

The consumer as agent in neoliberalism

O consumidor como agente no neoliberalismo

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the prevailing neoliberal discourse has highlighted the active role of the consumer. The consumer agency is associated with several factors: the rhetoric of advertising that emphasizes complicity with the consumer; technologies of self through which consumers act as entrepreneurs of themselves; interactive mechanisms that suggest increased participation; appeal to social responsibility in consumer behavior. When we look closely at each of these factors, however, the limitations of today's presumed consumer empowerment are revealed.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, consumer, complicity, participation, entrepreneurship

RESUMO

O discurso neoliberal, que se torna prevalente nas últimas décadas, destaca o papel ativo do consumidor. A agência do consumidor está associada a diversos fatores: retórica publicitária que enfatiza a cumplicidade com ele; tecnologias de si através das quais ele atua como empreendedor de si mesmo; mecanismos interativos que sugerem um aumento de sua participação; apelo à responsabilidade social em suas atitudes. Quando analisamos de perto cada um desses fatores, contudo, o suposto empoderamento do consumidor na contemporaneidade revela suas limitações.

Palavras-chave: Neoliberalismo, consumidor, cumplicidade, participação, empreendedorismo

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CONSUMER AGENCY IN NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSE

IN THE 1950S, criticisms of the homogeneity and conformity characteristic of mass society, which from an economic point of view is based on the Fordist articulation between mass production and mass consumption, began to proliferate. They are inspired, for example, by Riesman's (2001) analysis in *The lonely crowd*, which became a classic of sociology and a bestseller. For this author, the "other-directed" personality predominates in the postwar American society, especially in the suburbs, where individuals are concerned above all with the opinions of their neighbors. The song "Little Boxes", written and composed by Malvina Reynolds in 1962, and recorded by the activist Pete Seeger in 1963, became a hit by mocking the uniformity of suburban homes and their inhabitants with verses such as these:

Little boxes on the hillside,
 Little boxes all the same.
 There's a green one and a pink one
 And a blue one and a yellow one,
 And they're all made out of ticky tacky
 And they all look just the same.
 And the people in the houses
 All went to the university,
 Where they were put in boxes
 And they came out all the same.

In a famous essay, Mailer (1957: 278) proposes the alternative: "One is Hip or one is Square [...], one is a rebel or one conforms". And it is in this context that the counterculture emerges in the 1960s.

The issue of homogeneity and conformity echoes in the corporate world, which becomes the scenario of a series of transformations. In the labor market, workers' empowerment proposals gain influence, starting with a distinction made by McGregor (1960). For him, the traditional management, Taylorism or Theory X, is based on the idea that individuals do not like to work and need leaders to motivate them, direct their efforts and control their actions. In contrast, for Theory Y, the leader's job is to enable employees to recognize and develop the motivation, the ability to direct their behavior and the willingness to assume responsibilities that are already potentially within themselves. In the 1970s, according to Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), the "new spirit of capitalism" flourishes, and incorporates the "artistic criticism" of the alienation of labor inspired by the events of May 1968, emphasizing the

relative autonomy of workers in network-based organizational arrangements. These changes in work situation intensify under the aegis of neoliberal ideology, which gains prominence with the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States of America. For neoliberalism, work functions as human capital, whose amount depends on the worker's qualities and which is paid in the form of salary. This makes the worker a sort of business, and society a collection of enterprise-units (Foucault, 2004: 229-231). While in the corporate culture workers' responsibility in the exercise of their duties is underscored, in the social sphere this responsibility is extended: it is up to workers themselves, by investing in themselves, to ensure the reproduction of their workforce.

On another front, the appreciation of neoliberal market is accompanied by consumer appreciation. It is true that indications of consumer's importance are already present in classical liberalism:

Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self-evident, that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it (Smith, 1981: 660).

In the nineteenth century, neoclassical economics postulates the sovereignty of the consumer, understood as a rational agent moved by utility maximization. While it is heir to the tradition that comes from liberalism and passes through neoclassical economics, neoliberalism emphasizes the importance of the consumer in another way, celebrating the power implied in choice: the consumer ostensibly takes precedence over the worker and the citizen as the hegemonic model of subjectivity. In this context are offered economic stimuli for consumption, through initiatives such as tax cuts, credit expansion, and financial deregulation. But the changes in terms of consumer empowerment that are the focus of this article are grouped under four headings: rhetoric of complicity, technologies of self, mechanisms for participation, and social responsibility. It should be noted that the theme here is not the reappropriation *a posteriori* of goods as material culture, along the lines proposed by De Certeau (1990) and Miller (1987), among others, but the consumer agency in the very process of acquiring goods.

RHETORIC OF COMPLICITY

Until the 1950s, the rhetorical strategies used in advertising basically consisted of three types. The most traditional is the imperative rhetoric, which appeals directly and emphatically to consumers, urging them to acquire a certain product. The most common is the rhetoric of seduction, which builds a fantasy around the product to make it more attractive to the consumer. The third is the rhetoric of persuasion, which makes use of rational arguments, technical language and specialized professionals to persuade the consumer. It should be noted that these strategies are ideal types, which can be combined in various ways.

This situation changes with the so-called *creative revolution* in advertising. The “Think small” campaign, launched by Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) in 1959 to promote the Volkswagen Beetle, emphasizes its simplicity, which contrasted with the magnificence and luxury of the models that dominated the US market. The same agency was responsible for the “We try harder” campaign for Avis, in 1962, in which the company recognizes not being a leader in the car rental sector, trailing behind Hertz, but promises to devote its commitment to the consumer. In both cases, through an unusual image of openness, the advertising recognizes the limitations of the product advertised and at the same time points to it as an alternative for those who do not bother to follow the majority.

The ruptures proposed by the creative revolution in advertising are closely related to the counterculture, as Frank (1997) shows. Even the appearance of professionals changes: if in the 1950s they were known by their gray flannel suits (costumes made famous in *The man in the gray flannel suit*, Sloan Wilson’s bestseller published in 1955 and adapted for the screen the following year, under the direction of Nunnally Johnson and with Gregory Peck in the lead role), in the following decade creative types are wearing long hair and colorful clothes. On the part of advertisers from different areas, there is an effort to demonstrate that they are in tune with the *Zeitgeist*. In a campaign launched in 1963, Pepsi-Cola portrays its consumers as having a young, active lifestyle, linked to sports and adventures: “Come alive! You’re in the Pepsi Generation!” In 1965, Dodge starts to advertise its car models with the slogans “Join the Dodge Rebellion” and “The Dodge Rebellion wants you”; in TV campaign commercials, a reckless blonde stars in comical situations as a damsel in distress. In 1968, Columbia Records publishes an advertisement in magazines such as *Rolling Stone* showing young prisoners in a cell with a rebellious look and posters on the floor, as if they had just emerged from a demonstration. In addition to this, there are some album covers of its catalog. The title is an anti-establishment message: “But The Man can’t bust our music.”

The creative revolution is a milestone in the history of advertising, introducing a new rhetorical strategy. A relationship of complicity is established between the advertisers and the consumers. Consumers are treated as people who have their own style and know what they want. Symmetrically, the advertiser does not address them from a position of authority, but as an equal. In the ads, it is common to use an irreverent tone and some flirtation with transgression. Messages are sometimes subtle, giving more emphasis to the brand or a narrative about the product than to the product itself. The intention is to create a cool image of the product and to make consumers want to be associated with it.

This rhetorical strategy has become prevalent in recent decades. One example is the launch of the Apple Macintosh commercial, directed by Ridley Scott and presented nationally in the United States during the Super Bowl XVIII, in 1984. The reference is the novel *1984*, by George Orwell. In a futuristic setting in blue and gray tones, a man embodying the Big Brother speaks on a big screen to an audience of robotic people. In contrast, the colorful figure of a girl athlete, wearing a T-shirt that displays the stylized drawing of the computer, runs chased by police. When the speech approaches its conclusion, the girl arrives close to the screen and throws a big hammer against it, causing it to explode before the audience in shock. The final message explicitly links the product with the rupture of homogeneity and conformity: “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 will not be like 1984.”

The prevalence of the rhetoric of complicity is due to the fact that consumption is currently a factor of individuation, not of adaptation. It is not the case of imposing a standard, but of helping each one find him or herself in the market. This holds true when the product options are multiple and customized, but even in the case of a single model its appeal is different for each one.

Although the rhetoric of complicity treats consumers with more respect and resorts to more sophisticated messages, its intention remains the same: to make them buy. Criticisms, such as those from Packard (2007) and Friedan (1963), of advertising manipulations are in principle endorsed by the professionals, but used and channeled to enhance their message. The mechanism in action is typical of contemporary ideology and similar to perversion (Castro, 2014): we know very well that the announcement intends to induce us to consume, but we pretend it consists of mere entertainment. In certain cases, however, even the ideological consistency fades. Some attempts of adhering to transgressive messages by large corporations clearly sound artificial and awkward, like the Columbia Records ad pretending solidarity with the young

people protesting. Moreover, there is a discrepancy between the glamorous image of the products and the reality surrounding its production, such as the low wages and poor working conditions of the Apple workers in Asia.

TECHNOLOGIES OF SELF

The neoliberal discourse is characterized by shielding the responsibility of society over the individual destinies and transferring this burden to each one. Thus, if a worker is unemployed, this is not explained as a structural problem of capitalism, or even as a cyclical problem caused by recessive economic policies, but as a presumed personal deficit of someone who is not adequately prepared to deal with the existing circumstances in the labor market. Consequently, collective mobilization demanding social measures gives way to individual initiative. “The citizens of a liberal democracy are to regulate themselves; government mechanisms construe them as active participants in their lives” (Rose, 1999: 10).

It is therefore natural that neoliberalism has profound implications in subjective terms. These implications are sought deliberately: as Margaret Thatcher declares in an interview to the *Sunday Times* on May 3, 1981, “economics are the method; the object is to change the soul.” In our time, an individualistic and therapeutic view spreads, similar to that of self-help books. What matters, for each one, is to build a narrative of triumph, of fulfilling his potential and overcoming obstacles, that are disconnected from their social dimension. To that end, one can resort to what Foucault (2001, 1602-1632), in his analysis of ancient culture, called “techniques of the self.”

In the neoliberal context, the consumers are regarded as the producers of their own satisfaction (Foucault, 2004: 232). Consumption is part of the construction of identity through the technologies of self, which for this purpose are combined with the rhetoric of complicity described above. It is true that therapeutic culture is not new and that consumers in the past also invested in themselves. It was, however, an adaptation to predetermined models, while consumers now choose their models among multiple options. In contemporary consumer society, “the reflexivity of the self is continuous, as well as all-pervasive” (Giddens 1991: 76). Making use of tools offered by consumption, people can redefine their identities, sometimes with the help of experts, as in TV shows like *Extreme makeover*, which offers to selected candidates the complete transformation of their appearance, followed *pari passu* by television cameras. That is, the identity appears as something entirely modular, depending only on the resources available to each one, as if the construction of identity was a game in which the

assembled parts were purchased in the market. Advertising encourages consumers to engage in this game, following their own path and investing in their own achievement through motivational content attached to products.

One example is Nike's slogan "Just do it", created by the Wieden+Kennedy agency in 1988, normally used together with the company logo in various advertising media. These ads are starred by sport celebrities from various sports, nationalities and ethnic groups; based on their endorsement, the brand wants to be associated with connotations of success, sportiness, and health. The slogan urges consumers to leave their sedentary lifestyle. At the same time, the idea is to make sports footwear a prestigious fashion item, a shoe that can be used by anyone, not just by sportspeople. The motivational tone is modulated in self-help style messages, as in the commercial *Failure*, in 1997, in which the basketball idol Michael Jordan mentions the numerous times he failed in his victorious career (baskets he lost, matches in which his team was defeated, chances he lost to win the game in the end) and concludes: "That's why I succeed."

Apple's "Think different" campaign, prepared by the agency TBWA\Chiat\Day and launched in 1997, also combines a motivational message to investing in the prestige of the product. The ads highlight a number of notable historical figures, such as Albert Einstein, Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King Jr., John Lennon, Thomas Edison, Muhammad Ali, Maria Callas, Mahatma Gandhi, Alfred Hitchcock, Pablo Picasso, and others. After emphasizing their controversial aspects, the text concludes: "While some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do." The idea is to strengthen the reputation of creativity of the brand users and use that appeal to attract new consumers.

Although they present themselves as tools for individuals to account for their own lives, the technologies of self are supported by external models, even if they are multiple and flexible. Furthermore, the construction of identity by the favoured route of consumption inevitably involves a reification process: if people are defined by the objects they consume, their identity tends to assume the same status of these objects.

MECHANISMS FOR PARTICIPATION

For Hayek, a basic reference of neoliberalism, in the market, such as in scientific activity, a collaborative process takes place in which the outcome of resorting to several people is higher than what could be achieved individually:

Human Reason, with a capital *R*, does not exist in the singular, as given or available to any particular person, as the rationalist approach seems to assume, but must be conceived as an interpersonal process in which anyone's contribution is tested and corrected by others. (Hayek, 1948: 15)

This ideal seems to take place in the forms of interactivity brought about by the internet, which make possible the provision of data on consumption patterns and the direct contact among buyers, or buyers and sellers. These mechanisms are related, in theory, to a greater degree of consumer participation, compared with traditional consumption patterns. Such participation takes place directly, when consumers are actively engaged in the provision of information and assessments, or indirectly, when they leave fingerprints that convert into information. In all these forms of interactivity, there is apparently a gain of agency on the part of the consumer, inasmuch as they enable better informed decisions. Moreover, each consumer influences the others in some way, helping to determine what will be offered to them. The consumer has therefore something of a producer, a trend already detected by McLuhan, for whom "the consumer becomes producer in the automation circuit, quite as much as the reader of the mosaic telegraph press makes his own news, or just *is* his own news" (1994: 349, emphasis in original).

The data collection and processing of the activities of consumers enable improving the recommendations they receive. In a virtual bookstore, for example, when we order a book or consult its description, this operation is recorded in our profile and from then on we are usually sent to other works that could attract our curiosity. This can be done based on the most obvious similarities drawn from the description of the various works – the fact that they were written by the same author or deal with the same subject. The mobilization of collective intelligence embedded in the data, however, allows identifying more accurate connections, represented by works that usually seize the attention of those who share our interest in a certain book. It is a type of information the seller could not get nor provide the consumer in another way, for it is dynamically produced by the sum of activities of the masses of consumers. This is especially true for products like books, for which the range of predilections of each one is very personal. In addition, the opinion of other consumers can reach us individually, to the extent that e-commerce sites encourage their explicit input, reserving spaces for them to leave comments and assign scores to the products for sale.

Although they have a variety of other uses, social networks often serve also to exchange consumer experiences and to discuss advantages and disad-

vantages of products and brands. Here, the link between the user profile and the suggestions he receives in terms of consumption is to some extent more diffuse than in online shops. In these, consumer activities involve the purchase or at least the observation of items for sale, while on social networks commerce is not usually something central to the user. Even so, the consumer appeal can be more direct and comprehensive. Since its inception, Facebook is careful to emphasize the slogan with the promise of service gratuity (“It’s free and always will be”). In exchange, it collects user data, which indicate demographic profile, preferences, professional and leisure activities, travels, interactions with others etc., to gear recommendations at the user. This is quite detailed information, which can be associated with a wide range of products. The bond between consumers and a company becomes even stronger if they like its page or the page of one of its products, thus creating a permanent connection. This allows the company to supply them regularly with information, and use their approval to automatically promote itself with their friends. There are also cases of viralization, when a company advertisement attracts the interest of users to the point of sharing it, becoming agents of its diffusion.

In e-commerce aggregators, comparisons between vendors take on an automated nature, enabling to compare prices between different stores and showing which ones offer more purchasing advantages. Big stores like Amazon currently exhibit not only their own offers, but also those of their trading partners for the same products, displaying price comparisons in their sites.

Sites like eBay and its Brazilian counterpart Mercado Livre, which have emerged as virtual auction mechanisms, with an emphasis on second-hand products, began to function as channels of commerce in general, bringing together scattered sellers and buyers. They open market access to products that would otherwise not be sold regularly, and also to their respective vendors; place buyers and sellers in direct contact, eliminating the unnecessary intermediary factor; and enable price comparison, when searching for a specific product and coming across many results.

The advantages brought about by the virtual world when it comes to consumption represent a change of scale in relation to what happens in the physical world. If we compare the number and nature of clients in different outlets on a street or shopping mall, that somehow influences our opinion about them. Word of mouth or the mere sight of someone else using a product can provoke in us a more or less favorable disposition toward it. Price surveys can be made covering several shops. The so-called network marketing reduces intermediation between seller and buyer. Offline fans wear clothes with reference to a specific product or organize meetings about it. Roughly speaking,

the easy access to online deals expands opportunities to acquire assets beyond the geographical barriers and the conventional marketing channels, enthroning the contemporary consumers in a privileged position, in principle, compared with their predecessors. It is therefore not surprising that the neoliberal discourse praises the virtual economy. It fits in this context the expression “capitalism without friction”, employed by Microsoft’s Bill Gates (1996) to designate this market where everything seems to work smoothly, without any of the disruptions of distance, regulations, costs, and imperfect information. To all this another factor is added, as pointed out by Bauman (2007: 18): when I walk into a physical store, I put myself at the mercy of the seller powers of persuasion and my own weakness to buy on impulse, while on the internet “I am the one, the only one who stays in command and holds the steering wheel”, and could theoretically better consider what brings me advantages.

The ease offered by the internet, in addition to specific online commerce sales such as Black Friday or Cyber Monday, can actually induce consumer frenzy or even onomania, the addiction to shopping. Since the structure of Big Data is in the hands of large corporations, we have no control over the data being collected, how they are analyzed and how it affects what we are being offered. A risk involved in the use of data to predict the tastes and interests of consumers is to contain them in digital bubbles, always offering them the same kind of content. Another problem is the distortion of the recommendations – when an interested party pays to be displayed prominently in the search results, for example. In addition, consumer rating based on the purchasing data can function as an instrument of discrimination, e.g., when these data are used to support decisions about sales, discounts, credit, etc. The differences between users, as conditions for internet access and level of knowledge of online tools, should also be taken into account.

As corporations make use of control over the data for their own gain, the consumer is somehow recruited to work for them. If I want to increase the accuracy of the list of recommendations I receive from a virtual bookstore, it is up to me to edit this list, stating the degree of attractiveness of each new item advised to me and whether I already own it; ultimately, I end up providing the entire contents of my library and all products I wish to buy. If I place a detailed account of everything I do and all my tastes in a social network, I am helping, albeit unintentionally, build my profile as a consumer, refine the suggestions directed to me and endorse the suggestions made to others. The “Statement of rights and responsibilities” of the Facebook user, with the revision date of January 30, 2015, is explicit in this regard:

You give us permission to use your name, profile picture, content, and information in connection with commercial, sponsored, or related content (such as a brand you like) served or enhanced by us. This means, for example, that you permit a business or other entity to pay us to display your name and/or profile picture with your content or information, without any compensation to you.

And, if someone deliberately places him or herself as fan of a company or its products, their subordination to the company's interests becomes more explicit – with the additional advantage for the company that, compared with offline fans, those online are much easier to track and list.

When we receive consumer tips via Big Data, the contribution of each one in the accumulation of data diminishes. What remains, however, is the fact that this is an influence that comes from the outside. This external determination, more subtle than that of the disciplinary societies, is closer to what Deleuze (2003) calls “society of control.” The multiplication of data to guide us in every decision, moreover, indicates the extreme complexity of choices in every detail of life, an intensive resort to calculation that goes against the values of chance, spontaneity and intuition.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Throughout the twentieth century it has been noticed that, through their choices, consumers directly influence the fate of society. Consumption appears even as a model and as a substitute for representative government:

The masses of America have elected Henry Ford. They have elected General Motors. They have elected the General Electric Company, and Woolworth's, and all the other great industrial and business leaders of the day. [...] They do not vote with ballots, but with dollars. (Filene, 1932: 135).

Hutt (1936: 257) coins the term “consumer sovereignty” and declares: “The consumer is sovereign when, in his role of citizen, he has not delegated to political institutions for authoritarian use the power which he can exercise socially through his power to demand (or refrain from demanding).”

In neoliberalism, the political and social impact of the choices made by consumers is emphasized. The responsibility of individuals is exerted not only in the administration of their lives, but also extends to issues of collective nature. In such cases, the weakening of social engagement is evident: the consumers are invested with the task of repairing the distortions affecting the

functioning of capitalist society by merely changing their habits, that is, acting strictly as individuals. It is inserted therein the formula of the so-called responsible consumption.

The environmentally conscious consumption, for example, places the responsibility on the users to reverse the vast environmental liabilities of capitalism, which today represent a threat to all, via informed consumption decisions. The logic used is that everyone can make a difference thanks to his or her choices. If each one took responsibility for recycling his or her trash, was always aware of the environmental impact of the products he or she consumes, selected companies according to their sustainability reputation, cared about his or her ecological footprint (i.e., the extent to which his or her lifestyle, if generalized to all humankind, would overload or not the planet), the sum of these individual actions would have the power to minimize a problem of collective reach. Thus, we have here a breakdown of the technologies of self at the individual level in the social and political level.

The idea of responsible consumption fits quite well with the rhetoric of complicity described above, in which the advertisers (along with the corporations they represent) and consumers supposedly are on the same side, have the same goal, do not have disagreements and conflicts of interest. Through it, companies outsource their responsibility to the consumers. Whenever possible, decisions are transferred to them: it is they who must decide, for example, according to their conscience, to use a paper bag instead of a plastic bag. This becomes a satisfaction and fulfillment tool for the consumers, allowing them to continue to consume at peace with their conscience. Opinion polls show that sustainability is an important value for a considerable portion of the public, particularly attracting those with higher educational levels. To the extent that this value is a factor of status, it creates an incentive for the so-called conspicuous conservation, contemporary variant of the Veblenian concept of conspicuous consumption. Both companies praising responsible consumption and consumers who adopt this behavior accumulate what might be called ethical capital, variant of the human capital celebrated by neoliberalism.

The result is curious, because consumption starts to be seen, in practice, not as a source of pressure on the environment, but as the solution itself. Faced with the problems caused by consumption, the fix is to continue to consume. To save the planet, it suffices that this consumption is done correctly. Like decaffeinated coffee, non-alcoholic beer and other products emptied of their properties, as mentioned by Žižek (1992: 65), consumption here is taken by its opposite, as if it

was anticonsumption. This also brings to mind the “buy 3 and pay for 2” type of slogans, paradoxically suggesting buying more as a means of saving. That is precisely the reasoning behind the Lacanian concept of surplus-enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*), a sort of enjoyment that results from the repression of enjoyment. And what we see here is no casual analogy, a mere complicity of structure, for indeed contemporary consumption is closely linked to enjoyment.

In 2009, Coca-Cola Great Britain launched the campaign “keep it going. recycle.” The message to consumers is to indulge in the drink and then properly dispose of its packaging: *Enjoy the Coke. Recycle the bottle.* With this, it combines enjoyment and environmental awareness, presented as perfectly compatible. The very symbol of recycling on the packaging embeds a stylized image of the soda bottle. Aside from the ads, the initiative unfolds in the construction of containers at fixed sites and events to collect the material to be recycled, giving visibility to the campaign. Impact and prestige for the brand are also obtained through the installation titled *Precious metal*, mounted in the same year in Sussex. Containing 200,000 cans collected across the country, the gigantic installation created by the artist Robert Bradford and a team of volunteers is the reproduction of a 1949 poster of Coca-Cola, visible from aerial photographs; after disassembly, all cans were sent to recycling.

Outsourcing responsibility to the consumer can bring additional opportunities of gain to corporations. To encourage customers to give up receiving by mail paper account statements and invoices, choosing instead to consult versions of these documents on the internet, in 2012 the Brazilian bank Itaú used a video that went viral on YouTube. In it, the baby Micah laughs hysterically as he watches his father tearing pieces of paper in front of him. After an agreement with the family, residing in California, the images were transformed into a TV commercial. A second ad, with the baby’s parents, is a follow-up to the campaign, which is quite effective in encouraging the change in customer habits. This is an interesting change for the bank, since it entails cost reductions. When, in the same year, a ban to the use of plastic bags by supermarkets in the city of São Paulo was in force for a few months, who took most advantage of this situation were these establishments themselves, as their costs with packaging were greatly reduced, while benefiting with the sale of recyclable bags. In the case of recycling, the consumer generally works for free for a wide range of activities that profit from this by selecting and providing their raw material. Another kind of gain with responsible consumption is illustrated by the coffee chain Starbucks, which charges more for its products due to the brand associating with commitments to sustainabi-

lity, fair trade, etc. (although the company is also known in the US for their anti-union attitudes).

In addition to profiting from responsible consumption, corporations sometimes use it to mask their responsibilities. When a hotel suggests guests to reuse linens and towels, it omits mentioning that it could implement many other sustainable practices. This example, incidentally, resulted in the New York activist Jay Westerveld to coin, in an essay written in 1986, the term “greenwashing”, later added to dictionaries. It designates postures supposedly in defense of the environment that are not very effective and are only intended to convey an appearance of sustainability, to meet the demands of consumers or government agencies, by using evocative names, emphasizing vague or little relevant attributes, using unsubstantiated claims or endorsements, or making undue comparisons. Sometimes the costs of these measures, besides being irrelevant compared with corporate profits, are inferior even to those spent to advertise them, in addition to being offset by gains in terms of image. In its “Better world” campaign in 2011, Nike takes greenwashing to the advertising practice, making a recycled commercial, composed entirely of images from old ads; what matters here is obviously the concept, not the possible benefit to the environment.

Following Marx’s trail with regard to the contradictions of capitalism, Berman comments:

This system requires constant revolutionizing, disturbance, agitation; it needs to be perpetually pushed and pressed in order to maintain its elasticity and resilience, to appropriate and assimilate new energies, to drive itself to new heights of activity and growth. This means, however, that men and movements that proclaim their enmity to capitalism may be just the sort of stimulants capitalism needs. (1988: 118)

There are several historical episodes in which a theoretically progressive agenda is used by capital via consumption. In the early twentieth century, in the United States, progressivism starts attacking corporations and ends up pointing to them the way to control the consumer – the trajectory of Walter Lippmann is quite revealing in this regard. In the 1930s, as Ewen (1996: 322-336) shows, the rhetoric of the New Deal is tailored for the business world, becoming a celebration of the consumer according to the ideology of free enterprise, a PR tour de force culminating in the 1939 New York World’s Fair. The incorporation of the discourse of sustainability on the part of corporations, in the form

of stimulus to responsible consumption, as well as the incorporation of the discourse of the counterculture by advertising, is part of that trend. Insofar as it replaces mobilization, responsible consumption is the colonization of activism by the market, equivalent to the reification of political consciousness. **M**

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