



Brazilian Consumer Capitalism and its History in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Beyond: Changing Consumption, the City, and the Country in the Twentieth Century

O capitalismo consumista brasileiro e sua história
no Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo e mais além:
Mudanças no consumo, na cidade e no país no
século xx

JAMES WOODARD

Montclair State University, USA

woodardj@mail.montclair.edu

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5114-7024>

Abstract: Between the 1910s and the 1970s, the defining institutions, practices, and patterns of thought identified with something Brazilians call *consumismo* were installed in that country through processes focused on the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Business elites based in and acting upon the two cities were the key agents in these processes, which contributed greatly to the remaking of the two urban centers over the course of the twentieth century. By the 1970s, São Paulo was more closely identified with consumerism, but many residents of Rio de Janeiro were as beholden as any of their São Paulo counterparts with the new culture of consumption, to the profit of some and the consternation of others. Along the way, the two cities served as poles for the diffusion of that culture across the country's varied regions.

Keywords: Consumerism; Social change; Brazil; 20th Century

Resumo: Entre as décadas de 1910 e 1970, as instituições, práticas e padrões de pensamento identificados com algo que os brasileiros chamam de consumismo foram instalados no país por meio de processos focados nas cidades do Rio de Janeiro e São Paulo. Elites empresariais sediadas e atuantes nessas duas cidades foram os principais agentes nesses processos, que contribuíram bastante para a transformação dos dois centros urbanos ao longo do século xx. Até a década de 1970, São Paulo estava mais associada ao consumismo, mas muitos residentes do Rio de Janeiro estavam tão envolvidos com a nova cultura de consumo quanto seus homólogos paulistas, para o lucro de alguns e a consternação de outros. Ao longo do caminho, as duas cidades serviram como núcleos para a difusão dessa cultura pelas diversas regiões do país.

Palavras chave: Consumismo; Mudanças sociais; Brasil; Século xx

Describing Brazilian conditions in 1970, the anthropologist Charles Wagley wrote, “Brazil has a frankly consumer economy; the stores are well stocked and seemingly busy. In Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo the middle class seems well dressed, well fed, and actively spending money” (Wagley 1971, 309). For the artist Wanda Pimentel, born into “middle-class” Rio twenty-six years earlier, it had always been that way. “As a person, I always lived in a society based on the compulsive act of consuming,” she told an interviewer, before going on to identify that society as a “consumer society” (Montero 1970). The historian Boris Fausto, however, though only thirteen years older than Pimentel, remembered another era. Evoking his petit-bourgeois childhood in São Paulo, he declared of the 1930s, “that wasn’t the age of consumerism: to drink two *guaranás* was a scandal” (Fausto 2008, 153).

In the three testimonies—Wagley’s snapshot of 1970, Pimentel’s self-portrait from the same year extending back to the 1940s, Fausto’s late-in-life remembrance of a prelapsarian 1930s—consumption-related terms stand out. Wagley’s consumer economy, Pimentel’s consumer society, and Fausto’s consumerism identify something that beset Brazil by no later than the 1960s. What did it consist of? In Wagley’s description, it was well-stocked shops and a free-spending middle class. For Pimentel, it was the compulsive consumption of unnamed articles; in her paintings of the period, the automobile, television, and women’s fashions figure as iconic consumer goods. In Fausto’s statement, it was exemplified by the post-1930s normalization of consuming two or more soft drinks in one sitting.

Taken together, what Fausto, Pimentel, and Wagley refer to is the development of Brazilian consumer capitalism and its cultural fastening onto the country. Understudied until recently, the raising of this cultural edifice—Brazil’s great arch, I called it, in my book on the subject—is of great contemporary relevance, given the political salience of “middle class” consumption evident since the first presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010), during which the expression “Classe C vai ao paraíso” was used to describe once-poor working families acquiring durable consumer goods and enjoying services the likes of air travel (Woodard 2020). The history of that fastening is also, as the quote from Wagley suggests, a tale of two cities, São Paulo and Rio,

megacities today, urban centers of under a million inhabitants each in 1900. Between the interwar years of Fausto's boyhood and the postwar decades spanning Pimentel's earliest memories and the realization of her first major project—a series of paintings produced between 1965 and 1975 titled “Envolvimento”—the cities of their births served as premiere sites for the creation of Brazilian consumer capitalism, as it was elites operating in and upon São Paulo and Rio who built the institutions, promoted the products, and modeled the modes of behavior characteristic of the new culture. Over the same period—the 1910s to the 1970s—the two cities were changed in profound ways. By the 1970s, São Paulo was more often identified with consumer capitalism, but many Rio residents were as beholden as any *paulistano* to the new culture of consumption. Along the way, the two cities acted as poles for the spread of that culture across the country's far-flung regions. These changes—the development of *consumismo* in São Paulo and Rio, its effects upon the two cities, and its diffusion outward therefrom—are tracked in the following essay, which glosses some of the most important aspects of my booklength study of Brazilian consumer capitalism while making more pointed connection to the changes in Brazil's two principal cities, beginning with the capsule histories presented in the next few paragraphs.

CREATING *CONSUMISMO* IN RIO DE JANEIRO AND SÃO PAULO

Although only 400 kilometers apart, Rio and São Paulo could scarcely be more different geographically. Rio is coastal, hemmed in by saltwater and mountains. At the dawn of the twentieth century, most of its population lived within a short distance of Guanabara Bay. While its old downtown still faces that bay to its east, Rio's urban footprint has expanded greatly, the well-to-do generally moving south, then west, especially along oceanfront beaches increasingly backed by the iconic hillside settlements of the unpropertied called *favelas*, which also spread inland and north alongside kindred forms of popular housing. São Paulo, by contrast, is an interior city, on the plateau that bears its name, the *planalto paulista*. All but the largest of its rivers and streams have been paved over, and even those once-mighty rivers—the Tietê and Pinheiros—posed little obstacle to urban expansion, in contrast to the spatial limits imposed by Rio's geography. São Paulo thus grew outward in all directions from its nineteenth-century center, with the dominant patterns—to which many exceptions may be found—being its wealthy moving south and southwest, while industry and its workforce expanded in a generally eastern/southeastern direction, soon to leap its municipal limits and expand into what would become the industrial zone of ABC (so called for the once-sleepy settlements named for saints André, Bernardo, and Caetano).

The latter expansion points to economic differences between the two cities. Rio began the twentieth century as a more important manufacturing center but was soon overtaken. Among the factors was São Paulo's larger, more prosperous hinterland, as agriculture, infrastructure, finance, and industry on the *planalto* achieved a synergy

strange to much of the rest of Brazil. For Rio, by contrast, even when local industrial output compared favorably with São Paulo's, its status as national capital was more important, not just symbolically but economically as well. Paraphrasing Calvin Coolidge, one could say that the business of Rio de Janeiro was government. Economically and symbolically, then, the transfer of national-capital status from Rio to Brasília in 1960 was a major blow, from which the Marvelous City may never fully recover. Deindustrialization and the turn to services may someday be seen as a similar inflection in São Paulo's history, but it is too early to say for sure.

In population terms, Rio was a colossus compared to São Paulo in 1900, with more than 800,000 inhabitants to fewer than 250,000. By the time of the next national census, in 1920, São Paulo had begun to catch up, more than doubling its population to nearly 600,000, while Rio's climbed over the one-million mark for something like 1.1 million *cariocas*, as inhabitants of the city are called. Rio beat São Paulo to the two-million mark at some point in the 1940s but was overtaken by São Paulo in the 1950s. The census of 1980—when my research ends—counted just over 5 million *cariocas* to nearly 8.5 million *paulistanos*.

Turning to the history of consumption, one finds further contrasts. Consumer culture as an emanation of nineteenth-century Europe found its first and greatest flowering on Rio's Rua do Ouvidor, where émigré, especially French, entrepreneurs set up shop in the nineteenth century, fostering bourgeois fashions among the thin upper crust of an agrarian, slave society. For consumer capitalism in its twentieth-century guise, the record gives priority to São Paulo. It was in São Paulo that the first department store was opened, in 1913, two decades before any of Rio's retailers aspired to create one. Within sixty years of that founding, the shopping mall was consolidating its role as a crucial space for sociability and leisure in São Paulo, while its *carioca* counterparts lagged, Rio's era of *shoppings*—as the structures are called in Brazilian Portuguese—awaiting the 1980s. Yet even so, when *paulistano* empresarios wanted to promote their ventures, they turned to a Rio-based institution, Rede Globo de Televisão, the television network that remains one of the most important products and promoters of Brazilian consumer capitalism.

In that collaboration between shopping-center empresarios and the executives of Rede Globo, one sees two segments of a larger cohort of agents of the new culture, as well as an institution—Rede Globo—reliant upon the government-created infrastructure of the Embratel satellite network. The feeling of immersion in consumption evoked in Wanda Pimentel's testimony depended upon such infrastructures, institutions, and agents. Built outward from São Paulo and Rio in most but not all cases, new infrastructures and institutions, manned by agents of Brazilian consumer capitalism, enabled the conditions described by Pimentel and Wagley, and implied in Fausto's comment.

By the late 1920s, these infrastructures included the near-national sales organizations of several foreign corporations—including Ford and General Motors—that connected local dealers to central offices in São Paulo, through which poured products, promotion-

al material, and sales techniques. General Electric—based at that point in Rio—added the innovation of corporate-run showrooms, including stores outside the two southeastern capitals. GE’s infrastructural reach was dwarfed by that of the Hollywood studios, acting independently and through national partners. All these firms drew on the organizational and logistical infrastructures of the State and Commerce departments, the Chambers of Commerce, and National City Bank, while Brazil’s Canadian- and U.S.-owned utility companies contributed the electricity without which GE radio sets and refrigerators would not work, to which the utilities added their own promotional efforts, “acquainting the consumer with modern electric labor-saving devices” (Keener 1930).

Beginning in the 1930s and accelerating in the postwar, expatriate- and Brazilian-run retailers established regional and near-national chains. On the model of Woolworth’s, there was *Lojas Americanas*, with its flagship across the bay from Rio, in Niterói, doing business briskly from 1929, and *Lojas Brasileiras*, founded in Recife shortly thereafter, but based in Rio from 1933. The menswear chain *Ducal*, founded in Rio in the postwar, was an offshoot of one of three family-based groups headed by three brothers, Lauro, Milton, and Nilo de Souza Carvalho, who created the first Brazilian-owned department stores, in Rio, São Paulo, and the interior of São Paulo state, while contributing to the commercialization of Carnival, Mother’s Day, and Christmas. The Souza Carvalho brothers were joined in the latter effort by the Sears, Roebuck Company from 1949, when the U.S. firm opened its first Brazilian stores. In São Paulo, Sears entered a field pioneered by a firm called *Mappin*, British-founded but bought out by national capital in 1950, its flagship location still a landmark today, decades after its closure, while in Rio Sears vied with another once-European interest, *Mesbla*, which turned to department-store retailing in 1952, with the opening of *Magazine Mesbla*.

Sears and *Mesbla* would prove important in the consolidation of shopping-center shopping in Brazil. When São Paulo’s first mall, *Shopping Center Iguatemi*, opened its doors in 1966, it featured a Sears outlet as one of its “anchors,” the retail term for large stores that would draw shoppers to all of the center’s establishments. Fourteen years later, a *Mesbla* store played the same role at the Rio Sul shopping center, the first mall to be built in Rio’s Zona Sul. At their openings, the two shopping centers were also “anchored” by supermarkets operated by the Pão de Açúcar group, the success of which was part of a larger proliferation of supermarkets, their number leaping from 1,052 in 1967 to 3,500 in 1971. Two years later, there were an estimated 6,350 self-service foodstores in Brazil, including giant hypermarkets and tiny superettes as well as supermarkets of various sizes. By 1979, that number had risen to almost 9,000, including stores in almost every state.

That these tallies exist highlights the fact that such infrastructures could not be created, maintained, and expanded without the gathering of large amounts of information. Such gathering went back to the 1920s and 1930s, when the branches of U.S. advertising agencies—the J. Walter Thompson Company (JWT), N.W. Ayer and Son, and McCann-Erickson—introduced market research to Brazil. In these efforts, the U.S. firms would be joined by Brazilian-owned agencies and by the Instituto Brasileiro

de Opinião Pública e Estatística, or IBOPE, founded in 1942 by a Brazilian admirer of George Gallup. In subsequent years, IBOPE would be joined by an alphabet's worth of market-research firms, though only the acronym *IBOPE* would become synonymous with polling, and no firm would contribute as much as IBOPE to the diffusion of the letter-denominated classification—A, B, C, and D—that became the dominant way in which socio-economic difference was signaled in the media from which Brazilians of all walks of life increasingly took their cues.

These media infrastructures were crucial in establishing the ubiquity of the new culture, even in the lives of people too poor to be sought by advertisers and thus usually unstudied by market researchers. An increasingly advertising-minded daily press, culminating by the 1970s in the oligopoly of *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *Jornal do Brasil*, and complemented by dozens of weekly and monthly vehicles for advertising and enlightenment, was one pillar of this commercial media. Radio was another, impossible to ignore in the 1940s and 1950s, when Rio's Rádio Nacional was Brazil's Hollywood. Finally, there was television, ascendant over the 1950s and 1960s, dominant by the 1970s, when the national government's Embratel system and Rio's TV-Globo gave the country Rede Globo, the network beaming together a nation with sports, news, and the nightly soap-opera series known as *novelas*.

While Globo programming was offered to anyone who found themselves in front of a television, credit determined who would become an active participant in the world of goods. The Souza Carvalho brothers introduced credit sales at their stores in the 1920s, drawing on French, Argentine, and U.S. models. Their system, called *cred-iário* (a contraction of "crédito diário"), divided the price of goods into ten payments, the first two paid at the time of sale and the remaining eight due monthly starting two months later, so that the entire bill would be paid over ten months. In the postwar, this installment-selling system greased consumer spending in Rio, São Paulo, and other cities, while fueling the growth of increasingly sophisticated retail firms. At Lauro de Souza Carvalho's A Exposição chain, credit sales as a proportion of total sales doubled between 1949 and 1952, reaching more than two-thirds of the total. Between 1954 and 1958, credit sales at the Ducal chain increased from 60 to 75 percent of total sales. By 1958, some 65 percent of sales at Nilo de Souza Carvalho's Modas A Exposição Clipper were made on credit. Meanwhile, at Mappin, credit sales increased from 22 to 43 percent between 1952-1953 and 1955, while the figures for Sears for 1952 and 1958 were 31.3 and 57 percent.

Part of what drove the growth of installment selling was the increasing importance of "big tickets"—retail slang for bulky, expensive goods for the home. Manufacturers, merchants, and their allies agreed that installment purchasing was key to sales of such goods, while critics decried unnecessary spending on superfluous products. Alfredo Monteverde claimed that his firm—named Ponto Frio, in homage to Sears's Coldspot brand—had been the first Brazilian retail outfit to sell refrigerators on long installment terms, which it did beginning in 1949. Ten years on, Monteverde attributed much of his success to this gamble: "My merit was believing that the poor also like comfort, or

in other words, would also like to own refrigerators.” Although his early refrigerator customers were scarcely “poor,” he did begin selling gas stoves by *crediário* to working families and found that “class ‘C’ repaid our trust one hundred percent.”¹ The co-owner of the Rio store A Televisão was happy to be called “an apologist for commerce by credit” in the countdown to Christmas 1952. “Modern civilization,” he explained, “created innumerable necessities, entirely unknown to our grandparents.”² Credit had become a necessity of its own when it came to big-ticket items. “Today, credit is an established institution in Rio,” a Mesbla executive explained, “there are sections in a department store where it is imperative, as in the case of furniture, refrigerators, television and the like” (Vasconcellos 1954). A São Paulo advertising executive agreed: “this practice has been stimulating considerably the sale of certain products, the sale of which for cash in hand would be simply prohibitive [...] the case, for example, of refrigerators, televisions, etc.” (Silveira 1956). Indeed, wrote the journalist Fernando Lemos, the idea that Brazilian retailers “could sell radios, televisions, refrigerators” on a cash-and-carry basis was “pure demagoguery” (Lemos 1958). Meanwhile, the conservative senator Auro Moura Andrade bristled. “Present-day *crediários* exist [only] for the superfluous,” he argued. “For Brazil, a ‘Sears’ store isn’t even worth the taxes that it pays. In 80% it is a *crediário* for futile things; it is 100% an extremely poor school of savings for our people” (Andrade 1956). Thus, even critics attested to credit’s importance in the diffusion of consumer goods.

All the while, the number of installments stretched on as retailers vied for customers. In 1952, A Televisão did most of its sales in 10 or 12 installments, while Lauro de Souza Carvalho’s A Exposição advertised floor-polishers in ten payments starting two months after delivery. By mid-decade, this standard had shifted, A Exposição offering household goods on 15 payments, and up to 18 for gas stoves, washing machines, and refrigerators, with fees and a payment equaling 10 to 20 percent due immediately. Much of this detail would have been lost on consumers until they were far along in the purchasing process, while many members of Rio’s newspaper-reading, radio-listening, and television-viewing publics remained unaware, due to advertisements that led a trade columnist to complain: “There are advertisements—like one recently done by one of our large stores, to sell refrigerators—that don’t so much as inform the total price of the merchandise; they only say the value of the monthly payments, without saying at least how many there will have to be” (Vasconcellos 1956). The columnist came to his senses (given inflationary conditions, he wrote, “credit is a way of making up for the loss of value, allowing the maintenance and even the raising of the population’s standard of living”), but as he made up his mind, the length of installment plans grew: from 23 months for television sets at Casa Barbosa Freitas in 1956 to 30 at Ponto Frio in 1957, increasing thereafter.

Up several price points from even the biggest of big tickets was the passenger automobile, its expense leading middle-class *cariocas* to invent a technique for car-buying.

¹ “O sucesso da inexperiência,” *Vendas e Varejo*, March 1959; “Tendências dos negócios,” *PN*, July 5, 1956.

² “O segredo do comércio a crédito,” *PN*, December 20, 1952.

Called the the *consórcio*, it brought together a group of people—fifty was the standard—who committed to contributing a given sum every month, the total of which would be the price of an automobile (a *consórcio* of fifty would require one-fiftieth of the price of an automobile from each of its members every month). Each month the *consórcio* would buy an automobile, to be given to one of its members through a lottery, until each received their own. The ingeniousness of the solution, its affinity with beloved legal and especially extra-legal lotteries, and the rapidity with which it spread reveal the degree to which automobilism incorporated itself into visions of the good life. The model was so successful that dealers and manufacturers created their own *consórcios*. Through the 1960s, more than half of all cars sold in Brazil went to *consórcio* members, and while the proportion fell thereafter, it continued to represent a significant slice of small-car sales while spreading to other lines of goods, assisting internal migrants in the acquisition of color televisions even as their wages were held down by official fiat. “Just imagine when I write to my family in Recife,” remarked a northeastern-born worker in São Paulo’s garment industry, “telling them that I’m watching television in color. Everybody’s going to come, principally my mother, who loves *novelas*.”³

Dealer-run *consórcios*, industrial sales organizations, credit bureaus, market-research firms—these institutions and others operating alongside them were created and maintained by growing networks of stakeholders, staffers, and supporters. The earliest of these—the offices of the Hollywood studios, subsidiaries of U.S. corporations, foreign-owned utilities that provided electricity and promoted the use of electric appliances—were staffed and managed by Brazilians, North Americans, and European expatriates committed to promoting consumption, comfort, and convenience as a matter of professional course. So too were the branches of the U.S. advertising agencies as they opened offices in Rio and São Paulo beginning in 1929. Here, if not yet “the first great cohort of Brazilian advertising professionals” discerned by one veteran (Lessa 1979), was one nucleus thereof, the beginnings of a professional-managerial elite allied to its counterparts in journalism and radio.

Another nucleus was formed by the owners, managers, and employees of Brazilian-owned agencies, increasingly opting for U.S. models and manners of self-representation, joined in the 1930s by their counterparts in São Paulo and Rio’s retail trades, the inventors of the *crediário*, the term coined by Lauro de Souza Carvalho before he visited the United States, from which he returned in 1933 with merchandise, promotional ideas, organizational techniques, and the inspiration to create a *carioca* department store. As the example provided by Lauro and his brothers suggests, it was not only U.S.—owned and—directed firms that contributed to the emergent culture of consumption that the historian João Cruz Costa would describe as having been synonymous with “the American way of life” as early as the 1930s (Costa 1968, 138). Brazilian captains of commerce and industry, from the Souza Carvalho’s to José Milani of the Gessy company, eagerly adopted new methods, alongside such European firms as Lever and Nestlé.

³ “Entre as cores e o melhor nível,” *Veja*, January 12, 1972.

Across the postwar, as consumer capitalism confirmed its hold on Brazil, it came to be served by an oversized cohort of men and, increasingly, of women, who worked in advertising, sales promotion, market research, media management, design, and allied professions. Encompassing these fields, marketing provided a professional-managerial optic and object of study; it was also touted as a means to accelerate development and enhance the standing of the new professionals, who came to have the ear of powerful figures in the country's post-1964 military governments, for which they helped create the slogans, images, and anthems of *Brasil Grande*. These images, in turn, reached national audiences over the government-created Embratel network. By that point, education had become another field for colonization by the new culture, marketing having begun its long march through the institutions in the 1950s under the auspices of Point IV, "social communications" following in the era of military rule. Supermarkets, hypermarkets, and especially shopping centers came to involve some of the country's most economically powerful and politically influential groups as stakeholders in the new culture, as real-estate magnates, contractors, and construction firms profited handsomely from the malling of urban space, together with the successor firm to the Light & Power trust, renamed Brascan, then, in 2009, Brookfield, at which point it held a stake in 27 *shoppings*.

In 1973, specialists predicted that within ten years, "Brazil will definitively enter the age of the *shopping center*."⁴ Despite that year's oil shock, the second shock at decade's end, and the stagnation of the 1980s, Brazil apparently exceeded expectations, for by 1987 it had not only entered the era of the shopping center, the era was held to have reached its peak, which may have been the overstatement of the year (del Rio *et al.* 1987). Such projections also lent themselves to underestimates, another group of experts predicting in 1974 that Greater São Paulo (the state capital, industrial suburbs, and other satellites) might one day have "as many as 15 *shoppings*."⁵ By 2012, there were 57 in the state capital alone (Bueno 2012, 100), the jewel in the crown remaining Shopping Center Iguatemi, which as early as 1985 ranked fourteenth among shopping centers worldwide in profitability per square meter (Pintaudi 1986, 36). There seems little likelihood of either the mushrooming of shopping malls or the mega-profits of Shopping Center Iguatemi ending any time soon. What has vanished is the sense of the shopping center—*o shopping*—being "American," or being exotic at all. In the absence of that understanding, Iguatemi became the standard and trademark for *shoppings* nationwide.

CHANGING THE CITY IN SÃO PAULO AND RIO DE JANEIRO

That shopping-center shopping would become nearly synonymous with a *paulistano* place name points to changes in images and understandings of São Paulo. If, between

⁴ "Shopping center," *Jornal do Brasil*, September 30, 1973.

⁵ "Empresários destacam as vantagens dos shoppings." *Diretor Lojista*, November 1974.

the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, high-end retailing was identified with Rio's Rua do Ouvidor, by the 1960s that was no longer the case, the new culture of consumption having become associated archetypally with São Paulo. As early as 1962—four years before Shopping Center Iguatemi opened its doors—visiting São Paulo was identified with that culture for an audience of Rio women belonging to classes A and B: “We think about São Paulo in terms of commerce. Yes, shopping [there] is always an invitation. To stroll Rua Augusta, on a misty afternoon, looking at the pretty shopwindows [...] and the promenade of automobiles, of antique stores, and the parade of elegant women at five o'clock is without a doubt something that all of us like to do.”⁶ By that point, the shopping street of Rua Augusta as a symbol of São Paulo was an established trope in fiction (Théo-Filho 1961, 154, 208; Teixeira 1962). Twelve years later, a special edition of the slick, advertising-dependent newsweekly *Manchete* reported on the “sophistication of *paulistano* consumer society, made up not of a vast, standardized market [...] but by a complex of sub-markets, all with their own characteristics.” This “very subtle change, this move from super-standardization to super-alternating choice,” made São Paulo “our best laboratory for the examination of the first manifestations of the phenomenon among us. In standardization (the first stage of the consumer society) as in the diversification or individualization of the market (the second stage), the sale of goods and services, trumpeted by advertising and stimulated by the *crediário*, by direct-to-the-consumer credit or by the credit card, adds fuel to the fire under the cauldron of consumption” (Beting 1974).

Manchete's reporter went on to describe behavior that the anthropologist Maureen O'Dougherty would identify as typical of the “consumption intensified” she saw defining upper-middle-class family life in the 1990s (O'Dougherty 2002). And while some of the reporter's description was bluster, São Paulo was ahead of the rest of the country when it came to the new culture of consumption. Beachless, booming, and bereft of public entertainments commensurate to its size, it perhaps could not have been otherwise. However, as the anthropologist Gilberto Velho and his assistants found in their research in Copacabana in 1968-1970, consumerism and the culture industry reached deep into the experience of the middle-class families of Rio's southern beachfront as well, their informants returning again and again to the interrelated categories of commerce, consumption, and convenience in describing life on that once-idyllic shore. Indeed, more of their respondents touted Copacabana's retail trade than its natural attractions. “It's the best commerce of Rio,” was the typical reply (Velho 1973, *passim*, quote on 66).

These changes in understandings of the two cities and of people's lives within them were tied to changes in the structures of Rio and São Paulo and the functions of their neighborhoods. In the early twentieth century, all but the most rudimentary commercial activities were limited to well-defined downtown districts. In Rio, that district encompassed the Rua do Ouvidor and its environs; in São Paulo, it was in and around

⁶ “Semana para você,” *Correio da Manhã*, October 21, 1962.

the Triângulo of the old city center. That situation changed dramatically in São Paulo beginning in 1939, when the Mappin group transferred the site of its flagship to a new site in what was considered a distinct, “new” city center, and in Rio in 1949, when Sears opened its store in Botafogo, some five kilometers south of the Rua do Ouvidor. In both cases, the aim was to approximate retailing and the residences of the most desired customers. Among the effects were making shopping part of the daily lives of residents of those neighborhoods and making the neighborhoods shopping destinations for families from elsewhere. Bringing commerce closer to the wealthy and near-wealthy residents of Rio’s southern neighborhoods was at the center of plans to build what would become the Rio Sul mall at the mouth of the tunnel linking Copacabana and Botafogo. At Rio Sul, the interplay of shopping-center operations and internal tourism would be a going concern almost from the mall opening its doors in 1980.

In São Paulo, by that point, the expansion of shopping facilities—including hypermarkets and shopping centers—was leapfrogging to the edges of the urban footprint and beyond, to sites that were exurban *avant la lettre*, in Santo André and São José dos Campos, for example. Here, São Paulo’s less restricted physical geography intertwined with the near-universalization of passenger-car ownership among middle-class *paulistanos*, and in the latter, of course, was another expression of the new culture of consumption contributing to the city’s geographic spread.

However enormous the geographic growth of São Paulo and Rio may seem, it was outmatched by their demographic expansion. Fueling that growth was massive rural to urban migration, itself related to the appeal of consumer capitalism, as the beckoning of a new world of goods helped drive migration out of the countryside. As the leading historian of São Paulo’s northeastern-born working class has indicated, among the expectations of his subjects was “access, albeit modest, to the consumer goods that the development of Brazilian capitalism began to generate” (Fontes 2008, 77). By the early 1960s, according to the anthropologist whose testimony opened this essay, those goods included radio sets, wrist watches, nylon hose, “and other commodities which are symbols of the good life at home” (Wagley 1963, 115). Writing in 1970, Wagley added the television to his list of goods obtainable by migrants to the urban southeast, the products beckoning to distant kith and kin (Wagley 1971, 106).

BEYOND RIO DE JANEIRO AND SÃO PAULO: BRAZILIANIZING THE COUNTRY

An even more important driver of immigration out of the northeast and into the urban southeast was state policy, as national political economy during these years focused on the southeast, to the neglect of the rest of the country. Regional political economy might zag for a time, as it did in in Pernambuco’s *zona da mata* in the early 1960s with extension of the minimum wage to cane cutters and sugar-mill workers, sharp observers testifying to the resulting explosion of spending, including on

consumer durables, a pattern of consumption reversed under military-government austerity and wage-compression policies.⁷ But the overwhelming pattern was neglect, the agents of consumer capitalism following the official lead in this regard, as the top advertising agencies shuttered their offices in Recife, Salvador, Porto Alegre, and even Belo Horizonte, to better focus upon Rio and São Paulo.

Those cities and many others nevertheless continued to be served by *Lojas Americanas* and *Brasileiras*. Supermarketing, and with it the distribution, display, and sale of trade-marked products expanded in every direction under the military-led governments of 1964-1985, in good economic times and bad, encouraged by state support. Moreover, through the “life, suffering, and death of the regional offices of the big [advertising] agencies” between the 1950s and the 1970s (Ramos 1975), commercial messages reaching beyond Rio and São Paulo increased in frequency and sophistication, and they continued to do so after those regional offices closed. In 1975, this process was glossed in an insider’s legislative testimony: “Advertising is one of the indispensable components of the consumer society, the stimulating instrument for the growth of markets, recognizably educational and informative, to the degree that it carries civilized customs and practices to the most recondite interior of the country” (Rocha 2007, 95).

The carrying of such customs and practices out of the southeast is describable as Brazilianization, for even as exotic items, idioms, and entertainments became national, the media effected changes in everyday ways of being that would have been otherwise unimaginable. “Rádio Nacional had great national coverage,” remembered a McCann-Erickson executive, “Today, we owe the actual state of our language to Rádio Nacional” (Barros 2004)⁸. This nationalizing effect—the softening of regional accents and standardization of idioms—was almost entirely unscripted, and it owed little to state-led efforts at centralization. As a radio scriptwriter boasted, “without receiving any specific instruction, no recommendation [...] we perform a service of national integration, Nacional carried out that integration. The very language came to be modified through Rádio Nacional” (Rocha 2007, 48-49). “Musical idols, advice columnists, comedy programs and soap operas,” recalled Anna Verônica Mautner of her São Paulo childhood, “were relevant in the homogenization of a mentality and of a style that we may call ‘Brazilian’” (Mautner 2001, 30, 19). This homogenization reached deeply into Mautner’s home and others like hers through television and weekly magazines. Thus, in the words of Lia Faria, writing of a cohort of women who came of age in the 1960s as aspiring schoolteachers in Rio de Janeiro, did the nationalizing effects of consumer capitalism crowd out local and regional cultures: “The massification and consequent homogenization brought by the consumer society and by the cultural industry eliminated differences and often restrict the diverse” (Faria 1997, 160).

⁷ Caio Prado Júnior, interview by Robert J. Alexander (1965) (Robert J. Alexander Papers, microfilm collection, reel 3); Ribeiro (1985, item 1654); Bezerra (2011, 518).

⁸ Altino J. de Barros, interview by Luciana Quillet Heymann and Ilana Strozenbert (2004). FGV CP-DOC. <https://www18.fgv.br/CPDOC/acervo/historia-oral/entrevista-tematica/altino-joao-de-barros>

What was so often seen as Brazilianization, however, was actually a substitution of mostly novel aspects of a single part for a fictive whole, as could not but be the case in a country of archipelagic regions undergoing rapid, wrenching change. A reified sense of Rio was imposed on the rest of the country, especially its points north, in what Genolino Amado, writing in 1943, called “The Death of the Province”:

Sergipe was not Sergipan anymore. It was only radiophonic.

Because it was the radio that carried out the most singular revolution. Under its permanent and insidious quotidian influence, the local physiognomy, formed across the ages, imprinting its traits at the cost of so many traditions, to reflect so many aspects of history, of the physical environment, of the life that was spent there, was little by little decomposing, until it completely lost its character. In Laranjeiras one now speaks more of Orlando Silva than of Fausto Cardoso. In Própria and in Maroim the songs of the Epiphany were replaced by the sambas of Odete Amaral. The stories that one tells on the terraces of Riachão ceased to be those of Zé do Valé and those of Nicolau Tolentino; now they are stories from the “Teatro pelos Ares,” soap-opera plots. The girls of Itaporanga speak with the accent of Zezé Fonseca. The “rr” of Cesar Ladeira and of Carlos Frias spoils recitals of “Colibri.”

All this might not have great social importance, if there wasn’t also establishing itself in Sergipe, as in all of the other Brazilian provinces, a radiophonic conception of life. The smiling superficiality of the capital, its careless irreverence, the light froth of *carioca* existence, is seeping into the soul of these backland folks, of the small cities and the distant towns, to which Brazil always turned for greater, purer inspirations (Amado 1946, 137-138).

“Certainly, it would be puerile to blame ‘broadcasting’ for what is happening,” Amado continued, “If radiophonic futility is so influential, even in the provinces, it is because Brazilian life at this moment lacks something to defend it in its spirit, that truly engages it, that gives it greater satisfaction than sambas and the soap-opera serials” (Amado 1946, 137-138, 235).

The situation seemed critical to Murilo Mendes, for whom unnamed enemies of the people held out Copacabana—a “poor Miami” of “Americanized bars, with their falsely bohemian expression that doesn’t recall Paris cabarets, but California ‘drug-stores’” was held out as a model for the nation: “they want to Copacabanize, standardize, formulate, cretinize” (Mendes 1947). Rio-centered standardization of this sort was what Anna Verônica Mautner would call a Brazilian style and mentality, adding: “Presenting the same repertoires [nationwide], the kings and queens of radio homogenized ceaselessly from the center of irradiation that was the federal capital, Rio de Janeiro. Not only were the great transmitting stations there, but also the great magazine publishers, which divulged images of those whom we only knew by their voices” (Mautner 2001, 30). To these media, the cultural historian Cláudia Mesquita added the promotion-happy *Última Hora* chain, described as “fundamental for the ‘nationalization’ of the *carioca* way of being, because its habits, dramas, and human types came to be ‘exported’ throughout the country with the establishment of the newspaper’s national network, implanted in seven capital cities, including, aside

from Rio, São Paulo, Curitiba, Porto Alegre, Niterói, Belo Horizonte and Recife.” Before national television broadcasting, *Última Hora* “shortened the distance between Rio and other Brazilian locales and permitted its columnists to acquire importance throughout the country and for the ‘culture of *Carioquismo*’ to be assimilated as an element in the construction of national identity” (Mesquita 2008, 238). By 1970, the *Última Hora* chain was no more—victimized by state repression beginning with the 1964 coup—but the newly national medium of television was extending its efforts in a manner comparable only to the broadcasts of radio’s golden age. Describing the results in Recife, where he headed Globo’s local station beginning in 1973, the radioman turned television executive Paulo Ferreira declared, “The same phenomenon repeated itself years later before my eyes, at the time of the installation of TV Globo in Recife. Regional habits, manners, and manias came together in a single language, the *carioca* one” (Ferreira 1998, 57). The effects of these changes, meanwhile, were denounced by the novelist Ary Quintanella, who located national decline in the influence upon the media by a segment of Rio’s upper-middle class. “Only many years later could I understand the significance of all that. The virtual monopoly of the means of communication by the middle class of Rio’s Zona Sul. If the middle class is repugnant, that of the Zona Sul of Rio took on even more sordid characteristics,” he charged. “Rio’s middle class gives, takes, doesn’t have any standards of behavior and doesn’t even know what quality of life is anymore. And – through its golden idol, TV Globo—it seeks to impose that sordidness on the citizens of all of Brazil” (Quintanella 1981, vol. 2, 100).

The journalist Claudio Abramo took a less moralistic approach to changes that mass media—born of its consumer capitalism—were bringing. Of television-*novela* language overheard in Goiás, he observed, “The effect of TV is naturally bringing an end to regional habits. It’s inevitable, to want to fight against it is foolishness. It’s what one calls civilization.” Indeed, Abramo claimed, “That is the process of forming national identity [...]. Here this formation is greatly eased by TV, which speeds up the whole process. I don’t see a great danger in this, so long as for the cultural register of national-identity formation the manifestations of minorities be preserved” (Abramo 1988, 233).

Abramo was correct up to a point. The homogenizing effects of consumer capitalism and the media summoned into existence to serve it were *part* of ongoing processes of national-identity formation. But the media also trafficked in ideas of regional unity-in-diversity dear to traditionalists, as well as to the would-be centralizers of the authoritarian regimes of 1937-1945 and 1964-1985, ideas that contributed to the same processes. From the beginning, the selling of consumer capitalism had resorted to reified ideas of regional and local distinctiveness, as in advertisers’ appeals to São Paulo state pride and to cultural forms envisioned as embodying Rio de Janeiro. As consumer-capitalist institutions expanded into territories north of the two southeastern centers, they too grasped onto emblems of regional belonging: Globo appropriating the iconic northeastern fishing vessels called *jangadas* to

promote its Recife station, the Pão de Açúcar group using the backlands genre of chapbook poetry known as *literatura de cordel* to advertise its first supermarket in Fortaleza.

* * *

At that point—Fortaleza’s first Pão de Açúcar opened in 1974—the precious contraction “glocalization” had not yet leapt from marketeering lingo to the social sciences amid what has been rightly lampooned as “the Dance of the Flows and the Fragments” (Cooper 2001, 193). When thoughtful Brazilians and Brazil-watchers of the 1970s reflected upon the changes involved in the creation of consumer capitalism in the largest and most unequal of South American nation-states, they tended not toward celebration but to critique. Among the Brazil-watchers was Charles Wagley, who followed his description of well-stocked stores and free-spending consumers in São Paulo and Rio in 1970 with consideration of “the badly paid middle class [...] in the same, if not worse, bind than before,” as they “need[ed] more and want[ed] more,” enthralled by radio and television, yearning for refrigerators, passenger cars, and fashionable clothes, “prey to modern advertising and fads.” Nevertheless, these men and women were infinitely better off than the urban poor, whom Wagley described as “illiterate, hungry, and sick,” surrounded by “luxury and ostentation,” and increasingly tuned in to the same media (Wagley 1971, 309, 112-113, 111, 106-107).

Coincident with Wagley’s description, the paintings of Pimentel’s *Envolvimento* series provided a Brazilian critique, their bright colors, she later said, “related to criticism of consumption” (Gonçalves Filho 1992). Most of these paintings center on consumer products—women’s apparel, the passenger car, a television set—which are portrayed in sharp, flat geometric lines, offset by glimpses of the female form—toes, feet, or legs—the goods appearing more important and perhaps more alive than the human presence. In these framings, humanity itself is overwhelmed by consumer products and women even more so. For humankind, according to Pimentel, “no culture can resist the instruments of mass communication, the appeal to the irrational coming from all sides. Actively or passively, in this alienating whirlwind, all of us lose the chance to be.” As for women, or at least the middle-class womanhood Pimentel identified with: “The woman, above all, occupies a very prominent place in the consumer society, because she is used as an instrument and remains at the margin of a freedom she thinks she possesses” (Montero 1970).

Pimentel, unlike Boris Fausto, could not recall a time before what she called “consumer society.” Today, many of her compatriots—and not only in the consumerist poles of Rio and São Paulo—cannot conceive of a future beyond it. That fact speaks to the success of the building of consumer capitalism outward from São Paulo and Rio, accompanying and abetting the growth of the two cities, reshaping human lives locally and nationally, making contemporary Brazil.

- Abramo, Cláudio. 1988. *A regra do jogo*. Companhia das Letras.
- Amado, Genolino. 1946. *Os inocentes do Leblon*. Livraria do Globo.
- Andrade, Auro M. 1956. Letter to editors. *PN*, October 5.
- Beting, Joelmir. 1974. "O consumidor paulistano." *Manchete*, special issue, "Retrato de São Paulo."
- Bezerra, Gregório. 2011. *Memórias*. Boitempo.
- Bueno, Beatriz Piccolotto Siqueira. 2012. *São Paulo, um novo olhar sobre a história: a evolução do comércio de varejo e as transformações da vida urbana*. Via das Artes.
- Cooper, Frederick. 2001. "What Is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian's Perspective." *African Affairs* 100, n.º 399: 189-213.
- Costa, João C. 1968. *Pequena história da república*. Civilização Brasileira.
- del Rio, Vicente, Carlos E. Ferreira, José Kós, and James Miyamoto. 1987. "Nascimento e apogeu do shopping-center." *Módulo* 94: 34-47
- Faria, Lia. 1997. *Ideologia e utopia nos anos 60: um olhar feminino*. Editora da UERJ.
- Fausto, Boris. 2008. Interview by Angela de Castro Gomes and Keila Grinberg. In *Leitura crítica sobre Boris Fausto*, edited by Angela de Castro Gomes. Editora da Fundação Perseu Abramo.
- Ferreira, Paulo C. 1998. *Pilares via satélite: da Rádio Nacional à Rede Globo*. Rocco.
- Fontes, Paulo. 2008. *Um nordeste em São Paulo: trabalhadores migrantes em São Miguel Paulista, 1945-1966*. Editora FGV.
- Gonçalves Filho, Antonio. 1992. "Wanda Pimentel mostra o outro lado da tela." *O Estado de S. Paulo*, November 19.
- Keener, Ulysses S. 1930. "Hydroelectric Development in the State of São Paulo." *Paulista* 1.
- Lemos, Fernando. 1958. "Uma inciativa fracassada." *PN*, June 5.
- Lessa, Orígenes. "Em 1935 minha primeira grande promoção." *Propaganda*, June.
- Mautner, Anna V. 2001. *O cotidiano nas entrelinhas*. Ágora.
- Mendes, Murilo. 1947. "Formação de discoteca." *A Manhã*, September 21.
- Mesquita, Cláudia. 2008. *De Copacabana à Boca do Mato: o Rio de Janeiro de Sérgio Porto e Stanislaw Ponte Preta*. Casa de Rui Barbosa.
- Montero, Isabel. 1970. "Vanda [sic] Pimentel." *Jornal do Brasil*, July 25.
- O'Dougherty, Maureen. 2002. *Consumption Intensified: The Politics of Middle-Class Daily Life in Brazil*. Duke University Press.
- Pintaudi, Silvana Maria. 1986. "Os shopping-centers brasileiros e o processo de valorização do espaço urbano." *Boletim Paulista de Geografia* 64: 29-48.
- Quintanella, Ary. 1981. Interview by Edla van Steen. In *Viver e escrever*. 2 volumes. L&PM.
- Ramos, Ricardo. 1975. "Um século de propaganda no Brasil." *O Estado de S. Paulo*, December 20.
- Ribeiro, Darcy. 1985. *Aos trancos e barrancos: como o Brasil deu no que deu*. Guanabara.
- Rocha, Amara. 2007. *Nas ondas da modernização: o rádio e a TV no Brasil de 1950 a 1970*. Aeroplano.
- Silveira, Cícero. 1956. "Lojas & vitrinas." *Propaganda*, June.
- Teixeira, Maria de Lourdes. 1962. *Rua Augusta*. Martins.
- Théo-Filho. 1961. *Experiência em São Paulo*. Irmãos Pongetti.
- Vasconcellos, Manoel de. 1954. "Tudo que um grande magazine precisa o Brasil já fabrica." *PN*, September 20.
- Vasconcellos, Manoel de. 1956. "Uma palavra do editor." *PN*, March 20.

- Velho, Gilberto. 1973. *A utopia urbana*. Zahar.
- Wagley, Charles. 1963. *An Introduction to Brazil*. Columbia University Press.
- Wagley, Charles. 1971. *An Introduction to Brazil*. Second edition. Columbia University Press.
- Woodard, James. 2020. *Brazil's Revolution in Commerce*. University of North Carolina Press.

Manuscript received: 08.05.2024

Revised manuscript: 29.11.2024

Manuscript accepted: 19.12.2024