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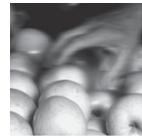
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The right to shine: Poverty, consumption and (de) politicization in neoliberal Brazil

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Abstract

This article discusses the political impacts on the poor's subjectivity provoked by neoliberal policies such as inclusion through consumption in 21st century Brazil. From 2009 to 2014, we carried out ethnographic research with new consumers in a low-income neighbourhood – Morro da Cruz – in the city of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul. We argue that consumption does not necessarily depoliticize human experience, as it is broadly assumed to have done in the scholarly literature on neoliberalism. In a society in which the poor has obtained goods through hierarchical and servile relationships, the possibility of buying things provides a micro sphere for recognition, though not in terms of classic collective action or even hidden subversion. Coupled with the momentum towards a national 'economic emergence', status goods became vehicles of an emergent subjectivity, which we conceptualize as 'the right to shine'. The right to shine are subtle forms of class and racial self-worth, and individual and interpersonal empowerment that revealed interclass defiance.

Keywords

Consumption, politics, neoliberalism, poverty, Brazil

Introduction

Consumption became a backbone of individuals' existential, class and political self-constitution in the 21st century. Its role is even more accentuated in emerging economies, which put domestic consumption at the core of their development models amidst

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profound economic and social inequalities. In Brazil, the so-called 'inclusion through consumption' and financialisation of the poor were key policies under Lulism's – meaning the rule of the Workers' Party ([PT] *Partido dos Trabalhadores*) during the administrations of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff from 2002 to 2016. A large part of the literature on neoliberalism and consumption argues that these policies cause alienation, depoliticization and de-democratization. In this article, we critically examine this assumption. Based on long-term ethnographic research (2009–2014) in a low-income community in southern Brazil, we investigate the political impacts on the poor's subjectivity provoked by such policies. In addition, we seek to understand whether the fostering of consumer practices empowers the poor and, more specifically, what kind of empowerment conspicuous consumption could promote.

An examination of consumer practices in unequal developing economies like Brazil's suggests that the management of consumption a key process in the reproduction of social divides, when elites produce a top-down pushing force that denies the aspirations of the poor in order to maintain the monopoly over conspicuous consumption and prestigious goods. However, boosted by national policies, consumption can also serve as a fertile ground for micropolitical struggles and social change, when low-income individuals attempt to self-include in a social structure that repels them. In this context, the political body has not ceased to exist among the poor. Rather, it has been transformed. This is particularly true if we consider that, nowadays, the poor's life aspirations are built more around consumer spheres rather than work, transforming the way through which poverty and misery are experienced (Bauman, 2005).

We argue that the political effects of inclusion on the poor's everyday lives in a market society is a nuanced, contradictory and nonlinear process. To shed light on this process, we draw the concept of *the right to shine*, which refers to the politicization of the pleasure and its limits. This form of new micropolitics demands a greater empirical effort to discern how layers of contestation emerge side-by-side with the will to consume. The right to shine is desire for fashionable things and pleasant experiences, but it is also an existential claim for visibility, recognition and citizenship. In a society in which the poor historically obtained goods in servile relationships, being able to purchase consumer items autonomously is a powerful self-reflective act embedded into politics, though not in terms of collective action or even subversion or resistance, which would be manifested through subtle, hidden and microscopic acts of rebellion (Scott, 1990).

We are not interpreting the poor's consumer practices from the perspective of the anthropological literature of *mimicry*, in which conspicuous consumption is seen either as a colonial subversion (Bhabha, 2012) or an outcry for membership in the new global order (Ferguson, 2012). We agree with Newell (2012) that the appropriation upper classes status goods is not a mere consumer act of deceptive imitation: it produces performances, meaningful fictions and new urban and national identities. Coupled with the Brazil's momentum economic emergence, we argue that status goods amidst poverty promoted self-reflection, acting as vehicles of a new subjectivity towards individual, racial and class self-worth. This process reveals both pride and interclass defiance, leading to the transmutation of a historical process of subaltern groups' humbleness and invisibility (Spyer, 2017) into visibility. Finally, our data reveals that such a new subjectivity results

in a form of individual and interpersonal empowerment, which has the potential (or not) to evolve into a collective catalyst for social transformation.

Theoretical frameworks

To analyse the political impacts of consumption among the poor, we articulate three strands of literature. First, we discuss the limits of the scholarship on neoliberalism that have perceived consumption solely as channel for de-democratization and de-politicization. Second, we engage in consumer vulnerability and coping debates to illustrate how consumption may be a source of empowerment. Finally, we deal with a political framework that assesses the degrees of empowerment brought about by consumer practices.

Neoliberalism, consumption and politics

Several branches of scholarship concur that both neoliberalism and its drive to consumption cause de-politicization and de-democratization at large. Marxist (Harvey, 2007) and Foucault-inspired (Brown, 2005; 2019; Dardot and Laval, 2014) literature on neoliberalism, for example, discusses the means through which the logic of the market invades the state, attacks rights and reduces political participation in the public sphere. Foucauldian scholars in particular argue that such a process is enabled as self-governed subjects embody a new rationality of self-enterprise, management and competition: 'the extension of economic rationality to formerly noneconomic domains and institutions reaches individual conduct' (Brown, 2005: 42, also 2019). In respect to consumption, Streeck (2012) notes that capitalism overcame the stagnation of the 1970s by adding value to goods, understanding people's preferences, and empowering consumers. There was an invasion by the market into social life. *Sociation by consumption* is more individual than collective, creating individuals who would be less socially integrated and committed to the public sphere and collective life. As the market mentality encroaches into politics, citizens are transformed into customers who are permanently dissatisfied with public goods, resulting in the political apathy. Brown (2005: 43) adds that in neoliberalism 'the body politic ceases to be a body but is rather a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers'.

Marxist theorists who analysed the impact of neoliberal policies on the politics of the poor in Brazil agree on the de-democratization thesis. Anderson (2019) states that inclusion via consumption commodified rights via an individualized solution. It has been noted that neoliberalism has brought about a gradual decomposition of the working class's culture and solidarity (Saad-Filho and Moraes, 2018) and demobilization of the poor, especially when compared with the PT's approach to politics in the 1980s and 1990s, which was characterized by intense mass mobilization. Through stimulating the consumption habits of the poor, several authors note that the state became a manager of financial programs, although the relationship between the state and lower-income people has since become more apolitical (Braga, 2015; Singer, 2012). Oliveira (2010) argues that the neoliberal state apparatus depoliticized the subaltern classes by emptying the critical

narrative that was strong in previous years, creating contentment in the working classes through the promotion of better material life conditions. In addition, the emergence of ‘hedonistic citizens’ would promote de-politicization and alienation because consumption provides individuals with an illusion of being in a higher class (Valadares, 2016; see also Bello, 2014).

The overarching thesis on the negative correlation between neoliberalism/consumption and politicization present limitations. They do not account for the nuanced political effects of consumption on everyday life in developing countries. Neoliberalism and consumption should be analysed within particular historical, political and cultural contexts (Zhang and Ong, 2008). With a few exceptions (Braga, 2015), most of the assumptions of these works are empirically ungrounded, relying on theoretical, large-scale or universalizing perspectives and overlooking micropolitics that occur on the ground. In order to advance our point, it is worthwhile to define two notions that are often interchangeable in the neoliberalism literature: de-democratization and de-politicization. The former refers to a retreat of rights provision, democratic institutions functioning and collective engagement (Brown, 2005). The latter refers to an opening of something as political or detecting the political potential of some existing changes, shifts, or processes (Polonen, 2003). When dealing with ethnographic perspectives, this distinction becomes important because de-democratization and de-politicization may refer to phenomena from different scales.

Finally, we do not disagree with the correlation drawn by between neoliberalism/consumption and de-democratization/de-politicization. Indeed, a significant part of our findings confirms that political demobilization occurred on popular bases (and the 2018 presidential election of the far-right Jair Bolsonaro is incontestable proof of the corrosion of democracy, see reference hidden), along with de-democratization at large. Our aim, therefore, is to complexify this theoretical assumption from an ethnographic perspective. The contribution of this paper to the literature on neoliberalism is to demonstrate on empirical grounds that (de) politicization is not a totalizing, alienating or a fatalistic process even in contexts of de-democratization.

The pleasure and the politics of consumption among the poor

Contemporary studies on poverty and consumer cultures shed light on the impacts of consumption practices on the poor. Consumer vulnerability refers to the constraints to access exchange networks and desired goods, which causes emotional harm (Baker et al., 2005; Dunnett et al., 2016; Hamilton, 2014; Hill and Sharma, 2020; Hill, 2001; 2016; Hutton, 2016). This experience has negative psychological impacts that can be mitigated through coping mechanisms. Coping is how individuals deal with adversity, and how they mitigate the emotional harm produced by vulnerability (Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton and Catterall, 2008). Ethnographic analyses by Hamilton and colleagues (2014) demonstrate that impoverished individuals reflect on their situations, aiming to eschew their socially imposed labels and engage in activities that restore their self-esteem.

Evidence from several studies on consumer coping indicates that consumption amidst poverty may foster self-esteem, well-being, resilience, self-confidence, agency and self-

care (Hamilton 2012; Henry and Caldwell, 2016; Hutton, 2016; Martin and Hill, 2012). These emotions may lead to a subjective state of well-being, although most of the time happiness and contentment occurs only while the product or service is being consumed (Hamilton, 2012). Henry and Caldwell's (2016) framework showed that consumption is a remedy for the powerless' stigma, providing self-empowerment, self-reflection and social critique. In the same vein, Martin and Hill (2021) argued that consumer coping also provides a means for self-determination, which means breaking alienation and seeking autonomous forms of existence in a given environment.

Within the coping framework, the notion of pleasure is key for the purpose of this article. Since Campbell's (1987) work we have known that hedonism, dreams and contentment are intrinsic dimensions of consumer cultures in modernity. Yet these emotions have been subjected to moral judgement in western societies. In the neo-liberalism literature, for example, self-pleasure is a fundamental principle of neoliberal rationality (Dardot and Laval, 2014), which empties the political life through (negative) hyper-individualistic self-gratifying emotions. In another direction, Hamilton's (2012) work on consumer coping de-moralize such an emotion, especially when dealing with low-income groups. She argues that poverty and pleasure seem antithetical. The poor's pursuit for satisfaction may be deemed as amoral by many; the poor are represented as making pleasurable and unnecessary purchases. In other words, the right to pleasure has been denied to the poor.

The scholarship on consumer vulnerability and coping supports our arguments about low-income consumers' empowerment and the right to shine. The contribution of this article to this literature is to add the variable of politics to the study of consumer cultures. In the debate on coping strategies, pleasure and empowerment are often discussed as an individual attainment, lacking a deeper analysis of power relations. Our work argues that in a society that denies the right to pleasure to the poor, satisfaction from conspicuous consumption is a potentially political act for the 'new consumers', especially when people defy social expectations that arise from social segregation. If consumption enables a better life to be imagined (Appadurai, 1996) by the poor, a dream of that kind would be audacious in highly unequal contexts. When the poor acquire goods that symbolize social status, society moves to put 'the poor in their place', which in turn makes stratification and oppression visible. Low-income groups thus face the contradiction inherent in unequal neoliberal societies: while the market and financial policies encourage and incentivise them to 'buy things', the resultant discriminatory backlash de-legitimizes their autonomy. Thus, (Miller, 2005) remarkable claim that consumption is the vanguard of history is still valid for the purpose of this article; goods are perceived here as a means through which people dialectically reflect their social status, and consumption becomes a materialized form of power, paving the way for politicization – and not alienation.

Taking power back to empowerment

A shortcoming in the consumer vulnerability and coping literature is that it does not define what is meant by empowerment. The word 'empowerment' frequently appears without further critical explanation. In that usage, empowerment is *an end* – occurring when

individuals achieve self-esteem and self-confidence. In the field of development studies, the empowerment framework conceives individual empowerment as *a means* to achieve collective power. It is a radical, political, transformative individual or collective process that subverts politics by critically engaging with and shifting power structures (Batliwala 2007). Scholars that were part of the foundational debates of the category claim that the concept has been emptied and hijacked by neoliberal discourses that have individualized it and removing its anchoring element: namely, power (Batliwala 2007; Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Pearson, 2005).

In this article, we follow the primary understanding that empowerment involves transformation of the individual self and entire communities and provokes a practical learning experience that is enabled over time, through which the poor gain autonomy, the potential for decision-making, and the ability to fight injustice (Friedman 1992; White, 1996). We rely on a Rowlands' (1997) framework of empowerment. In her model, empowerment is perceived as a complex and dynamic process that involves inter-relation and interaction among three dimensions: namely, *individual, interpersonal, and collective empowerment*. Individual empowerment means respect, agency, dignity and gratification. This is also potentially political; it is the prerequisite of any change, but it does not automatically lead to change in how power is exercised. Interpersonal empowerment, in turn, is an individual's capacity to negotiate, communicate and defend themselves in the midst of close relationships. Individual confidence and self-worth are the first steps that potentially lead to wider political transformations at the interpersonal and collective levels, but do not necessarily occur, as external powers may encourage or limit such processes. As a dynamic process, collective empowerment does not just suddenly begin; rather it is encouraged (or hindered) over time and even across generations. In the pages to follow, we will present ethnographic stories that reveal different forms of individual and interpersonal empowerment brought about by conspicuous consumption.

National and local context

In the 2000s, Lulism's reformism attempted to converge the poor's and the financial elites' interests, navigating through the global neoliberal order (Singer, 2012). This model worked for many years. Brazil not only resisted the effects of the international financial crisis that began in 2008, but also achieved its economic growth peak in 2010 by reducing taxes for manufactured goods and incentivizing domestic consumption. Mass consumption was fostered by the development model that prioritized financial policies, such as financial inclusion and the world-renowned conditional cash transfer program named *Bolsa Família*. During Lulism, inclusion through consumption became a national emblem. For the first time, low-income groups enjoyed a range of financial opportunities, including offers for credit cards, the ability to purchase manufactured goods in several instalments, and access to the banking credit system (Müller, 2014). The fact that the poor were travelling by plane for the first time or buying brand-new cell phones was celebrated as evidence that poverty was being reduced.

New changes in the access to higher education provided by higher education loans and racial quotas (Bernardino, 2002), as well as new labour rights for domestic workers (Lima and Prates, 2019), responded to long-standing demands by social movements (Flauzina, 2019), aiming at empowering the poor through rights, recognition and affirmative action. Still, Lavinias (2017) argues that Brazil's recent social and economic development was marked by a contradiction: 'it reduced inequalities; invented a poverty-fighting program broadly praised across the ideological spectrum, [...] brought about a hefty increase in average income; increasingly pushed the working class toward formalization and expanded their rights; and broadened opportunities, establishing quotas to ease access to higher education [...] All of this came about in the absence of reforms aimed at reducing the sharply regressive bent of the heavy Brazilian tax burden, and without breaking away from a macroeconomic regime that was, at its core, largely a neoliberal one' (Lavinias, 2017: 2–3). In short, the poor had more access to good and rights within a system that remained stratified and unequal.

A natural question that arose in the final years of PT's administration in the Brazilian public debate was to what extent the left-wing party had depoliticized and de-radicalized its popular basis through consumption-led and neoliberal financial policies. On the one hand, as the previous section has shown, scholars argue that these policies brought about alienation, de-democratization or demobilization. On the other hand, the effects of inclusion through consumption seem to be more complex than a homogenous path towards individualization, customerization of citizenship or de-politicization. This is particularly true in Brazil, as financialisation occurred alongside a movement towards the mild redistribution of income, social inclusion, citizenship expansion, and rights provision, and strengthening of civil society. Hence, it is possible to observe a paradox: if Lulism was intertwined with fierce financialisation that reduced state intervention – while consumption and market inclusion started becoming key elements of citizenship – it is also true that mass consumerism emerged in an era of politicization and empowerment of the poor, which reshaped the meanings of subalternity in Brazil. Lula himself politicized the act of consuming, re-signifying it in the language of the rights of the poor.

Politics at Morro da Cruz

Research was conducted at Morro da Cruz, one of the biggest and most impoverished peripheral zones of Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul. The area is one of the most paradigmatic places in which to study the political reduction of state influence in neoliberal Brazil, along with the emergence of consumption as a key factor in the everyday life of the poor. This is because Porto Alegre was the base of the PT's participatory budgeting program – that is, participation in state policy in which people became involved in part of the city budget and voted for their demands (see Junge, 2018). From 1989 (with the pioneering PT's city government) up until the turn of the millennium (when the PT lost the local government), large numbers of the community's residents were deeply involved in the assemblies that discussed the priorities for the region. Most of the improvements made in the area, such as paved streets and a health centre, were secured in those disputed

political arenas. In 2002, after years of the local authorities fostering efforts at radical democracy, the PT lost the municipal elections. However, at the national level, the PT's Lula won the presidential race, inaugurating a new era for the party. As mentioned earlier, Lulism focused less on inclusion via political participation, and more on inclusion through consumption. At Morro da Cruz, the vast majority of people received social benefits, such as *Bolsa Família*, and their lives were changed directly through this process of financialisation in the midst of remaining infrastructure precariousness.

Methodological note

We conducted our ethnographic fieldwork in Morro da Cruz from 2009 to 2012, with a follow-up in 2014. These years were the peak of Lulism and Brazil's economic emergence. We systematically visited the community once or twice a week. We focused on two generations in particular: one group was composed of the 'new consumers' (adults up to 50 years old), and one of the children of these 'new consumers' (children and adolescents up to 23 years old). Our selection criterium was based on recruiting those people who had bought electronic devices, cell phones, and branded clothing and accessories through the new financial incentives (private or public credit offers) or social benefits. We focused on status goods that brought a high level of satisfaction and involved great personal or family sacrifice to acquire. The objects most desired by our interlocutors were branded clothing accessories from high-end shopping malls that were typically bought by the upper classes, such as Nike caps or tennis shoes, Ray-ban sunglasses or Lacoste t-shirts.

We concentrated our efforts on maintaining four core research networks. Silvia (who was 40 years old in 2009) and her family, as well as an Afro-Brazilian religious centre located at the bottom of the hill (in a wealthier zone); Karla (a black female micro-entrepreneur, then aged 34) and her family who lived at the top of the hill; then there was the Murialdo School, a secondary school where we spoke with students from all over the community; and finally, the neighbourhood of Beco das Pedras, the poorest area of Morro da Cruz. By visiting these places and people's houses regularly, we were able to develop ties with a large number of individuals. We participated in the social and private activities of the community, such as engaging in Afro-religion rituals, visiting houses to have a coffee (*um cafezinho*), going to bars and restaurants, or simply sitting on the sidewalk to chat informally with people. During the first period of the ethnography, we also conducted 27 in-depth semi-structured interviews and mediated 3 informal focus groups on consumption. We also followed our interlocutors' online interactions on social media, especially Facebook.

Aside from the area of Morro da Cruz, in 2011 we also conducted fieldwork at *Correios*, the National Mail Service, during Christmastime. The institution collected Christmas wish letters from children from underprivileged areas in the city. We read – and responded to – 50 letters to gain a better idea about what teenagers dreamed of receiving as a Christmas gift. In 2012, we used to take our young interlocutors for a 'rolé' (visit) to shopping malls, which are typically white middle-class places in Brazil. We gave them

a lift, had a meal together, walked around the shops, and asked them about their favourite brands.

Empowerment through consumption

In this ethnographic section, we analyse individual stories that unveil microscopic power relations. The first part provides a context of how the poor's desired goods is structured upon a segregated society that maintains expectations and moral judgement about consumer practices in poverty. In the following part, we present cases in which everyday consumer practices defy such class structure. In the same vein, the third and fourth parts discuss cases in which consumption mediates individual and interpersonal empowerment.

More than they could chew

Dear Santa, I am Kaiane... I'm 16... I live with my mother and we depend on the Bolsa Família... And I really wanted to have some branded stuff... Pants, blouse or tennis shoes... Adidas, Nike, Billabong, Ecko... or even Puma ... I think I deserve it I am such a good girl, I do everything people ask me... I study hard... I put the house in order... I look after my grandmother... Last year I wrote to you and you, Santa, did not answer me... I got very sad... But I did not lose hope.... Santa, make my dream true!

This letter was sent to a major Christmas charity. Citizens went to *Correios*, read the children's wish letters, and responded to some requests. We talked to the people who intended to answer their wishes. Kaine's request was not only refused, but also despised by the volunteers, who searched instead for letters that asked for 'appropriate' items such as school materials, cheap dolls and bikes. 'Good' letters were those in which the children would evoke merit and humbleness. Kaine succeeded in the former as she tried to create empathy with her readers by pretending that she was speaking to Santa Claus, relating her hard daily routine and mentioning that she was good, but she failed in the latter. A lady who read Kaine's letter told us 'that's why *they* [the poor] don't change their lives. You cannot bite off more than you can chew'. Other readers' reactions included the following: 'they [the poor] are not humble', 'they should ask for little. When they ask for little, we feel encouraged to give more, but when they demonstrate such ambition. . .'. In addition, some ladies were moved when they read a letter from a girl who said: 'anything will make me happy'.

These are some of the spontaneous impressions that we gained while sitting at a large table full of letters. Kaine's wish provoked outrage, but not simply because of the price of the items. The judgement was moral. Branded clothing and videogames, for example, were not viewed as being the appropriate kind of goods. As a result of this moral outlook, an employee of *Correios* explained to us that a huge pile of rejected letters was formed every year, letters from children who had 'asked for more than they could chew'. [Caldeira \(2000\)](#), in her landmark study on Brazilian segregation, pointed out that people who consider themselves to be in a superior social position frequently deny the poor the right to

enjoy the behaviour associated with capitalism and modernity. As she put it, the poor should not dare to access the universe of consumer goods.

Our visits to *Correios* were revealing with regard to the elites' spontaneous perceptions of the poor. They not only revealed what some sectors of Brazilian society thought about what the poor should or should not consume, but also exposed a deeper expectation regarding how they should perform as subalterns. Brazilian segregation has long been described as 'the myth of racial democracy' since interracial and interclass relations are marked by profound layers of veiled violence. After a three-hundred-year period of slavery, the relationship between classes was only considered to be cordial while hierarchies were not challenged. The poor 'must know their place' is a popular saying. In the end, the pile of rejected letters represented a society that adhered to an ideal of the 'good poor' – meaning people who are humble, servile and aware of social boundaries.

These hidden class conflicts mediated by unequal gift-giving practices have been particularly prominent in the relationship of 'affective ambiguity' between domestic workers and their *patroas* [female bosses] (Brites, 2014; Goldstein, 2013). By reproducing the slavery pattern marked by the giving of favours as opposed to rights, the 'good maid' was someone motivated by love and appreciation, for instance by eating the same food, but would never contest the hierarchical rules. It is part of this subaltern social role not only to accept all donations received from a *patroa*, but also to demonstrate gratitude. To Goldstein (2013), aspects such as charity, gifts, favours and the *patroas'* benevolence are forms of paternalism that function as euphemisms, hiding deep inequalities within a transitional structure that ranges from slavery to servitude. In 21st century Brazil, however, such pattern is changing. What this article analyse is the political impact provoked when commodities are no longer stolen or given: they are now bought by the poor.

Consumption, shine and class experience

Spyer's (2017) ethnography, which was carried out in a low-income settlement in the state of Bahia, argued that people posted images of material acquisitions on social media to seek visibility within their own networks. Although we also noticed the importance of intraclass distinctions, our findings suggested a struggle for interclass visibility, especially in urban spaces outside the periphery. When our interlocutors spoke of the goods they valued, they usually implied a relationship between self-gratification and interclass defiance. They never expressed a sense of gratification that was experienced exclusively at the individual level. Goods functioned as mediums through which people could elaborate – and even defy – their lived experience of segregation. Our interlocutors were aware of the fact that personal gratification came at tremendous effort and with social costs within an unequal society. They knew they were *daring* to buy things, and were also aware of the unspoken social rules that acted as restraints on their consumption of goods for pleasure. As their social condition was always a factor when explaining their behaviour, buying things appeared to be a self-reflexive act that they felt necessary to defend. The claim was that they should have the right to consume things and enjoy places that they found beautiful, yet which seemed to be off-limits to people like them.

What is noteworthy is that the word ‘shine’ was widely employed by Brazilian scholars and policy makers to describe this emergent momentum of the national economy that was marked by social mobility (see [Neri, 2008](#)). On the ground, we observed that consumption provoked a series of positive emotions, leading to the fostering of class reflexivity. The word ‘shine’ recurred throughout our fieldwork and pointed towards a new subjectivity, which was intertwined with national propaganda, especially amongst young people. One interlocutor put this in terms of power: ‘I am not the black poor, victim, *favelado* any longer. I am empowered!’ [*estou podendo!*] (Betinho). In Portuguese, the expression ‘*eu estou podendo*’ refers to a temporary feeling of empowerment and self-esteem. These affirmative acts of the self were described by several adjectives, such as shining, power, happiness and even freedom.

With political overtones, the pride of the *favelas* has been sung since the 1990s in hip-hop and funk songs ([Facina, 2010](#); [Mizrahi, 2007](#)). In the 21st century, the emergence of a funk genre – ‘Ostentation Funk’ – that celebrates the right to happiness, luxury consumption, positive individual feelings, *favela* pride and class boldness ([Pereira, 2014](#)). One of the first hits by MC Guimé – a prominent young singer of this genre who was popular amongst our interlocutors from Nascente School – was about happiness: ‘All I want is to be happy, here in the *favela* where I was born, be proud of myself, and know that the poor have their place’. In an interview, he explains how his songs evolved to describe how consumption now means happiness and freedom for the poor:

So we make music that is a kind of cry of freedom. ‘So what if we are from the favela? We have things too! We have a car!’ That’s the message we’re sending. Every day, on TV, the rich family is happy and the poor family is sad. How am I not going to want what they’re allowed to have? (*LA Times*, 4/4/2014).

Ostentation Funk is the supreme manifestation of consumerism. The themes of the songs range from helicopters to Ferrari sports cars, and the singers wear gold chains and hold US dollars in their hands. Although it caricaturizes the symbols of wealth, we do not frame this cultural genre as a ‘[political] parody of the dominant’, to use Bhabha’s (2002) concept of mimicry. Instead, we argue that although the lives of the wealthy artist’s that perform Ostentation Funk do not reflect the material reality of the *favelas*, this genre is still part of a new self-gratifying subjectivity. It is one that no longer appears to be simply emulating the upper classes by saying ‘we want to be like you’ – as Ferguson (2002) pointed out in his work on class emulation in the 1990s – but is instead demonstrating that ‘we *can* be like you’. Following [Newell \(2012\)](#), who studies the young poor (the *bluffeurs*) in Côte D’Ivoire, we understand the act of ‘we *can* be like you’ more than a desire to access the benefits of modernity, but a polyvalent and contradictory reconstruction and attainment of it. In fact, our interlocutors’ despise for fake goods and appreciation for genuine brands ([Scalco and Pinheiro-Machado, 2010](#)) is an act of self-inclusion in the neoliberal economy, not as a bluff, but through formal and visible market channels.

Our interlocutors celebrated consumerism and felt that by acquiring status goods they were asserting that they were no longer part of the dispossessed. They were challenging

the previous privilege of the elite who could enjoy special supply, breaking the monopoly of status symbols. Yet, it is also true that these symbols of wealth were consumed as contrasts with reality; the fact remained that people were still lacking basic health and education services and were being racially and socially discriminated against. Their lives were barely improving, and they faced a poverty stigmatization. In this sense, consumption was an act that remained full of ambiguity, arising from the conflict between individual interests and class oppression.

Consumption and class defiance

Betinho told us that it was important to wear branded items in order to not be confused with a 'bandit'. This was a point stated by many of the boys we interviewed. They all stressed that they need to wear 'good stuff' when entering shopping malls. As Roberto said, 'these clothes are important to go to the mall, so the guards will not stop me'. However, their goal was not achieved as they were in fact systematically classified as belonging to a 'dangerous class' by those who work in the mall. We interviewed the guards and the employees of the expensive shops. One employee told us that 'when we see these boys all covered with brands we immediately know they are the black, poor, *favelado*'. A private security guard said that brands were a code by which they identified 'marginal bandits': 'when we see these boys with caps, etc., an alarm goes off among us. Then we keep an eye upon their circulation in the mall'. These two statements reveal a process where our interlocutors' struggle for recognition and freedom is denied. As the writer Ferréz wrote, the youngsters are the best consumers who buy the most expensive brands, and yet they are the ones humiliated by the guards. For them rights and happiness are prohibited: 'the Country says that everything is improving, that we are rich now. But this is a lie. Elites are not ready to share spaces with us' (*CartaCapital*, 25/1/2014).

The youngsters were aware that their branded goods were socially perceived as symbols associated with drug dealers and drug bosses. Thus, the question remains as to why they told us that they chose to wear these brands in order to not be confused with 'bandits', when they knew they would be associated with them? We believe that the rationale behind their dress choice was not to gain access to the mall by wearing branded clothes in order to imitate the middle classes, thereby disguising the fact that they were poor or alleviating stigma. We instead interpret that their goal was to express their confidence; by wearing branded clothes they were not trying to prove they were not bandits, but rather to show their pride in themselves. They chose to deny the role of the dispossessed poor that was being forced upon them – that is, the image of the poor being dirty and humble that has been perpetuated in Brazil throughout its history.

The boys, by defying stereotypes and daring to gain access to middle-class spaces, played a tense and veiled game testing and interacting with class boundaries. Similarly, this is clearer in Karla's story. She showed us her new acquisition, which were genuine Ray-Ban sunglasses. In Brazil, a pair would likely cost more than her whole monthly salary as a domestic worker. In her words:

I like these glasses the same as everybody likes them. They are being sold to everybody. There is no label that says: “this is for the white madam”. [...] I know that when people look at me in a bus, they think my glasses are fake, bought in the informal economy. I know they think: how dare this black fat woman, who smells of cleaning products, wear such glasses? You know what? I do not care. I think I am super-hot with my glasses... You racist! [laughing out loud].

Karla is aware of the tension inherent in class interactions. The game consisted of recognizing that the *other* might not legitimize or acknowledge their expensive goods, but they continued to wear what they liked, defying social judgements that constantly attempt to degrade them on account of their poverty. Since the classic works of Simmel (2002) and Bourdieu (1984), we have known that low-income people are trapped in a cycle in which their consumer practices are delegitimised, which would reinforce the stigma. Yet, we observed a step further from the distinction pattern. Karla is aware of the stigma but defies it. She was not imitating the upper classes, as she knew she would not succeed if that were the case. Karla was simply claiming that consumer goods might be acquired by everyone in a capitalist society. Yet by wanting goods that were not intended for her use, she was admitting herself to a club she had not been invited to join, in a self-direct-action of consumer citizenship.

Karla employed a high level of sarcasm when she spoke of the ‘white madam’. In Goldstein’s (2013) ethnography conducted in the 1990s, the humour of the black Brazilian women was perceived as a form of resistance, an ambiguous narrative through which they could talk about their social dissatisfaction. Yet there is a tremendous difference between Karla and Goldstein’s interviewees, because Karla’s laughter is not provoked by feelings of resistance, but rather displays an attitude that suggests a change in the pattern of subalternity. Karla continued ‘you [white madam] will have to tolerate me’. Unlike the 1990s, low-income people have now dared to feel good about themselves in public spaces. Goldstein, for example, narrated a moment when she took a maid to a restaurant. Her interlocutor was embarrassed and did not know how to behave. Although still incipient, domestic workers like Karla were feeling confident enough to visit restaurants, shops, airports and malls.

Karla also said that ‘I no longer get the service lift’. This is significant, as in Brazil most of the middle-class buildings have two lifts, one for the residents and a ‘service’ lift for the employees. Therefore, by doing that, Karla showed that she was ready to carry out an act that contested spacial segregation. It is not by chance that we heard similar things several times during our fieldwork. Bira said ‘I go to the mall with my head up’; a teenager told us ‘I enter the mall by the front door’. These sentences might be read as a sign of change. Encouraged by national policies, people were not only starting to consume goods and places; they were also changing their body postures in relation to themselves and others, thereby defying segregation. It is also important to note how Karla related her ability to negotiate for an increase in her salary with her *patroa* – which suggests that interpersonal empowerment was an immediate consequence of her personal self-esteem boost. She said that the most difficult thing in such a professional relationship was to develop the audacity to refuse leftover food or clothes – which was interpreted by her employer as an act of disdain.

'By the front door': rolezinhos as national momentum

In 2014, gatherings of mostly male, black and low-income teenagers in shopping malls – the *rolezinhos* – occurred in Brazil. Unprivileged youth were visiting middle-class malls to buy branded goods, to sing funk, and to go on dates. They organized themselves through Facebook and gathered in groups of hundreds or even thousands of people, which frightened the upper classes. Some elite shopping malls literally closed their doors to the boys.

Historically, poverty has been associated with marginality in Brazil – a realm outside of modernity (Perlman, 1979). Large groups of poor and black people in public spaces have since been criminalized, and as they were perceived as causing disorder, reinforcing the elite's perception of the poor as a threat (Reis, 2005). The *arrastão* – during which large groups of people committed assaults on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro at the turn of the millennium – were a principal example of this perceived threat. The *arrastões* were also seen as mechanisms of resistance of the male poor (Goldstein, 2013). Conflicts mediated by consumer goods have been present since the late 1980s, when young boys from gangs from the peripheries started to acquire branded goods (especially tennis shoes) by stealing them during muggings in metropolitan cities in Brazil. In Brazil, there was a commonly held notion that underprivileged youths were committing assaults and killing people for a pair of Nike trainers, as they symbolized success. In our fieldwork, however, none of our younger interlocutors engaged directly in muggings, but their parents did so.

From the *arrastões*, or the muggings, to the *rolezinhos*, there is a noticeable shift in power relations between classes that can be understood as a form of contestation. Frequent muggings in the 1990s were a weapon of the weak. They were a result of the class and racial tension that revolved around the possession of goods; the violence occurred in the night, and ultimately grew into quasi-ritualistic acts that inverted the conventional power structures. Nevertheless, the findings of our fieldwork suggested something other than hidden acts of micro rebellion were taking place. Although rivalry between classes persists, the larger policy of inclusion through consumption gave many of the now 'empowered' boys the opportunity to move away from 'expropriating goods' through sporadic violence, thus stimulating the emergence of the wider phenomenon of participating – albeit unequally – in capitalist society.

Increasingly, people from Morro da Cruz would buy their goods in shopping malls and no longer exclusively from the black market. Betinho and his friends, for example, told us that they wanted to work formally in order save money and buy things in the mall. Thus, going to the mall becomes a ritualistic act that involves great financial effort but also the kind of social change necessary for them to be there. For the boys, this change includes wearing the best clothes to gain access and enter 'through the front door'. Although the employees may regard them as *favelados* because they are paying in cash, ultimately they know that their money is needed.

The *rolezinhos* were the most tangible development of an emergent non-servile subjectivity. Unlike the muggings, the youngsters were looking to gain access to the mall legitimately through the front door, unlike their parents. These gatherings therefore were a moment when young people explored new environments and set out

to occupy those parts of the city in a confident and visible manner. Thus, the contrast between the muggings at night and the *rolezinhos* taking place under the bright lights of the mall is revealing: while the former can be viewed as a micro dynamic of resistance, the latter suggests a tentative process of change, which is related not only to consumption but also to other policies of inclusion that have been implemented in recent years in Brazil.

The poor's consumption of status goods provoked a backlash. Reactions against *rolezinhos* showed that elites did not necessarily wish to enlarge their restricted circles of prestige. The *rolezinhos* have thus become a paradigmatic phenomenon precisely because they have brought to light these unspoken rules. The reaction of the upper classes was based on moral judgements relating to how the poor should behave and enact their subaltern role by being aware of social boundaries. The event thus showed how disruptive and disturbing the emergent self-esteem of the subaltern can be. That is why we consider these gatherings to be a peak moment of Lulism and its inherent contradictions: the children of the new consumers were performing their pride and individual and interpersonal empowerment in a society that remained segregated. The *rolezinhos* were imbued with political ambiguity: the youngsters were claiming their citizenship and right to the city in the form of gaining entry to a symbol of capitalism. As (Barbosa-Pereira, 2016) noted, these events are forms of 'insurgent citizenship' in Holston's (2008) terms. They are a means through which peripheral subjects claim their rights to consume and to circulate through direct appropriation.

Discussion and conclusion

In this concluding section, we draw two major arguments that contributes to advance cross-disciplinary debates on neoliberalism, empowerment, and consumer and poverty. Firstly, *neoliberal policies concerning consumption do not produce linear, totalizing, homogeneous political impacts. Depending on the context, the inclusion of the poor into mass consumption may provoke unintended consequences, including the politicization of pleasure and conspicuous consumption.* In contemporary studies on neoliberalism, it is broadly assumed that the vacuum left behind after the retreat of the state has been filled by market rationality, which results in political barrenness in everyday life. In this literature, individuals are seen to be moved by the desire for enterprise and participate in consumption as a form of self-gratification: a superficial, individualistic pacifier. By bringing an anthropological perspective to this debate – one that maintains that consumption is not alienating – this article adds nuance to established arguments and advances the understanding of the unpredictable and microscopic impacts of neoliberal policies on the poor's livelihoods in developing and emerging economies.

We agree with the scholarly literature that maintains that neoliberalism and consumption cause de-democratization. However, from an ethnographic point of view, the stories presented in this article show that the act of becoming a consumer alone does not politicize or depoliticize human experience because it does not happen in a vacuum but in an entanglement of social, political and economic factors. Brazil's economic opening-up,

market liberalization and entrepreneurial euphoria, in turn, coincided with the process of democratization and the strengthening of civil society and social policies. It is in this contradictory context that the politics of consumption developed in Brazil. As controversial as it is, Lulism politicized consumption as a vehicle for recognition and happiness.

An in-depth view of consumer coping strategies revealed that conspicuous consumption and pleasure provoked incipient lines of politicization on the ground, which is neither resistance nor collective action, but points towards the emergence of a non-servile subjectivity. The categories of pleasure and shining are political because they disrupt patterns of humility and invisibility. Our interlocutors were claiming the right to 'shine': to have a materially comfortable life, proud show their bodies in public spaces, and experience moments of ephemeral happiness suffering alleviation. Yet this claim occurred in a segregated society that constantly tries to 'put the poor in their place', obstructing the poor's aspirations and maintain social divisions. In this way, consumption emerged as a form of direct action which sought self-inclusion within a social structure. Goods became a means that allowed individuals self-reflect on their status and permitted them to assert that self-gratification should be a non-exclusive right. The acquisition of status goods by these new consumers enabled a narrative of confidence, as well as allowed racial and class self-esteem to stand out. While a large part of the literature on consumer coping states that consumption, brands and pleasure are mechanisms to mitigate stigma, our observations in the field suggest even further significance. When the upper classes do not legitimize the consumption of the poor, the cycle does not end: rather, our interlocutors were aware of the stigma, but confronted it and defied conventional subaltern patterns.

Secondly, inclusion through consumption provoked not only individual but also interpersonal empowerment in the context of poverty. The literature on consumer coping and vulnerability has already extensively demonstrated that one of the most immediate outcomes of consumption among the poor is individual empowerment. Our study contributes to this literature in two ways. (i) We understand that empowerment cannot be detached from a discussion on power. As we argued above, individual empowerment is a potentially political act in an entanglement of racial and class relationships. (ii) We go beyond the individual level and assess wider layers of empowerment. Signs of interpersonal empowerment were identified in the fieldwork. Our interlocutors stated the need to change their behaviour in everyday interactions, claiming the right to recognition and visibility. They consistently employed expressions such as 'head-up', 'front door' and 'social lift' when referring to micro – but powerful – actions through which they refused to reproduce an attitude of subordination. Such a posture defied long-standing and established mutual expectations that structured interpersonal relationships in the workplace, public transportation and shopping malls. More than making interlocutors 'feel good' with their self-esteem, such micro actions contributed to the shifting of everyday attitudes vis-à-vis the upper classes.

The stories narrated here are far from being isolated; they are in tune with Brazilian society's broader changes in the 21st century. It is not by chance that the political climate in Brazil started to change in 2014 – right after the momentum of *rolezinhos*, when the low-income subjects displayed their happiness and self-confidence at the malls. Since that year, middle-class mass demonstrations demanded the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff,

which came about in 2016, followed by the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. This marked a step backwards with regard to the social and economic achievements earlier in the 21st century. This article showed that consumption is a powerful instrument to reinforce social divides, but also to challenge them. The access to certain commodities sharply redefines segregating structures that do not accept the fact that poor citizens possess goods, rights and desires. Still, after the elimination of hunger, consumption is likely to be the most important sign of the aspiration of the poor, a trigger that allowed profound changes in the subjectivities of Brazilian citizens.

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