

Consumption, Domestic Life, and Sustainability in Brazil

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Abstract: Much of the research on environmental awareness and sustainability targets the impact of production on the environment and the need for more sustainable production practices. However, a disproportionate amount of all environmental impact comes today from consumption and the particular uses to which products are put by individuals in their daily lives. In such a context, we suggest, sustainability studies should refocus their attention towards routine, domestic practices such as eating, personal hygiene, and cleaning. We also argue that only by understanding the real environmental impact of such domestic consumption can one hope to raise individuals' awareness and develop more sustainable practices. Based on qualitative and quantitative research, we examine (1) some consumer perceptions linked to sustainability, (2) the underlying cultural logics of routine practices of washing, cleaning, and eating, and their negative environmental impact. These varied data and analyses are intended to contribute to a discussion of whether and how it might be possible "re-socialize" Brazilian consumers towards domestic sustainability, and thus the emergence of more sustainable homes.

1 Introduction

If one cares to download and examine some of the reports issued online by major corporations about their sustainability programs and policies, one will rapidly see that such corporations appear to have "done their homework," so to speak. In other words, corporations seem to be trying to respond to the demands voiced by governments, social movements, and consumers for increasing attention to sustainability in their production practices. Unilever, for example, has developed a "sustainable living plan," where, among other pledges, it states its commitment to "halve the greenhouse gas impact of our products across the lifecycle by 2020" (<http://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/greenhousegases/targets/index.aspx>). As for renewable energy, the same plan states that Unilever "will more than double our use of renewable energy to 40% of our total energy requirement by 2020" (<http://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/greenhousegases/biofuels/>). Unilever and others are also significantly diminishing their water consumption, attempting to bring in more small farmers and distributors in their supply chains, and so on.

Under this light, businesses do seem to, at least, have become aware of their responsibility towards more sustainable production practices. But what is happening at the other end, namely, that of consumers? Our research is consistently showing that Brazilian domestic consumption practices – such as eating and cooking, personal hygiene, cleaning, and others – are still far from sustainable; in fact, many are deeply detrimental to the environment. For example, previous research by Barbosa (2002) on low-income and middle-class households

has shown that Brazilian cleansing and hygiene practices operate according to a logic of pollution whereby different types of clothing must be segregated in washing, which greatly increases water, electricity, and soap consumption. Barbosa's research on food habits has uncovered a similar logic, one based on "new" foods, "fresh cooking," and persistent washing, that severely impairs reducing, reusing and recycling of food and utensils (2011). And Veloso's study of electricity use in the home (2011) has shown that a steep rise in gadgets presumably purchased to "facilitate" cooking, food storage, and cooling has made electricity usage less, not more efficient, because a variety of gadgets remain on all the time and are not used to their full capacity.

In this paper, we start with some quantitative data on perceptions of sustainability to show that the very concept is still far from prevalent in Brazilians' understandings. We then move on to present and discuss qualitative data on domestic practices and their environmental implications. We show that deeply internalized cultural logics actually prevent the easy dissemination of more sustainable practices linked to cleaning, eating, cooking, and so on. This, of course, poses the question of how to develop a more sustainable cultural logic among Brazilians. We thus use the Brazilian case to suggest that sustainability studies should refocus their attention towards routine, domestic practices, since only by understanding their logics can one hope to raise individuals' awareness and develop more sustainable practices. Changing such habits, however, may be difficult because they are based on cultural assumptions and principles upon which one never consciously reflects: they are part of everyday "habitus" and act like second nature.

2 General Consumer Views on Sustainability

In order to assess a population's views on, and concerns over, sustainability, the important questions are: how familiar are individuals with the current socio-environmental crisis, and are they incorporating a more sustainable worldview? Further, do consumers know what "responsible consumption" means, and are they effectively adopting specific actions in their quotidian lives? To answer these and other questions, Barbosa (2011) has conducted quantitative research with 3,000 respondents. The data has shown the following:

When asked whether they "know very well," "know well," "know a little," "have heard of," or "have never heard of" key concepts in sustainability discourses – such as "quality/certification seal," "fair trade," "transgenic," "sustainable," "environment-friendly," or "carbon emissions" – none of the proposed concepts is known "very well" by more than 8% of respondents, with "fair trade" being the least well known (only 1%). When one combines these "know very well" with the "know well" answers, percentages increase only slightly, never topping 30% even for the best known concepts: "quality/certification seal" (30%), "sustainability" (25%), "enriched" (24%) and "organic" (24%). Interestingly, three of those concepts are usually related to food consumption, indicating that sustainability is entering Brazilian homes via immediate concerns with nourishment and the body.

Social class is also important: while 43% of respondents belonging to the lower-middle class and to the lower classes said they do not know what sustainability is, upper-class respondents have a broader understanding on sustainability as including "preserving the planet" (61%), "garbage recycling" (27%), "producing what is necessary without excess" (24%), or "reducing energy consumption" (19%). On the other hand, questions about one's own efforts, such as reducing waste or reusing foods, are more cited by the poorer respondents: 30% of upper class respondents say they never reuse foods, while 40% of lower class respondents say they always reuse them. As with the concept of sustainability itself, this suggests that one's own engagement is linked to basic, concrete necessities: wealthier Brazilians do not see the need to reuse foods since they can afford to buy what they want when they want it, while the poor have long learned to reuse and recycle as intrinsic to everyday living.

A final and equally significant variable is age. First, the kinds of sustainability practiced by younger and older respondents vary greatly: those between 17 and 24 use more recyclable packaging, while those between 55 and 65 are more concerned with reducing energy consumption, closing faucets while brushing their teeth, and not depositing oil in the kitchen sink. When one considers only age and disregards class, those between 41 and 65 reveal a wider range of changing habits: 67% say they have reduced energy consumption at home, 48% say they only buy energy-efficient home appliances, and 26% say they reuse foods.

Given that so much of environmental and sustainability discourse targets the socialization of children and youth towards a sustainable “habitus,” these findings may appear counter-intuitive. But, again, the explanation may lie in concrete, everyday concerns: in Brazil only the minority of youth between 17 and 24 live alone and are responsible for their own expenses; most still live with their parents and do not help with household expenses. So, they do not feel they need to worry about reducing waste or energy consumption: it is their parents who pay the bills and are therefore more preoccupied with sustainability. On the other hand, qualitative data suggest that even in the domestic realm the logics are still heavily marked by “non-sustainability.” This is the question we turn to now.

3 Everyday Domestic “Non-sustainability”

Though cleaning, hygiene, and utensil use have certainly not been central themes in anthropology, sociology, or history, there has been some interest in them since at least Elias’ (1982) groundbreaking work on the “civilizing process” that forever altered Western domesticity through new body practices and etiquette that included cleanliness and hygiene. This literature has grown to comprise, for example, studies on the symbolic significance of cleaning and personal toilet by Cowan (1983) and Forty (1986), or Tomes’ study on the introduction of new technologies and industrial products for cleaning (1999). Along similar lines, Synnot (1993) has studied the construction of a culture of de- and re-odorization of everyday modern life. In the Brazilian canon, cultural historian Gilberto Freyre (2006) placed domestic habits at the center of Brazilian cultural identity: since very early on, and differently from Europe, bodily cleanliness and hygiene – initially “copied” from indigenous peoples who practiced multiple daily bathing – were key markers of distinction and status for the Portuguese-Brazilian nobility. Such habits were then disseminated through all classes until becoming a “second nature” for most Brazilians.

As for food and cooking, numerous studies have placed them at the center of studies on Western society. Scholars have thus investigated, for example, our cultural systems of food classification and meal structure (such as Barbosa (2009)), a specific food’s centrality in a westernized world system, as in Mintz (1986), or food and globalization, as in Wilk (1999). Still, the concreteness of cooking as a material practice, and its importance in the making of domesticity, has more often been examined in non-Western contexts (for example, in Weiss (1996)).

With respect to utensil and electricity use, sociologist Elizabeth Shove and others have been making an effort to uncover the underlying logics of everyday domestic habits, their links to changing notions of domesticity, and their impact on the environment – by investigating how the introduction of plastic utensils have redesigned everyday life by making it “easier” and “quieter” but less sustainable (2007), and how Western contemporary notions of comfort and cleanliness were built upon deeply unsustainable and energy-inefficient habits such as daily showers (2003).

3.1 Cleaning in Brazil

In a series of works based on ethnographic research with women from different class backgrounds and regions, Barbosa has explored the cultural meanings of cleanliness in Brazil (see, for example, 2004 and 2007). Basically, there are two types of cleaning in a typical Brazilian home: routine, everyday cleaning and heavy cleaning (called “faxina”), which must take place once every week, or at least every other week. Routine cleaning means removing what is termed “first sight” (apparent) dirt in each and every room, since all rooms must be cleaned daily. The “faxina” means removing “hidden” (ingrained) dirt behind doors, furniture, walls, frames, carpets and rugs, window glasses, and so on.

In both cases, cleaning is based on a logic of practice that determines what kind of dirt will be removed in what way; this depends on the extent of the “threat” and the risk of pollution that each specific dirt allegedly brings into the home. Dust, for example, is always threatening in that it is thought to denounce the presence of the outside world in the inside world and, since it is easily perceived by people, it can potentially damage the reputation of maids and housewives. Hence, any items of wood (such as floorboards or furniture) or glass (such as table tops, bedside tables, and so on) must be dusted and scrubbed until the last trace of not only dust, but also human manipulation (fingerprints, hands) and stains has been removed.

This, quite obviously, demands specific gadgets and utensils (vacuum cleaners, brooms, dusters, mops) and products (all-purpose cleaners, alcohol); some of those use a lot of electricity, others are partially made of plastic, while the cleaning products are potentially damaging to the environment. The fact that, besides dusting, sweeping and vacuuming people also often use a wet cloth to remove the final traces of dirt adds yet another dimension to the unsustainability of such cleaning, since it also requires the use of water.

Water, in fact, is central to Brazilian cleaning practices, especially in bathrooms and kitchens, but also on sideways and, in the case of one-family houses, even outside walls and gates: everything must be washed with generous amounts of “clean” water – importantly, it is always fresh, clean, treated water (never recycled from some other use) that is used, even to wash sideways. In bathrooms and kitchens, where dirt is thought to be especially “dangerous,” water is the main cleaning item, since only water is thought to thoroughly remove everything from grease to germs. Industrial products are considered merely “good helpers” in cleaning; they are never substitutes for water. To clean based only on industrial products is considered “dirty cleaning: everything, from floors and walls to utensils, from mops to wiping cloths to scrubs and sponges, must be washed; it is a purification ritual.

Interestingly, it is a common ambition of the poor to pave their entire kitchens and bathrooms with tiles. As one thirty-year-old housewife living in a slum put it, “It is wonderful to have a kitchen and a bathroom with the tiles all shining. It is easier to clean. I will use the rubber hose to wash everything.” As this example shows, “shine” is central to the cleaning process, also because it is associated with the purity ascribed to water. In the kitchen, for example, pots and pans must always shine, as do floors, cabinets, tiles, glasses and crockery. It is a criterion for evaluating people’s cleaning standards, even for the very poor: in their case, shining kitchen utensils – achieved after long and arduous scrubbing with a metal sponge and huge amounts of water – incite the common saying that one is “poor but clean.”

This saying also points to centrality of cleanliness as a sign of personal value and, hence, as a fundamental cultural logic in Brazilian society. This cleaning is both more extensive – in that both its forms must take place very frequently – and intensive – in that it entails multiple repetitions, intensive electricity use, and massive amounts of clean water – than perhaps in other societies. Given that these are ingrained, cultural habits that, as Bourdieu (1977) would have it, “go without saying,” for they are part of the common sense world, the implications for domestic sustainability are quite serious. When cleaning is understood as something that must be done very often, very profoundly, when it is equated to “washing,” and when it is such a crucial part of domestic identity, changing such habits will require more than simply environmental awareness campaigns or the dissemination of the concept of “sustainability:”

people may understand such concepts in a superficial way, but their ingrained habits will tell them to proceed otherwise.

3.2 Cooking Practices

Barbosa (2011) has conducted long-term research on food and eating habits throughout Brazil, illuminating a few key points, such as how tremendously homogeneous Brazilian eating practices are, even though this is such a large and diverse country: over 95% of Brazilians of all classes eat bread, butter and coffee for breakfast, and rice, beans and some variety of meat for lunch. She has also uncovered the prevalence of “real” cooked foods (as opposed to “snacks” such as sandwiches) as integral to the day’s main meal (lunch): regardless of where it is eaten, whether at home or in restaurants, “lunch” ideally equals a warm plate of freshly-cooked food made from scratch.

Of course, processed foods are also, gradually, being incorporated into families’ domestic routines. But, so far, they do not appear to have cancelled this perceived need for at least one fresh, warm meal per day: breakfast “on the go” – packaged, processed foods such as cookies, boxed or bottled juices or milks, and so on – is increasingly common, especially among youth, and purchases of processed foods are also on the rise, especially for the evening meals which are, traditionally, less substantial than lunch.

In terms of meal organization, in Brazil (perhaps more so than in other contexts), it is assumed that at least one daily meal (freshly cooked, meaning that it is not based on reused foods) must be shared by all family members, even on weekdays but especially on weekends. On weekends, the main difference is that meals – especially Sunday lunch – must be more elaborate, so while weekday meals usually consist of the rice, beans and meat described above, weekend meals entail more effort on the part of the cook. Not only are such meals expected to be home cooked, but their preparation is more complex – an intricate meat or fish recipe, perhaps, or homemade pasta. Usually, too, this meal entails more dishes than the weekday meals: traditionally, there is a rice dish, one or two meat (or fish) dishes, a salad, one or two other side dishes, and at least one desert – all, ideally, made from scratch. Even though quantities exceed what is consumed, leftovers are rarely re-used, since food is assumed to only taste good when it is fresh.

Somewhat similar to the logic of cleaning, such cooking is both extensive and intensive. It is extensive in that food must be cooked every day, for eating leftovers, freezing cooked food for later consumption, and reusing foods for other meals are all inconsistent with a “real” meal. Very rarely will a family content itself, say, with a dinner plate that repeats the midday meal, and reusing foods (chopping up a pot roast to make a stew) is almost a form of “cheating.” Cooking is also intensive, based on making several different dishes per meal cooked with several “special” gadgets and utensils: special pressure cookers for the ubiquitous beans, various other pots and pans for specific dishes, not to be reused for others (a special pot for rice, or Sunday’s “flan pan”), and various spoons and other gadgets. None must be mixed, all must be kept (and used) apart, and all are submitted to the cleaning procedures outlined above – not to mention that dishes must be done immediately after a meal has been eaten, several times a day: everything used for that meal must be washed, scrubbed, dried, and stored right away, for dirty dishes and other utensils are considered “polluting.”

Veloso’s research (2011) among lower-middle class Brazilians has uncovered yet other aspects of the logic of cooking. One is that, for this group, custom still mandates that shopping be done piecemeal rather than weekly or monthly. This is not solely because of budget restrictions, but mainly because only freshly purchased foods (including staples such as rice or pasta) are thought to taste good. In this research, many a lower-income household was visited where new fitted kitchen cabinets and brand-new double-door refrigerators and

freezers were proudly shown off – all empty except for maybe a sack of beans and a carton of milk in the cabinet and a pot of beans and some rice in the fridge. Reasons given by interviewees were always that “you have to buy and cook food every day, otherwise it doesn’t taste good.”

This logic of freshness, however, is being increasingly mixed, for this group, with an opposite logic whereby packaged, processed foods – once “luxuries” reserved for the better-off – are considered “essential,” “high quality,” and “a normal part of life today.” Their consumption is rising steeply, as Veloso (2011) has shown, as a result of a growing “new middle class” in Brazil: over 30 million formerly poor people now able to indulge in middle-class consumption patterns. These mixed logics have important implications for domestic sustainability: cooking every day and buying new, fresh food every day is still valued, yet at the same time people are buying more processed food as well. Often, they do not even use the fresh food supplies they bought, because they choose to eat the packaged foods which are seen as “more prestigious.” In fact, being able to afford squandering food is also a sign of distinction: filling a plate with more food than one can eat and throwing away the leftovers, having more food at home than can be eaten so that it goes bad and needs to be thrown away, and so on. Such mixed logics greatly increases domestic waste on both ends: uneaten food and used packages.

In fact, Barbosa’s and Veloso’s work complement each other in that they reveal a deeply unsustainable logic of cooking and eating that, increasingly, is encompassing all classes. Cooking every day and for every meal requires massive amounts of gas (gas ovens are the norm in Brazil), various uses of electricity (kitchen lights, appliances such as blenders, juicers, beaters and so on – all of which are considered “essential” for “proper” cooking), and water (for, besides the water used for cooking, everything must be washed repeatedly and thoroughly). Not reusing food means that a lot of it goes bad and turns into waste. And combining fresh cooking with packaged foods basically doubles both the use of resources (gas, electricity, and so on) and waste production – which, in turn, poses the additional problem that waste recycling is still relatively incipient in Brazil, even for the upper classes.

3.3 General Electricity Usage

Electricity usage is so significant to understand the point we are trying to make – that knowing about sustainability and practicing it are two very different logics – that it merits additional commentary. Veloso (2011) has conducted research on domestic consumption patterns of this so-called “new middle class,” especially in relation to technology and appliances for the home. For example, a typical “new middle class” living room generally includes, besides the furniture, at least, one television rack complete with a 42” flat-screen television, a separate, smaller rack with two videogames and a sound system on it, an air conditioner and a ceiling fan, and perhaps other, smaller fans for “personal” use. Then, there will be one or more children’s rooms with, besides the furniture, also a computer table with a desktop computer permanently left on, monitor, printer, sound boxes, a smaller television set mounted on a wall, another DVD player, one or two videogame consoles, several videogames, a ceiling fan, and perhaps another air conditioner. The master bedroom is not very different: though it probably lacks the videogames, it will have its own DVD player and a rack filled with DVDs, plus a sound system and another rack for the CDs, plus the usual television set mounted on the wall, plus a ceiling fan and air conditioner.

This is the general logic in most such lower-class homes: piling up as much “stuff” as could possibly fit in cramped spaces, “duplicates” (more than one of each object) being increasingly common. Kitchens and service areas also tend to be filled to capacity with all sorts of appliances, from the much-coveted “double-door” refrigerators to another separate freezer (space and budget permitting), to microwave ovens, sandwich makers, different kinds of blenders and food processors, vacuum cleaners, often a smaller television set on the kitchen table – “to watch the *novelas* as I cook,” one woman explained.

Even more interesting than this abundance of “stuff” is the use to which these objects are put. Refrigerators and freezers are nearly empty, as mentioned above, freezers often carry only ice cubes, and all kinds of cooking appliances are scattered around, most plugged in even when not in use. As for electronic appliances, all tend to be permanently plugged in, and many are always left on even when no one is in the room: it is customary to leave on both fans and air conditioners even when residents are not at home (to “cool the air” for when they do come home), and the various television sets are also often left on even when no one is watching them. Television, in fact, is especially interesting: the ubiquitous expensive, 42” flat screen television set, intended to provide a movie-like experience, is mostly used to watch *novelas* on open channels. And, since *novela*-watching is a family activity in Brazil, family members will gather around the living room television all evening long, watching one soap after the other, oblivious to their own (turned on) sets in their own rooms.

Importantly, for such lower-middle-class homes, electricity frequently comes “for free:” they do not pay for it since they use illegal electricity cables. The same goes for cable television and Internet connections: most if not all homes rely on “pirated,” illegal, television cables and internet connections that come at a low cost or no cost at all. This, of course, is what makes it so easy to leave everything on simultaneously even when appliances are not in use. By the same logic, it is possible to understand why the middle and upper classes are more committed to reducing electricity consumption in their homes: most commonly, they do pay for their electricity, cable television, and Internet, so they feel the difference in their own pockets. Once again, the argument about the concreteness of sustainability concerns and practices stands: what our data shows is that, the closer to home – in a very literal sense – the greater the concern with sustainability.

4 Overall conclusion

We have focused here on the taken-for-grantedness of such habits and their implications for developing a true culture of sustainability in Brazil. We have shown that cleaning, cooking, and electricity usage as commonly practiced in Brazil are oriented towards certain cultural logics that have negative impacts on the environment: their consumption of resources is both intensive and extensive; they use many resources and repeatedly so, and when new practices are introduced, more often than not they increase, rather than decrease, energy consumption and waste production. Further, because these practices are deeply tied to moral valuations (the “good housewife,” for example) and understood as signs of distinction (one becomes “less poor” the cleaner one is), this reinforces the cultural need for sticking to these same, environmentally-unsound practices. However, given that, as our quantitative data show, concerns with sustainability are, gradually yet slowly, reaching popular perceptions and discourses, the question now is, how long will it take for such discursive understandings to be more fully translated into more sustainable modes of domestic consumption?

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