



Trust, participation and political consumerism among Brazilian youth



Livia Barbosa^a, Fátima Portilho^{b,*}, John Wilkinson^b, Veranise Dubeux^c

^a Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

^b Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ) Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

^c ESPM, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

In the last few years, research carried out according to different theoretical traditions has identified a transnational process of politicization of consumption. Civic values have been related to consumption, pointing to a possible breaking down of the borders between citizens and consumers. Several theories, developed mainly in sociology and political science, focus primarily on the decline of trust in traditional political institutions and the emergence of sub-politics in their interpretation of this phenomenon of political consumerism. The thesis of post-materialism provides another interpretation, suggesting that the broad satisfaction material of needs has led to a reorientation of values and to a change in the repertoire of political action. This paper maps the profile of political consumerism in Brazil, focussing in particular on young people who live in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Our results show that while involvement in political consumerism among young people in Brazil is low, this is not explained by levels of institutional trust, or an inability to adopt political positions; nor is it related to a reorientation of values associated with meeting material needs. Rather, we point to the way that young people in Brazil remain under the influence of the family much longer than is customary in European and North American societies, and therefore do not have to perform household tasks or face the dilemma of making consumption choices. We also point to the importance and activism of Brazilian social movements that are responsible for many social changes, thereby rendering individual action somewhat secondary. We finally point to another relevant cultural aspect of Brazilian society, namely the way that individuality and a sense of responsibility are formed. We conclude, therefore, that while global tendencies may be identified in many countries, the way these develop depends on the institutional configuration of each society. Explanations based only on trust and post-material values are not sufficient to help us understand the phenomenon of political consumerism if cultural points of view are disregarded.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades “a growing variety of discourses, both within the market place and outside it, in politics and civil society”, both at the individual and institutional level, has emphasized the role of the consumer as a moral subject, and consumption as a tool for implementing changes in society in general (Sassatelli, 2006, pp. 240). Civic values such as citizens’ rights, equity, ethics, sustainability and social responsibility have been related more and more frequently to terms such as consumption and consumers, pointing to a possible breaking down of the borders separating these two

worlds that have traditionally been strangers – when not opposites – to one another (Hirschman, 1977; Gabriel and Lang, 1995). The joining together of these two words raises interesting questions in that the historical origins of both are based on quite different principles, values and traditions. Notions of citizenship and citizens go all the way back to Athenian democracy, and in modern days have been reinterpreted by the American and French Revolutions. These concepts imply equality among the members of a community, as well as freedom of thought and action. Fixing roots locally, defending the community, giving way to the will of the majority, and the feeling of defending and being responsible for the world around us are the most characteristic features of citizenship. This is the symbolic representation of political man who believes that a “good, fair and happy life” can be achieved through collective action.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +55 21 22248577.

E-mail addresses: livia.barbosa3@gmail.com (L. Barbosa), faportilho@yahoo.com.br (F. Portilho).

Consumers, on the other hand, were and are still defined as subjects who come from an amorphous and territorially transcendent world. Their actions are not permeated by blame or social responsibility; they are not obliged by the community to give way on behalf of a greater good; they are subjects whose autonomy of choice reflects their own interests. Private pleasures are their principal objectives, and they are associated with voluntarism, social atomism and the idea that a “good, fair and happy life” is to be found in the market and in the seduction that goods and services exert over them (Simmel, 1978; Marx, 1978; Bauman, 2007).

Given these different historical and ideological roots, it is by no means odd that this discursive approximation should provoke a certain discomfort or even outright rejection in many authors, social movements and the media, who see in the society of consumption and its ideology – consumerism¹ – a perverse threat to civic values that will reduce citizens to consumers and shoppers (Bauman, 2007; Ewen, 1992).

However, authors whom Horowitz (2004) calls “post-moralists” – such as Michael Schudson and Daniel Miller, among others – have rejected this opposition between consumers and citizens, and the negative reactions to their association. In his article “*Citizens, Consumers and the Good Society*”, Schudson (2007) claims that the time has come to discard rather than recycle this opposition which romanticizes both and belies their respective practices. Likewise, transforming consumption and consumers into villains cannot resist in-depth scrutiny. In many cases, consumption involves positive political values, just as political actions can often be driven by the same petty-minded interests that are attributed to consumers (Hirschman, 1977).

Despite the disputes that the joining of such actors and worlds might provoke among some academics, in the media and public opinion, the fact remains that the link between consumer and citizen has been defended in the work of many authors such as Canclini (2001), Halkier (1999), Paavola (2001), Micheletti (2003), Portilho (2005), Stolle et al. (2005), Trentmann (2006, 2007), Sassatelli (2006), Schudson (2007), Binkley (2009) and many others, indicating the existence of a new area of academic interest that considers certain changes in consumer behaviour, rooted in environment and ethical concerns, to be a relevant phenomenon worthy of analysis.

These changes and the “growing variety of discourses”, (Sassatelli, 2006), that approximate civic values and consumption can be understood in a wider contemporary social context where social and environmental problems are confronted through the practices and choices of consumers. The implicit goal of these discourses is to transform traditional, automatic and private acts of consumption into responsible practices in which considerations of an ethical, social and sustainability-minded order play a key role in people’s choices at various levels of their private lives. In this context, shopping, eating, and the use of energy, water and transport are evaluated according to their overall social and environmental impacts.²

¹ The word “consumerism” has two different meanings. While it can be used to express an ideology of the excesses of material consumption, especially of a conspicuous nature, it also can be used to refer to the social movements related to consumer protection and consumer rights.

² Eating, for instance, is no longer seen as an activity based on personal preferences and tradition, focused on individual pleasure and sociability. It has become a highly conscious, regulated and ideological activity that entails considerations about the quality of the productive processes and the socio-environmental impacts of what we eat. Such considerations now become essential to our choices and provoke significant changes in the way we eat and think about food (Micheletti, 2003; Sassatelli, 2006; Barbosa, 2009).

The analysis of consumption as an instrument of political action and social transformation includes a variety of characterizations, such as responsible, green, conscious, ethical, critical or sustainable (Stolle et al., 2005; Sassatelli, 2006; Clarke, 2008).³ Although such terminology can represent different and in some cases even opposite strategies (Portilho, 2005), in this paper we prefer to use the term “political consumerism”, as defined by Micheletti (2003) which is more comprehensive and indicative of the on-going process of using the practices of consumption as a tool for social change. According to this author, political consumerism can be defined as “actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional market practices”. Political consumers are defined as “people who engage in such choice situations. They may act individually or collectively. Their market choice reflects an understanding of material products as embedded in a complex society and a normative context” (*opus cit.*, pp. 02). In addition, these individual or collective actions involve organisation, mobilization, protest and the attempt to influence both public policies and markets, as in the case of the fair-trade organizations.

2. Design of research

Although the theme of political consumerism is new both in the United States and Europe, much research in the areas of sociology, anthropology, political science, geography and history has already been undertaken (Halkier, 1999; Paavola, 2001; Micheletti, 2003; Stolle et al., 2005; Trentmann, 2006, 2007; Sassatelli, 2006; Schudson, 2007; Halkier and Holm, 2008; Binkley, 2009). Such research has registered the growth, dynamics and the variables that bear most on political consumerism.

By contrast, only a few research initiatives have been undertaken to date in Brazil on this theme, whether academic (Echegaray, 2010; Castañeda, 2010; Carneiro, 2012), governmental (Crespo, 2012; MMA, 2012), or market inspired (Akatu, 2012). Nevertheless, several signs point to changes in Brazilian consumer practices that might be interpreted as a growing politicization of consumption. In the first place, a number of NGOs have been set up specifically on this theme, such as *Repórter Brasil*, *Instituto Faces do Brasil*, *Instituto Kairós*, *Instituto Akatu para o Consumo Consciente*, and *Instituto para o Consumo Educativo Sustentável do Pará*, among others. Governmental and non-governmental programmes on “education for conscious consumption” are yet another example of this same phenomenon. The volume and frequency of reporting on “sustainable”, “responsible” or “conscious” consumption in the different mass media have increased significantly. The emergence of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, the profusion of certification and labelling systems, as well as the strengthening of the so-called “new economic social movements” (Gendron et al., 2006) which presuppose the existence and action of “conscious consumers” – such as the solidarity-economy, fair-trade and slow-food movements – are other important signs of the growth and engagement of different levels of Brazilian society in political consumerism. Despite these signs, academic data on political consumerism as experienced by the different social strata in Brazil are all but non-existent.

³ Besides the differences in emphasis posed by each of these adjectives, the initial interest of certain academic fields (such as political science or anthropology) is also responsible for the terminology adopted. A good example of this situation is the article by Clarke (2008) which maps out the reasons why the term “ethical consumption” is used more in England, while “political consumerism” is used more in Scandinavian countries. In Brazil, this nomenclature is used differently according to the type of institution: governmental institutions have used “sustainable consumption”, NGOs have used “responsible” or “ethical consumption”, while market institutions have preferred “conscious consumption”.

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