Everyday Consumption in Twenty-First-Century Brazilian Fiction

Published by Purdue University Press

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Purdue University Press, 2022.
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In January 2012, the Brazilian television network Band premiered the reality show *Mulheres Ricas* (*Rich Women*). The show, similar to the North American franchise *The Real Housewives of [Atlanta, Beverly Hills, D.C., Miami, Orange County, Potomac, New Jersey, New York]* broadcast by Bravo, and British channel E4 reality show *Made in Chelsea*, featured, as the title indicates, rich women from the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. One of the women is Val Marchiori, a businesswoman, former model, and socialite of working-class origin, whose comments on the show in question made her famous nationwide. On episode four of the second season, which aired on January 28, 2013, Val, whose obsession with luxury brands is clearly evidenced throughout the show, made the following comment about one of the other women in *Mulheres Ricas*: “Bom, se a Cozete vai conseguir ter filho ou não vai, eu num sei. Tem tanto motorista, garçom, segurança lá na casa dela. Pode ser que consiga. [Val ri]. É bem o nível.” (“Well, whether or not Cozete will be able to have a child, I don’t know. There are so many drivers, waiters, security guys at her house. Maybe that will work. [Val laughs]. That’s kinda her level”; 00:45:24).

Val’s comment was meant to insult Cozete, whom she opposed the entire second season. The insult is an example of the common classist view that exists in Brazil, which equates belonging to the working class with being inferior; a view that Val—and the other women—express in the show frequently, in more or less subtle ways. In episode one of the second season, Val insults Cozete also by suggesting that her dress must have been purchased at the popular shopping zone of São Paulo, along the 25 de Março Street, a place where, according to her, she wouldn’t shop at “até quando [ela] era pobrinha” (“even when [she] was poor”; 00:02:49). *Mulheres Ricas* spoke of its socioeconomic context: a time when,
according to a study, the country was creating about 19 new millionaires per day since 2007 (Phillips). Many saw the show as a debauchery of Brazilian long-standing social inequality, which, although ameliorated by the Workers’ Party’s social policies, was still significantly pronounced.

Just about three months after the second—and last—season was over, June 2013 happened in Brazil, inaugurating a cycle of protests, initially against a R$0.20 raise in the bus fare, but soon aggregating a variety of groups from several segments of society, including the many who were unhappy with the government’s investment in the 2014 World Cup. The protests, which echoed international movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy, gathered the energy of a country that, according to Pinheiro-Machado, lived a moment of abundance that favored the emergence of new political subjectivities that demanded more rights (qtd. in Canofre). From this perspective, consumption was good for thinking, to use Nestor García-Canclini’s expression (37).

Nevertheless, consumption as a path to social inclusion without a broader political project of society also opened the door to the rise of conservatism in Brazil, which co-opted the original agenda of June 2013, and rapidly gained visibility thanks to its strategic use of social media to organize (Gomes). After all, the crisis that led to President Dilma Rousseff’s ousting was in part energized by a conservative and classist discontent with the ascension of low-income consumers made possible by the social policies implemented by the Workers’ Party administration. Since Rousseff’s controversial impeachment, the increasing prominence of conservative forces has been evidenced by the aggressive push of a conservative agenda by the Temer administration, the controversial imprisonment of Lula, and the dangerous rise of ultra-conservative Jair Bolsonaro, who presented himself as the anti-establishment candidate—and eventually won the election—following in Donald Trump’s footsteps.

The fiction analyzed in this book is a product of and a comment on the years that led up to this context of political turmoil in the aftermath of the growth of consumption in Brazil during the Lula and Rousseff years. As such, this fiction represents consumer culture in various ways, highlighting both the constraints that consumption poses to and the possibilities that it opens up for change in capitalism. While some of the novels stress apocalyptic views of
the future, at times reproducing some of the problematic perspectives of the very system that they set out to criticize, others point to the complex subjectivities that emerge in consumer capitalism, including those that are made political via consumption itself.

All the narratives point out serious constraints, many of which threaten the existence of democratic societies today—such as increased polarization—or even our very existence on this planet. Underlying these narratives' critique of everyday consumption in Brazil today, which is not unlike consumption elsewhere that consumer capitalism is the norm, is an urge for the construction of a collective project for a solidary society. And what would that project look like, according to the reading of this fiction proposed here? For Bonassi and Sant’Anna, we can infer that tamed consumption—perhaps for the working class only?—albeit not envisioned as possible in their narratives, could lead to a more civilized society and more livable cities, ending a culture of consumption that suffocates and oppresses, as streets are filled with cars and people are only interested in defending their own interests.

For B. Carvalho and Lísias, this project would entail the end of a neoliberal subjectivity that makes individuals responsible for their own success or failure, a myth that perpetuates social inequality and generates pathological individualism. It would also require breaking free from information bubbles that lead to the breakdown in communication and, ultimately, threaten democracy, given the disappearance of a common ground. Indeed, polarization leads to a decline in institutional forbearance, thus resulting in the destabilizing of democratic societies (Levitsky and Ziblatt 115). As depicted by B. Carvalho, Brazilian society is watching this very process unfold within itself.

In Maia’s work, the project of a democratic society would be tied to the visibility of societal segments that carry the weight of consumerism on their shoulders as they do the daily work of collecting trash, producing coal, burying the dead, and killing animals for the sake of producing food. This project would also entail far more sustainable consumption, in an effort to stop the destruction of the environment. The representation of an abrupt temporary halt to production in Maia’s novels, which in turns affects consumption, suggests a timid, but possible change for a potentially catastrophic future.
For Laub and Galera, change is already inherently possible in everyday life in consumer capitalism. In the repetitions of the characters’ routines, there are cracks through which self-awareness and self-reflection sprout, thus potentially leading to the inauguration of new phases in one’s life and, potentially, in society more broadly. Subjectivity, thus, is not completely numbed by consumption in these novels. It is rather prompted by a movement between alienation and disalienation that reveals contradictions in our experiences as consumers.

Finally, for Faustini, this project is already somewhat realized in our relationship to commodities. Without romanticizing poverty, his narrative suggests the possibility of a more balanced consumption, in which joy, patience, and solidarity can take place. This view echoes, to some extent, concepts such as minimalism, the tiny house, fair trade, and slow fashion, practices that, however, are still largely restricted to a middle class that can currently afford them. Nevertheless, the joy of consuming less, consuming slowly, consuming fairly, consuming together is already underway and narratives such as Faustini’s are crucial to help us think in more hopeful ways about a more democratic and just future of consumption.

This future is also already here in the indigenous South American philosophy of Buen Vivir, according to which quality of life can be achieved via “co-habitation with others and Nature” (Gudynas 441). The concept, which has been incorporated into Ecuador’s and Bolivia’s constitutions, is born out of critiques to Western development and indigenous ideas of development. It can be conceived as “a useful concept that can support and enhance critical traditions looking for alternatives to development” (445). As Eduardo Gudynas points out, the concept is both post-capitalist and post-socialist, but should not be confused with a call for returning to pre-Columbian life in the Americas (443). For Avelin Buniacá Kambiwá, this is also an alternative for Brazil as a way to rethink production and consumption in a truly democratic future (247). In fact, twenty-first century Brazilian literatura indígena signals this possibility, particularly in the work of Daniel Munduruku, who addresses consumerism, among other issues, in his 2001 narrative Meu avô Apolinário (Graúna 134). Also in Todas as coisas são pequenas (2008), Munduruku touches on the limits of consumer capitalism by telling the story of Carlos, an
ambitious and selfish businessman who, after his plane crashes in the middle of the jungle, has an opportunity to learn another way of life from a native Brazilian he encounters (Figueiredo 297–99). In other words, in twenty-first century Brazilian literature, to use Williams’s categories (122), there is both a residual view of consumption as degraded and alienating, and an emerging view of consumption as a practice of possible sustainable co-existence.

Consumption deeply marks life in capitalist societies in the twenty-first century. As realms of everyday life such as education, healthcare, information distribution, and electoral systems become increasingly commodified, understanding our relationship with consumption and imagining possibilities of facing the challenges that this commodification brings is imperative. In this process, it is essential to listen to a variety of voices in twenty-first century Brazilian fiction, thus capturing the varying narratives of consumption and their contributions to imagining possible ways of existing in a consumer society.