the financialization of capital, and others, Ribeiro argued at the beginning of the 21st century that, especially in large and medium-sized cities, capitalist processes have increased “social distances in these spaces that, historically, have concentrated the material and immaterial conditions of capitalist accumulation” (Ribeiro, 2006, p. 413, our translation). In this context, Ribeiro questioned whether sociability would withstand the “financialization of social relations,” arguing that there was a lack of “words (concepts) to grasp sociability transformed into an event,” “in the ‘thread-like gestures’ produced by spontaneous action—that is, by unplanned or simply conceived action” (Ribeiro, 2006, p. 416–417, our translation). This discussion suggests the very continuity of the Process of Restriction of Sociability as understood by D’Inca.

Another author also contributes to this dialogue. The British geographer David Harvey (2008) offers a reflection on the Process of Compression of Modern Space-Time, which likewise suggests the occurrence and continuity of the transformation from Broad Sociabilities to Restricted Sociabilities. According to him, this compression has been occurring since the nineteenth century and corresponds to the “annihilation of space through time” (Harvey, 2008, p. 212, our translation), and vice-versa; that is, to the growth of bourgeois power to manipulate Time and Space in the world in the service of capital accumulation, but at the expense of the Space-Time of traditional life. For Harvey:

[...] changes in the qualities of space and time can result from the pursuit of monetary goals. If money has no meaning independent of time and space, it is always possible to seek profit (or other forms of advantage) by altering the ways in which time and space are used and defined. [...] Every complex system of production involves spatial organization (even if it is restricted to the factory or the office). Overcoming these spatial barriers costs time and money. Consequently, efficiency in spatial organization and movement is an important issue for all capitalists (Harvey, 2008, p. 209-210, our translation).

Furthermore, Harvey’s argument inevitably brings to mind Henry Lefebvre (2001), who provided a compelling understanding in the 20th century of the “Space-Time of Cities,” whose

additional notions, according to the author, have been transformed by “Capitalist Space-Time.” Thus, Lefebvre fundamentally recognizes the idea of Time as an exercise in Social Action—a debate that also seems to align with D’Incao’s Process of Restriction of Sociability.

Second, as already mentioned, Maria Angela D’Incao provides insight into the finer points of sociability. In her writings, she refers, for example, to the architect Nestor Goulart Reis Filho to point out that changes in sociability brought about by the rise of bourgeois lifestyles occurred, first, not in urban space but through modifications to the home and the urban lot, and only later had an impact on public spaces. D’Incao (1992a, p. 76–77) cites initial transformations involving the setting back of dwellings from the sides of the lot, and later from the facades, which created new morphological configurations for the streets: a slow process, but one that is said to have led to social distancing from the street and among neighbors. This observation is relevant because, in the doctoral research referred to here, an analysis of other recent studies on urban sociability (Dousti *et al.* 2018; Justo; Amado, 2015; Muñoz, 2018; Monteiro, 1989; Bichir; Marques, 2012; Almeida, 2011) revealed that, today, the phenomenon of sociability has commonly been linked to public space, while ignoring greater complexities arising not from the production and use of that space, but from the social relations and ways of living and inhabiting that shape it. Consequently, it still seems necessary today to provide further clarification regarding what is meant by sociability and socialization—that is, the general and complex set of socio-urban relationships that establish forms of sociability, and the occurrence of immediate social interactions that take place in urban spaces. This debate evokes the very distinction—yet also the complementarity—between those particular and general aspects of sociability discussed since Simmel and Durkheim, to which the writings of Maria Angela D’Incao also contribute.

Third, D’Incao lends greater concreteness to the discussion of sociability, given the unpredictabilities that often emerge in complex analyses conducted using different research methods. In the current studies of sociability analyzed here as well, many of their conclusions reveal unexpected insights regarding sociability. For example, in urban spaces where there is greater physical proximity between homes and the street, one sometimes encounters unexpected scenarios that could be described as “Restricted Sociability,” whereas, in spaces with greater physical distance between homes and the street, one finds, conversely, “Broad Sociabilities.” This unpredictability is yet another indication of the complexity and critical relevance of the issue of Urban Sociability, and—as D’Incao and the other authors help us understand—it appears to require further investigation; and this applies not only directly to bourgeois public

urban space but also to the configuration of local urban spaces within neighborhoods and communities, as well as to the private spaces of homes, apartments, and workplaces.

Final considerations

D'Incao has established herself in Brazilian academic literature as a leading authority on the topic of urban sociability in modern terms, and on the impacts of its bourgeois overlay on traditional—that is, premodern—forms of sociability. Although the contemporary world continues to present new challenges and contexts that contribute to the debate and understanding of the phenomenon of sociability—which seems to occur increasingly in spaces that are transforming at a faster pace, in ever-greater interaction with technologies and social networks—an understanding of D'Incao's "Process of Restriction of Sociability" emerges as timely and concise for addressing sociability from a social and historical perspective that highlights the profound impacts on cities stemming from modernity's ways of inhabiting and building. After all, this social and historical perspective is not confined solely to the distant past. As analyzed and experienced throughout the doctoral research mentioned here, the author himself has identified shifts from Broad Sociabilities to Restricted Sociabilities even in this third decade of the 21st century. Thus, more than just academic theoretical and empirical contributions, awareness of this process served the author in his own local socio-familial reality, allowing him to gain new insights and adopt new social stances, which ultimately fostered greater sustainability for his family's-built heritage.

In reviving the qualities of "Broad Sociability" in his neighborhood, the author was able to discover better ways to manage his family's-built heritage, while simultaneously expanding his relationships with the street and the neighborhood. If we reflect more broadly, we will note the importance of this understanding for heterogeneous socio-urban realities such as those in Brazil, a country where different modern and traditional ways of life coexist. And all these different ways of life are distinguished not only by cultural expression—the veneer most immediately identifiable in social relations—but by the more nuanced relationships established between individuals and with space. From this arise different epistemes, different techniques, different perspectives on life, ways of inhabiting, working, and socializing... Ultimately, the shift from Broad Sociability to Restricted Sociability serves as an analytical starting point for addressing the theme of Urban Sociability, in the sense of constructing a contemporaneity that transcends modernity and establishes greater balance and equity among different ways of

living! It is no coincidence that this knowledge held significance both academically and for the everyday reality of the author of this research, which highlights Maria Angela D’Incao’s sensitivity and contemporary relevance in her complex observation of Urban Sociability.

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