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Consumption, domestic life and sustainability in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Much of the research on environmental awareness and sustainability targets the impact of production on the environment and the need for more sustainable production practices. However, a disproportionate amount of all environmental impact comes today from consumption and everyday life, particularly in how purchased products are put to use by concrete individuals in their daily lives. Such daily practices, moreover, are always deeply embedded in historical, cultural, and social specificities. Thus, we suggest, alongside other scholars, that sustainability studies should also consider routinized domestic practices. In this article, we do so by examining some everyday habits linked to eating, personal hygiene, and cleaning in Brazil, as well as discourses that are currently developing around sustainability in this country. We contrast the two and show that, oftentimes, individuals' awareness about sustainability is at odds with their own consumption practices. Based on qualitative and quantitative research, we investigate (1) routinized, potentially environmentally-unsustainable practices of washing, cleaning, and eating in Brazil, and (2) Brazilian consumers' perceptions about sustainability, ultimately suggesting that both perceptions and practices are indicating substantial impediments to a more sustainable way of life. These varied data and analyses are intended as a first step towards future studies on whether and how it might be possible "re-socialize" Brazilian consumers towards domestic sustainability, thus leading to the emergence of more sustainable homes.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we begin by a general discussion on some of the intrinsic contradictions the literature has been finding between sustainability discourse and consumption practices. We then present the results of various ongoing qualitative, ethnographic research projects on domestic consumption in Brazil. Afterwards, we move on to contrast those qualitative results with those we obtained through a quantitative research project we conducted on Brazilian views and perceptions on sustainability and the environment. In conclusion, we suggest that a study such as this highlights the role of consumption in understanding sustainability, and we suggest that such insights be further developed so as to provide a better grasp as to how exactly consumption habits might be changed and lead to a more sustainable way of life.

Our main goal in pitting these two sets of data against each other is to show that, in Brazil, routinized, everyday practices, rather than increasing awareness of sustainability issues, may be the main challenge in the construction of a truly sustainable society. Thus, with our dual-method strategy and the insights we gained from both projects, we seek to advance scholarly understanding of sustainability – which necessarily entails sustainable practices in both production and consumption – by focusing on the consumption side of this equation. More specifically, our contribution in this article is to compare and contrast two sides of the broader problem of sustainability. On the one hand, what people say about sustainability when prompted to reflect upon it. This we try to grasp, here, by asking research subjects to elaborate on their views about various topics linked to sustainability and the environment. On the other, Brazilians' commonsensical, quotidian domestic practices (most of which are tied to consumption in some way or another).

These we try to grasp through ethnographic observation of what people actually do on a daily basis without much consideration of why they are doing it; we consider such practices in relation to the environmental impact that subjects do not elaborate on in everyday life. Interestingly, as Barbosa (2011) has been showing, some of the more mundane practices around the home, such as cooking and cleaning, do not vary greatly in Brazil, neither by class

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nor by region; emphasis on cleanliness and water usage, for example, is naturalized throughout the country.[1] By such routinized practices, we mean the most habitual of habits, such as the presumed "proper" way of cleaning one's home or cooking one's food. As anthropologists, we assume that these practices operate at a symbolic, cultural, and taken-for-granted level which, by definition, is largely non-reflexive. In Brazil, as we try to show, cleaning, personal hygiene, and cooking habits are considerably unsustainable, for example, in how they employ resources such as water and energy, or in how they eschew reusing food items.

A focus on consumption as actually practiced by living subjects, we suggest, is crucial for advancing sustainability studies, where much focus has been placed on production per se, as highlighted in labels – employed by both scholarly studies and actual companies to describe their tentative practices – such as "clean production," "green production," and so on.[2] Production and consumption, however, are inextricably linked, hence the rising interest in linking sustainability studies and consumption studies. In this sense we are following the lead of other scholars making similar points (Connoly and Prothero, 2003; Gilg et al., 2005; Hobson, 2002, 2003; Spaargaren, 2003). We base our arguments here on our ongoing research, which has consistently been showing that Brazilian domestic consumption practices – such as eating and cooking, personal hygiene, cleaning, and others – are still far from sustainable; in fact, many are deeply detrimental to the environment.

For example, previous research by Barbosa (2002) has focused on low-income and middle-class households in the poorer regions of the Northeast of Brazil, where she lived in a slum to do an ethnographic study of working-class women's cleansing and personal hygiene practices. From that experience, Barbosa learned that such practices – for example, the ways that these women clean their homes and wash their laundry, how they cook and then do their dishes, and so on – operate to what Barbosa called a "logic of pollution." By this she means the process whereby, during either laundry or dishwashing or cleaning any part of the home, the cleaning process requires several steps and various rigid separation measures, lest an item be "contaminated" with presumably less-clean ones during the wash. When doing laundry, for example, people consider that, even while being washed, some types of clothing are more "polluted" than others and must not be allowed to touch any less "polluted" ones. As a result, one does one's laundry in several batches, however small each batch may be – not only whites and non-whites are separated, but also children's clothes from adults', babies' clothes from other children's, women's intimates from the rest of the laundry, kitchen rags and washcloths from everything else, and so on. The logic, therefore, is neither one of choosing the shortest or fastest or easiest process, nor the more economical one; the "logic of pollution" organizes how things are cleaned in the home, not only disregarding issues of water, electricity, and soap consumption, but even increasing both consumption and waste.

Barbosa's research on food habits has uncovered a similar logic, one based on "new" foods, "fresh cooking," and persistent washing, that severely impairs reducing, reusing and recycling of food and utensils (2011).[3] Here, what she found is that "old" foods – for example, yesterday's rice or beans – are considered unfit for consumption and often thrown away, under an argument based on taste, but also on the "freshness" of foods: a popular saying in Brazil is that "rice and beans must be cooked every day," regardless of how much gas, water, or electricity is being spent in such practice. It is not so much a "logic of pollution" that is at play here, but one that rigidly separates "fresh" food from "non-fresh" food, deeming the latter unfit for consumption in the eyes of anyone moderately able to afford cooking everyday. Incidentally, a logic of cleanliness is also at place in utensil use: utensils are hardly ever reused without being washed again, oftentimes plates are changed between meal courses during one single meal, and so on. Again, such logics greatly disregard the question of sustainability, because habit and routine have made it commonsensical that one should act in this non-sustainable manner.

Another piece of research that we have conducted was Veloso's (2011) study of working-class families who had recently experienced upward mobility by ascending (often through access to formal work) to the lower middle classes. One of the first actions such families would take would be to buy as much new equipment as possible for the home. In homes often no bigger than 30 square meters, it is common for them – and those are families with monthly incomes between 400 and 800 dollars – to own three or four television sets, two or three videogame consoles, one or two sound systems, DVD players, various ceiling fans and air conditioners, a double-door refrigerator, a separate freezer, and various kitchen appliances.

We use those examples and the environmental impact they speak to, as well as our interviews with actual consumers about their views on sustainability, to address several broader questions: the gap between sustainability discourse and unsustainable practices, the ingrained nature of certain practices and the fact that it is precisely the most ingrained ones that often have the most serious environmental impact, and the potential that such a study on consumption and its underlying cultural logics and meanings for furthering a more comprehensive study of, and action on behalf of, sustainability.

2. Dilemmas and contradictions in sustainability discourse and practice

Our main goal with this paper is to contribute to the growing understanding that, in the environmental sciences, the analysis of sustainable production must be complemented with more studies of how consumption practices and lifestyles actually deal with the objects thus produced, whether in a sustainable or non-sustainable manner (Spaargaren, 2003). Without resorting to a simplistic notion that people's practices are "environmentally unfriendly," as Spaargaren puts it (Ibid.), it is still possible to, taking a contextualized approach to what people actually do with the objects and resources they purchase and use, better understand why they do what they do, what it's environmental impacts are, and why it

[1] Our goal here is not to theorize class, so we are using the term more as a label than as a sociological category subscribing to Marxist, Weberian, Bourdieusian or other approaches. Simply put, we are referring to "class" only under the assumption that it can loosely be conceived of as consisting of a hierarchical division between an upper class (often called an "elite" and often reproduced through inheritance or internal reproduction), a middle class (or various middle classes) (usually considered as that group in a particular society that lives off its work and whose "work" consists of the liberal professions (such as lawyers, teachers, or doctors) and whose reproduction largely happens through education, and a working class (which can be loosely conflated with the Marxian proletariat).

[2] Unilever, for example, has developed a "sustainable living plan," where, among other pledges, it states its commitment to "halve the greenhouse gas impact of our products across the lifecycle by 2020" (http://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/greenhousegases/targets/index.aspx). As for renewable energy, the same plan states that Unilever "will more than double our use of renewable energy to 40% of our total energy requirement by 2020" (http://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/greenhousegases/biofuels/). Unilever and others are also significantly diminishing their water consumption, attempting to bring in more small farmers and distributors in their supply chains, and so on.

[3] This research sought to uncover Brazilian food habits and was done, quantitatively and qualitatively, in ten of the largest Brazilian cities.