

Reflections on living and the politicization of consumption practices.

Reflexões sobre o viver e a politização das práticas de consumo.

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Abstract: *In the last decades, an increase in globally consumption patterns took place, followed by increased pollution, exploitation of natural resources and a constitution of a lifestyle dominated by an excess of labor work and economic debt. This article presents partial results of a research and had as objective to make visible how groups with alternative lifestyles and labor practices related to consumption practices. Aspects related to individualization of responsibility related to environmental problems, as criticized by some respondents of the research, will be problematized. Even though the reflection and modification of consumption practices are not a complete solution to environmental problems, the fact of being concerned with our planet make possible the emergence of less massified relations in our lives.*

Keywords: *consumption practices; politicization; lifestyle.*

Resumo: *Nas últimas décadas, tem acontecido um aumento nos padrões de consumo de forma global, acompanhado do aumento da poluição, da exploração dos bens naturais e a constituição de um modo de vida tomado pelo excesso de*

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trabalho e pelo endividamento econômico. Esse artigo é resultado parcial de uma pesquisa de doutorado e teve como objetivo visibilizar como grupos com estilos de vida e de trabalho alternativos a modos massificados de viver relacionavam-se com o consumo. Problematizaremos o aspecto da individualização das responsabilidades sobre os problemas ambientais, crítica apontada por um dos grupos participantes. Ainda que refletir e modificar as práticas de consumo não acabe com os problemas ambientais, o fato de tomar para si as preocupações em relação ao planeta que habitamos pode viabilizar relações menos massificadas com a própria vida.

Palavras-chave: *práticas de consumo; politização; modos de vida.*

Introduction

Consumption is a human activity that is modified throughout history (BAUMAN, 2008; BARBOSA, 2010). This way, we cannot understand consumption as something homogeneous or that works only to supply our needs. According to Castro (2014, p. 60), “consumption must be understood as the result of a set of social and cultural practices strongly related to the subjectivity of its actors and to the social group they belong to”. When we are referring to the term “consumption”, we are including different actions in the same sphere, because, when we consume something, we are communicating, expressing a “lifestyle, a way of being and acting” (CASTRO, 2014, p. 61). To better express these differences, we choose to use the term/concept “consumption practices” and we use the term “consumption” when we refer to the generalization of these social and cultural practices.

In the last decades, there has been an increase in the consumption patterns globally, followed by some effects, as the increase of pollution, the advance of exploration of natural goods and the constitution of a way of life filled with excessive labor and economic debt, among many others. At the same time, the concerns related to the “limits of the model of capitalist expansion” and their effects are also increasing, bringing to the table “the ethical and political dimensions of consumption practices [...]” (CASTRO, 2014, p. 68).

This relation between consumption and environmental problems have been leading some people to become responsible for their consumption practices and changing them. Some militants of social movements, activist groups and also people that are not organized politically in groups have been stopping the consumption of products and/or services, boycotting brands and/or companies or simply not consuming something they consider superfluous. To stop consuming certain products or to start consuming something become a more conscious action, because it begins to consider: The origin of its production, the type of “labor relation” there is in its making, the fact it was transported through great distances, the political position of the company who makes it

(involvement in war, corruption, environmental crimes, the use of pesticides in the cultivation of foods, etc.)

It would not be possible to say that every person who practices these actions of refusal of the consumption of certain products do it as a strategy of fight against “the Capital”. We can think that these are ways of manifesting indignation in relation to the effects of a certain production and consumption style on the planet and in people’s lives, either because of the critics about the invasion of private spaces (modifying habits of consumption) and/or the appropriation of public spaces by big corporations. Such actions are ways to fight for their own life, because, when they are opposed to certain consumption practices, these subjects come up with new paths for their way of life. When we evidence these practices, we can hear other voices, making visible other ways to inhabit the planet Earth.

The theme of consumption has been related to environmental problems for some decades. Television news talk about global warming, a subject that is still controversial, because there are people who think global warming would be a natural event. According to the report of Intergovernmental Panel about Climate Change (IPCC) in 2013, global warming is an event created by human beings, due to the industrial activity (NASSIF, 2014). IPCC is an institution created by the United Nations Program for the Environment and by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and gathers scientists and specialists from all over the world, that create their reports based on research analyses (WOLFFENBUTTEL, 2007).

The issue of the environmental crises, until the 70’s, was related to developing countries due to the fact that they have major unorganized population growth, producing impact on the environment (PORTILHO, 2005). From that decade on, another speech gained relevance, relating the issue of environmental problems to the way of production used by developed countries, because they consumed more natural resources

and energy, and, consequently, produced more pollution (PORTILHO, 2005). The argument that these environmental problems were due to the way of production used was being incorporated and impacted the production sector through pressure made by the government, for the “establishment of new norms and environmental demands, pressured by environmental movements - through complaints, manifestations and boycotts - and also by the own businessmen that appropriated the environmental speech” (PORTILHO, 2005, p. 2).

It was by the 90's that the discussion about conscious consumption and the relation between consumption and environment started to gain some expression, yet indirectly, coinciding with complaints about the climate crisis (FONTENELLE, 2010). According to Portilho (2005) the Conference Rio 92 and the documents produced at that time, as the Declaration of Rio, the Agenda 21, the NGO Treaty, influenced this change of debate, changing the culpability from the modes of production to the consumption practices. This twist in the discussion about social problems “coincides with – and can be explained by - a tendency of a paradigmatic change of principle that structures and organizes society, which also goes from production to consumption (PORTILHO, 2005). Thus, we see, next, that the report of IPCC on 2007 and the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), directed by Al Gore, former vice-president of the United States, hold people accountable for their choices when relating global warming with human activities (FONTENELLE, 2010).

This article is the partial result of a PhD research entitled *Consumptions and ways of life: Problematizations about the stylistics of existence and ways of consuming*⁴, by the first author. The research had as objective to make visible the relationship that groups with lifestyles and labor relations alternative to massified ways of living had with consumption; to do so, we used the cartography as methodologic orientation and we followed four groups in the city of Porto Alegre and one group from

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Nova Santa Rita, metropolitan region of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul. When referring to massified ways of living, we are not talking about a fordist/taylorist process of production and the consequent massification of certain consumption habits, but we are talking about a life with less reflection, of a mindset that makes few remarks about the relationship with the world that we live in.

Consumption practices communicate, evidence brands that express something about the relationship of the subjects with the world. For Douglas and Isherwood (1990, p. 88), consumption has the capacity to give the world a meaning, which “supposes interpreting the sensibility of this world”. On their understanding, goods are ritualistic accessories, given that their consumption is a ritual, “goods perish or are consumed, however this is only a small part of the whole process of consumption” (DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 1990, p. 91). That way, thinking about how we relate with consumption is also reflecting about how we communicate with the world we live in.

To study consumption practices, for Castro (2014, p. 62-63), means to analyze “in what way goods work as language, communicating signs of distinction and classification in a social environment highly mediated by signs of consumption”. It also means to reflect on the singularities “of the ways of appropriation of each social group which works according to their own rules for giving meaning to products, services, brands and others” (CASTRO, 2014, p. 63), in addition to give subsidy for analysis about the customer from a market point of view.

When we study the singularities in the relationship with consumption of different groups during the PhD research, it was possible to observe that the consumption practices of each group expressed certain lifestyles. The first group followed was the Cambada de Teatro em Ação Direta Levanta Favela, who performs theater on the street. The second group was Pedal Express, a cooperative of cyclists that do delivery for other companies. The third group was the Cooperativa de Consumo,

a partnership between a group of MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores sem Terra – Movement of workers without land) members that plant organic products and the Ateneu Libertário A Batalha da Várzea, a libertarian group that sells the products and delivers them throughout the city. The fourth group was the Coletivo Até o Talo, group that cooks vegan⁵ and vegetarian food, selling it on public events and in their own house.

Each group was followed during one month on their daily activities (with one or two meetings per week), followed by two more meetings (one per week) specifically to discuss the question of the research: “How do you relate with consumption?”. Notes were made in field diaries, with a total of 100 pages. As a way of restituting and closing the process, we made a meeting with all the groups to socialize what has been already systematized with the research material. On this day, we used a recorder and we had the participation of a colleague from the research group helping with the notes. The meetings with the groups happened between May 2013 and May 2014, having the total of 12 meetings with the theater group, eight with the cooperative of cyclists, eight with the cooperative of consumption and eight with the group of vegan and vegetarian food. The names of the groups were not altered in order to maintain the relation of co-authorship with the participants. The groups agreed and encouraged the use of their names; however, the names of the individual subjects are fictional.

From the meetings, we perceived some characteristics each group had in their consumption practices. For the analysis of this research, we highlighted only one characteristic on their relation with consumption. Thus, for example, with the Cambada de Teatro em Ação Direta Levanta Favela, we highlighted the fact they do not accept sponsorship from brands, so they do not become a sellable product. With Pedal Express, we highlighted the problematization about the ways of resistance regarding consumption, more specifically regarding the use of the

5 The expression “vegan” refers to food or people that do not eat meat and do not use any product with animal origin or even tested in animals.

bicycle (what would mean to resist in this field?). With the Cooperativa de Consumo, we highlighted the solidarity in their relationships (with the community they live in, with the groups with whom they interact and with the buyers of their products), seeking a less impersonal interaction, but rather a more friendly interaction.

Individualization or politization?

In this article, we will reveal the analysis regarding the Coletivo Até o Talo, and the characteristic we will highlight was the criticism towards the individualization of responsibilities about environmental problems. The Coletivo Até o Talo has more reflective consumption practices, seeking to consume in a way of minimizing the effects of this activity on the environment and in a way of not living a life geared towards work and the consumption of goods and objects. However, they believe that the ones responsible for the degradation of the environment and the consumption of natural goods would be the big corporations, the agribusiness and the relation that these sectors have with the government.

The Coletivo is organized in a selfgoverned way; in the moment of research, four people were participating more actively, everyone had other paid activities (none was formal), only one person lived exclusively from the work in the Coletivo. Among the activities developed there were: Production of snacks for events (parties, farmers markets, concerts, etc.) and for delivery; production of frozen dishes for delivery; dinners at their house and the creation of cooking workshops. The Coletivo produces vegan and vegetarian food with a low cost and in a healthy way, in addition to sharing information about this kind of food. Among the forms found to produce food at a low cost are: The use of unconventional food plants (UFPs) found on abandoned places around the city and/or planted by them in their house; using all parts of the food, such as fruit and vegetable peel; using foods in an unconventional way, such as the

“cheese” made out of potato and the “meat ball” made out of beans; recycling, which is the activity of going in the end of farmers markets and picking up food that would be thrown out to use in their preparations.

This lifestyle is not something exactly new; there is a movement called *freegans*⁶, that began in the United States in the 90's and spread to other countries, including Brazil. This movement is composed by people who adopt a lifestyle based on minimal consumption, who refuse waste and “support the community, the generosity, social interest, freedom, mutual help, contrary to the current society based on materialism, moral apathy, competition, conformism and greed” (O QUE É, 2016). Inspired in their anti-globalization fights and in groups such as Food Not Bombs⁷, they use as strategy the boycott to consumption because they believe purchasing any product from corporations will harm the environment and/or the animals and/or the human rights. For *freegans*, in an economy based on the large-scale production, “geared towards profit, animal, human and land exploitation, this exploitation happens in every level of production (since the acquisition of the raw material, to the production and transportation) and in practically every product that we buy” (O QUE É, 2016). Thus, the alternative they have is to reuse products used by other people, that is, they collect from the trash: furniture, home appliances, books, CDs, food, clothing, among others. Among the principles of the *freegans* is: “waste reduction”; “work less”; “renovating what is wasted”; “return to the natural”, through the construction of community gardens, gardening and wild harvesting; “living free from rent” through squat; “ecologic transportation”, as far as possible (O QUE É, 2016).

The Coletivo Até o Talo is not inserted into the *freegan* movement, but it shares some of their characteristics, revealing there are different types of people that seek to consume less and work less. However, Coletivo has its own singularity, and their members reveal not to believe that their consumption practices will minimize environmental problems.

6 They are participants of *freeganism*, the word *freegan* is the fusion of the word *free* with the word *vegan*.

7 Independent collectives that distribute vegan food for free in protest against war.

They relate climate problems, air pollution, water contamination, the depletion/devastation of natural resources, deforestation, etc. to the way our society has been dealing with consumption. When they talk about environmental problems, they differentiate from polluting agents, because they believe the big responsible for the environmental pollution are not the subjects individually, but the companies and agribusiness – for using more energetic resources and polluting the environment, producing bigger impacts – and also the government, for participating and enabling this damaging relationship.

For the group, there is a certain culpability of individuals and their lifestyle that is present mainly in the media, such as television, radio and newspapers, when they talk about environmental issues. The culpability of individuals is pointed out by Fontenelle (2010) as one of the crossings of the speech of responsible consumption, since it is offered to the consumers the option of buying products from companies that have more care regarding the environment. Thus, every individual can choose whether to buy or not from companies that pollute the environment, expressing the idea of a subject that is self-governed. According to Fontenelle (2010), this speech, that gained popularity in the 90's, although it marks differences, demands discussions because it makes people responsible for their practices.

This accountability of subjects is shared by the media, according to Fontenelle (2010, p.216): “it is possible to visualize such speech on media in general, on business media, on specific magazines about sustainability and the environment, on the actions of NGOs and company foundations and in the marketing of big brands”. For the author, a feeling of anguish is created on the subjects by having to respond to something that surpasses their understanding about the subject. This feeling will be the “match for a new big product of the contemporary capitalism – security – which, in a new template, sells redemption as a commodity” (FONTENELLE, 2010, p. 218), i. e., responsible consumption. The consumer is responsible for their “self-government” in the responsible consumption speech:

[...] assuming or requiring a subject who is rational, reflective, aware of their own actions and responsible for them. Thus, such speeches might be added to the category “self-management”, in which it is explicit a proposal of “freedom of choice”, and, consequently, a personal responsibility for their actions (FONTENELLE, 2010, p. 220).

The self-management speech blames the individual for actions that are not only individual. That way, the subject is captured by this accountability and can engage in a healthier lifestyle, that is also sold by the media as being a more adequate way of living, from a so-called healthier consumption. Fontenelle (2012), on its research about business-oriented media, in which she analyzed the Brazilian magazine *Exame* and the British magazine *The Economist* from 1996 to 2007, defined healthy consumption as one of the categories of analysis. In this study, she perceived that the concerns about the theme were not related to the environment, but to a more “balanced lifestyle aiming physical and mental well-being for the performance of men at work” (FONTENELLE, 2012, p. 146). When she tried to understand how the speech of healthy consumption was dealt on *Exame* magazine, specifically, the author observed that it was seen as a business opportunity; for example, the idea of making a business “is exalted through the narration of success stories of shake inventors and diet soft drinks, sandwiches, among others” (FONTENELLE, 2012, p. 147). In the analyses of some of the magazine articles, healthy consumption was considered as a way of investment and the body, as a way of making a business (FONTENELLE, 2012). The debate on healthy consumption was, thus, summed up as a business opportunity.

We cannot disregard the contribution the debate about responsible consumption for the environment allows to focus on other aspects for the analysis of the issue. Portilho (2005) makes a distinction between what would be an accountability of the subject’s actions regarding the environment - through green consumption - and the politization of the ways of consumption - from the idea of sustainable consumption. The green consumer is the person that, with their “power of choice”,

chooses to purchase products that do not harm the environment, focusing on individual actions. However, the idea of green consumption would have limitations, individualizing the responsibility, leaving aside the comprehension about consumer culture, giving less focus on the process of distribution and production and provoking a transference of regulation, “from the government to the market, through mechanisms of self-regulation; and from the government and the market to the individual, through their choices of consumption” (PORTILHO, 2005). In addition to that, the author points out the untruth of, from the information about environmental problems, the consumers would choose to purchase products that do not harm the environment - indeed, green consumption ended up increasing a green market for people who could afford such products (PORTILHO, 2005).

Still, sustainable consumption appears as a proposal of collective overcoming of these limitations through creating policies that regulate the production and consumption, stopping to focus only on solutions in the field of technology, behavior or economy (PORTILHO, 2005). One example of that would be investing on actions that improve public transportation, which would depend on public policies and an understanding that a better city is not built by widening roads.

These more politicized consumption practices, more responsible, need to be studied more thoroughly. Studies that can make visible the many forms of resistance, of refusal and/or opposition to certain modes of consumption. Beyond the aspiration or struggle of building a more sustainable lifestyle, there is also the issue of fighting for solidary and ethical values for other human beings and for the planet Earth.

If, on one hand, subjects have been held accountable for their modes of consumption and led to rethink their lifestyle, on the other hand, we can think that there are subjects, individual or collective, that, by rebelling against the more massified way of living, take responsibilities for themselves regarding the world, politicizing a space that was previously seen as private. We do not believe the consumer is the subject that will change the entire society, however, it is possible:

[...] to consider the possibility of politization and environmentalization of the private sphere, considering it a necessary extension of new political practices. If the proposals of change on consumption patterns belong to the project and the utopia of a “sustainable society”, consumers – individual or organized – can be perceived as one of the holders of this project, building new ways of political action and strengthening citizenship and the interest for the public space (PORTILHO, 2005, p. 10).

It is towards this perspective that Coletivo Até o Talo brings to themselves the task of deconstructing the relationship they learn to have with consumption and making a work on themselves to create another relationship, inventing new consumption practices, escaping the logic in which the critics to the effects of modes of consumption are transformed into a business opportunity. At the same time, they say not to have the illusion of living “outside the system”, they just seek to live in a way they experience the type of society they want to, that is, a more fair society, worried about the planet, the animals and other human beings. The dialog below expresses this idea:

Letícia: Capitalism throws the blame onto the individual, but companies consume more than any person. There isn't any change in this, if everyone stopped using natural resources, it wouldn't change a thing about the society. But in an individual level, we are satisfied by living that way.
 Camila: We are satisfied reproducing something we believe in.
 Letícia: We are an experience of the society we project (Field Diary, May 20th, 2014).

Participants express that the problems regarding the environment would be related with the logic of life geared towards consumption. When she said she is satisfied doing what she believes in, Camila expresses making her life an experience of the world she would like to live in, being satisfied putting into practice the choices she believes are best for herself and the world. She understands that her practices regarding consumption will not solve environmental problems, even if they can soften one situation or another. When they save water, reuse food, ride a bike, customize their clothes, reuse objects, Camila and her group

members are constituted as subjects and their practices support their principles. Thus, they communicate their lifestyle through their consumption practices. When they express what they think through the way they dress, how they eat, how they move, how they inhabit the city, how they interact with other people, etc. they communicate their choices about how to live, which makes and brings sense to their existence.

However, to seek to put their own principles into practice and politicizing a space previously seen as private (PORTILHO, 2005) demands a great effort. In order to build this politization of a private environment, participants of Coletivo Até o Talo say that is necessary to constantly work on themselves in order to deconstruct what they learned regarding consumption practices. For Camila, “to deconstruct is not to deny consumption, because we live in this system, there’s no way out. To deconstruct is a process of looking for more autonomy in this system” (FIELD DIARY, May 20th, 2014). For Coletivo Até o Talo, the deconstruction of consumption practices goes through looking for a relation with a greater autonomy regarding objects of consumption on capitalism. To do so, they seek to learn activities of building, sewing, cooking, planting, etc. in a more autonomous way and criticize the way of life in capitalism – that produces a distance between who produces something to who is consuming and creates a lifestyle marked by a cyclical movement between work, purchasing objects, debt, and discard objects.

For Rodrigo, this way of life imprisons people, they “get a credit card from the bank and end up in debt, getting bills of financing that will paid in a long-term commitment, that way the person cannot leave their job because of the debt” (FIELD DIARY, May 27th, 2014). For Hennigen (2010), there is a relation of reciprocity, of common production between credit and consumption, or consumption society, because a person can purchase goods and services even if they cannot pay. We can think that credit can either democratize access to consumption or it can produce big problems to the subject when using without planning, “purchasing excessively and without thinking, or if some ‘life accident’ occurs to the person in debt, among other factors” (HENNIGEN, 2010, p. 1.191).

The indebtedness, for Hennigen (2010, p. 1.189), “gets managed. Or not. When the debts exceeds the possibilities of budget of the consumer, what happens is called a over-indebtedness. In order to pay this economic debt, subjects cannot stop working, having intensive dedication to work is one of the characteristics expected of a participant of the consumers society (BAUMAN, 2008). According to Bauman (2008, p. 17), “the ideal employee would be a person without previous bonds, commitments or emotional bonds, and who avoids having them now; a person who is ready to take on any task that comes their way [...]” In this logic, Leticia explains that consumption, in capitalism, generates economic indebtedness, people “get into debt for buying things that are not going to last” (FIELD DIARY, May 27th, 2014).

Coletivo’s critics, along with Bauman’s (2008), are regarding the excessive work, that leaves little room for leisure, reflection, interaction with people and that serve for purchasing objects that will have a short lifespan and soon will be discarded. For Leticia, it is necessary to rescue the “position of not only being a consumer, everyone is educated only to consume. That is what we want to rescue – autonomy - escaping from this idea that every person is only a potential buyer (FIELD DIARY, May 20th, 2014). Hence the importance of thinking that politicizing consumption practices can also take us to reflect about what we do, not necessarily to change the world, but to say that we are part of this world.

For Rodrigo, “nowadays people are only producing symbolic things, because no one knows how to make things with their own hands anymore” (FIELD DIARY, May 27th, 2014). The importance of making “things with their own hands” would be in having more autonomy on their own lives and knowing what they are consuming, of leaving the position of being only a consumer. Participants say that, in this search for autonomy, it is necessary to deal with their own needs and is evident there is no way “out of the capitalist system” because everyone has “bills to pay” and the denial of this way of life in capitalism can bring many constraints, making impossible the reflection about what was lived. When someone denies they live in a capitalist world, thinking there

would be a “way out”, the subject would be creating life and resistance strategies in disagreement with their reality, creating illusions about their own doing. They express that is necessary to reflect about this reality so people can produce consumption practices with more autonomy, taking their needs into consideration. For Camila and Letícia:

[...] it is not possible to escape capitalism, to say that we are doing that would be a hypocritical attitude, since we need to pay rent, for example. [...] Until you create another way, you're in. Even if you occupy a land, you need capital to start producing in it, in order to escape capitalism you need capital (FIELD DIARY, November 20th, 2014).

However, in their practices, they evidence the possibility of living in another way, even if it is inside the capitalist system. Their ways of life express precisely that we do not live in a society where everyone has a life geared towards consumption, because there are people who try to put their ethical values on their practices, in this case, consumption practices. And in this search for experiencing this world they desire, they constitute for themselves and evidence other ways of living that can inspire other people.

Final considerations

To understand consumption practices as communication, signals that express something about the culture, choices or impossibility of choices helps us expand our view about our own relationship with the world. When perceiving that consumption practices express lifestyles, it is possible to give a more thorough look on social groups, giving less totalizing analysis about consumption, making visible the existing singularities.

These reflections about the relationship of the subject with himself and the world they live in express the constitution of more reflective subject on a personal level. But they also point out that the incorporation of new practices in the field of consumption can manifest other forms of participation in the public sphere. It is necessary to understand that consumption practices are not individual practices, even if they also express

something about an individual subject. Consumption practices, when they play their role in communication, make cultural habits visible, express lifestyles, reveal political revindications of the subjects about the world. That way, the inclusion of “values such as solidarity, ethic and responsibility in discourse, choices and consumption practices, according to the proposition of certain social movements, demands sociologists and anthropologists to revise the concept of society and consumption culture [...]” (PORTILHO, 2009, p. 203).

The Coletivo Até o Talo showed that politicizing consumption practices is not the same as accepting individual’s culpabilities about environmental problems. Even if reflecting and modifying our consumption practices do not end up with environmental problems, owning preoccupations regarding the planet we live in can enable less massified relationships with our own life. Knowing where our food came from, how they were made, who produced them, expresses the desire of building a less impersonal and a more welcoming lifestyle. At the same time, politicizing consumption practices do not lead to an individualization of responsibility regarding environmental problems, even if culpability does exist and circle around in a somewhat marked manner in different mediatic spaces. This politicalization can lead to the engagement of subjects regarding the world where they live, reflecting about their practices, making visible other possibilities to inhabit the planet.

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