



Consuming the City: Social-Cultural practices of Consumption in Latin America

Introduction*

Consumiendo la ciudad: prácticas socioculturales de consumo en Latinoamérica

Introducción

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In 1973, 100,000 tourists arrived in the city of Manaus. Most of them had not come to see the Amazon rainforest. They had travelled thousands of miles from Brazil's major cities to experience something new: to buy luxury goods in the new "free trade zone". Prices were up to four times lower than elsewhere in Brazil. This "explosion of consumerism," as Adrian Lerner calls it, was implemented by the Brazilian government as a strategic plan to transform the region. It is an example of how, in the twenti-

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eth century, the transformation of Latin America's increasingly populous urban centers depended on consumption and the anticipation of future consumption.

As one of the most urbanized regions on the planet that at the same time has the highest rates of social inequality in the world, Latin America and its cities can be considered as social laboratories, the loci of experiments with new modes of sociality through consumption. In this context, however, consumption is not only about the satisfaction of individual needs and self-realization but, above all, about social belonging, participation, social position, and identity formation that have all been transformed by the evolution of the Latin American city. As a social device for the coexistence of different classes and lifestyles, the sustained increase in market access on the part of the poorer sectors of Latin American cities – mainly through the popular consumption of consumer goods such as food, clothing, and household appliances – has led to the development of social dynamics that could be adopted elsewhere.

In that sense, this dossier is dedicated to exploring a global phenomenon that has been little studied from the perspective of the Latin American city (Trentmann and Otero-Cleves 2017). The texts in this volume examine the production of consumer societies, consumption as event, projective consumer cultures, government policies, marketing projects, media advertising, and many other socio-cultural processes. The contributions explore how consumption has transformed Latin American cities, how the acquisition and use of goods and services make and remake cities, which sites of consumption have been important, and what role local and global actors have played in these processes.

We are dealing with very different forms of consumption, from food for daily needs to luxury consumption. In doing so, we try to take into account the difficulties that can arise when using consumption as an analytical term; we do not want to create a harmonious picture of capitalism amidst the harsh inequalities in Latin American societies (Welskopp 2021), nor do we want to ignore the original meaning of the term “consumption” as the final devouring of something, which has become more relevant again today in connection with environmentally-minded studies (Graeber 2014).

In this sense, James Woodward's essay on São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro describes the cultural production of commodities aimed at attracting poor and middle-class Brazilians from the interior to the metropolis. Woodward presents the transformation of “consumer cultures” as processes led by various groups and individuals that do not simply imitate or creatively reinterpret previous Euro-American cases. As in Adrian Lerner's essay, state policies work in tandem with market forces, and consumer capitalism and consumer cultures are creatively intertwined. The “Brazilianisation” of consumer practices began in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo under the very specific circumstances of a national development project.

Jennifer Adair describes the role of a Buenos Aires Provincial Police intelligence unit in the context of Argentina's 1989-1990 hyperinflation and the prospect of supermarket looting. The essay observes consumer price increases through the analysis of surveys that were carried out by the unit with the intention of preventing riots in

popular neighborhoods. Through meticulous archival research, Adair sheds light on the emergence of a new form of an experimental state dedicated to the monitoring of socio-economic conditions in order to anticipate political unrest. It was through consumer surveys that spies were able to anticipate future scenarios in which riots and looting could lead to uprisings and regime change. In this process of risk management, the poor were constructed as a politically dangerous class through consumer research.

Melina Teubner proposes a well-detailed history of the sustained increase of chicken meat consumption among Brazilians during the 1990s. Brazil's national consumption of chicken increased from 13 kg per person in 1990 to a peak of around 40 kg in 2010 (OECD 2023). Drivers for such change, Teubner signals, relate to various factors such as the emergence of a highly technologized industry, President Enrrique Cardoso's "promise of consumption", and, finally, to the modelling of consumption habits and practices in relation to chicken meat through massive marketing campaigns. The project to integrate chicken consumption in the daily eating habits of all Brazilian classes was in some respects successful, and is remembered as the "conquest of the chicken," while ignoring the problematic aspects of its production-consumption cycle.

Christiane Berth analyses shopping practices in Managua, Nicaragua, during the period 1979-1993. In general, food shortages made shopping at the time a time-consuming experience. After a massive earthquake in 1972, the city was seen to have lost its traditional commercial center, and from 1979, when the Sandinista revolution took place, propaganda aimed at – but never achieved – the development of food self-sufficiency in the city. Sandinista planners observed that the rural poor tended to be attracted to Managua's impoverished outskirts, leading them to propose various measures including urban gardens to produce food in the city, the opening of official "expendios populares" (small local shops), "diplotiendas" for the purchase of imported goods with dollars, a permissive attitude toward black markets, and other heterodox solutions. With the wave of privatization that began in 1991, supermarkets and the creation of small shopping malls modified consumption practices but Managua's center never regained its old role as the city's commercial heart.

Andrés Dapuez' paper starts with a political event that was largely distributed and commented on through social media. By problematizing the state's moralization of poverty and its previous electoral promises to restore traditional barbecue consumption among the popular classes, jokes and irony challenged a "moral economy" (Thompson 1971) promoted by the Argentine state. Dapuez argues that the jokes generated around the consumption of polenta were moments of moral abeyance, producing a new radical scenario in which the political and moral aspects of consumption crises could be coopted from the progressive morality of the *Frente de Todos* party to the moral economy of an emerging new right.

In her comparative research, Micaela Díaz Rosaenz explores consumer dynamics in two popular settlements, one in Rio de Janeiro and one in Buenos Aires. She demonstrates that objective and subjective concepts play a role in household practices of consumption and prior financial calculations. Monetary transactions and later instances

of consumption reflect the macro-social conditions that influence these practices, such as, among others, labor market conditions, pricing systems, credit instruments, and household dynamics. Díaz Rosaenz describes how these practices reshape the meanings that individuals assign to them based on the interplay of various factors such as gender, class, status, family, and neighborhood ties.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this brief introduction, Adrian Lerner's article about the planned and actual modernization of Manaus highlights certain paradoxes of consumption. On the one hand, the creation of a significant economic expansion amplified former contradictions. It drew upon economic players from the rubber boom era, exploitative labour practices, and the reproduction of well-known inequalities. Lerner claims that this was (and perhaps still is) a development model that ultimately increased the pressure of extractive practices in relation to the rainforest and its peoples.

The contradictions and complicated economic and cultural interrelationships revealed in each paper of this dossier are central to a better understanding of consumption in Latin American cities. Beyond extreme critiques of consumption (such as that of the Frankfurt School) and the singularist theories sustaining that consumption can solve all problems by creating new individual political identities, our aim has been to deal meticulously with the social complexity of consumption in Latin American cities, a task that would be impossible without local studies in interdisciplinary analysis and the consideration of the many changing actors involved in the processes.

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