

# Self-attribution of responsibility: consumers of organic foods in a certified street market in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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This study aims to contribute to the analyses of consumption, and food consumption in particular, as a political act, by emphasizing the process of self-attribution of responsibility by consumers involved in organic food consumption at an organic certified street market in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Conducted from the perspective of sociological and anthropological consumption theories, in addition to risk sociology and the theory of reflexive modernization, this study concluded that these consumers act and participate socially through “responsible consumption” instead of the collective forms of political participation through institutionalized social movements. Even though there is a diversity of values and practices, these consumers seem to have in common (1) a mistrust in other social agents and (2) the trust in the importance and effectiveness of their actions.

KEYWORDS: self-attribution of responsibility, environmentalization of consumption, political consumption, organic food.

## INTRODUCTION: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE “RESPONSIBLE CONSUMER”

This study aims to contribute to the comprehension of “environmentalization and politicization of consumption”, i.e., perceiving and using<sup>1</sup> consumption practices as a means to materialize environmental and social values and

1 The social use of consumption is understood as the many functions and uses that consumption can have, such as material and symbolic reproduction; construction, strengthening and determination of identities; social distinction; materialization of values; belonging; resistance and hostility; sociability. Recently, a new social use of consumption seems to be under the spotlight: the participation in the public sphere and the political action through responsible consumption practices.

commitments, as described by Gabriel and Lang (1995), Halkier (1999), Halkier and Holm (2008), Goodman and DuPuis (2002), Micheletti (2003), Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti (2005) and Portilho (2005).

The “environmentalization and politicization of consumption” can be seen as part of a larger process of environmentalization of society in which different segments of society as well as different scientific areas have been incorporating and re-signifying the environmentalist set of ideas in different paces and to various extents.

Leis (1999) identifies a new social segment adhering to environmental concerns in each passing decade: in the 1950s, these concerns were restricted to the scientific area (mainly the natural sciences) and, in the 1960s, the social movements appear; from the 1970s on, the governmental sector starts to play a role, and, in the 1980s, environmentalism reaches the economic sectors, consolidating itself in the 1990s. As previously shown (Portilho 2005), the concern about the environmental impacts of the standards and levels of consumption gained momentum in the 1990s, when a change in the discourse pertaining to the environmental issue seems to have taken place – from concerns about “environmental problems related to production” to concerns about “environmental problems related to consumption”.

As a result of this discourse change, new responsible consumption movements have appeared that give the consumer the leading role. As such these active consumers are less alienated and manipulated, which enables them to be important and decisive social actors. As a result, public participation and political action can also be experienced through consumption, instead of only through more traditional and collective forms of participation (political parties, unions, elections, demonstrations, institutionalized social movements, etc.).

These responsible consumption practices, although apparently irrelevant and ineffective in face of the magnitude and complexity of contemporary environmental problems, are increasingly perceived, stimulated and used by individuals, social movements, governments, media, and companies as a strategy to face the environmental crisis. More than point at its limitations and possibilities, as broadly discussed in a previous study (Portilho 2005), this article aims to contribute to the understanding of the responsibility self-attribution processes by consumers.

Thus, a new category has been created: the “responsible consumer”. Although hard to define and conceptualize empirically (Halkier and Holm 2008), this new category encompasses (1) a deep involvement with social and environmental issues; (2) a definition of the consumer as an important social actor; and (3) a self-attribution of duties and responsibilities. Above all, the “responsible consumer” has been defined as one who truly dedicates himself to activities conceived by him to be environmentally and socially responsible and one who has the intention of changing social life through these activities.

The phenomenon of responsible consumption can be analyzed using the theoretical framework of the new social and economical movements, as proposed by Gendron, Bisailon and Otero (2006). For these authors, in the context of great global transformation (including the deregulation and globalization of markets, the transnationalization of social actors and the centrality of consumption), many social movements have changed their focus and their demands and strategies, resulting in their seeking new innovative forms of political action aimed at re-appropriating the economy through their own values and emphasizing the use of economic mechanisms to attain social goals. In this context, the market, more than the state, becomes the central goal and stage of this movement, which organizes alternative trade networks, proposes alternative labeling systems, sets new rules for conventional trade, and establishes political action campaigns through consumption practices (Wilkinson 2006). These market-oriented movements aim to redefine the relationship between producer and consumer. As such, the politicization of consumption is crucial to these authors.

Nevertheless, I shall not consider in this article the social movements organized around responsible consumption proposals, which is an issue still to be reviewed and consistently analyzed in Brazil within the theoretical tradition of social movements. Conversely, this study aims at analyzing ordinary consumers (Halkier and Holm 2008), or the “non-organized” and diffusely politicized social actors who are somewhere between anonymity and the will to be politically active, between the daily concerns of private life and the desire to act in a broader public sphere, and who are bargaining the costs and benefits of their actions (Paavola 2001; Portilho 2005). These are people who use consumption as a form of political action (for many reasons) and who feign lack of interest in taking part in institutionalized movements, explicitly avoiding this participation.

Unlike some current interpretations, I do not consider consumers as atomized, fragmented, hedonistic, and self-interested individuals. Even considering that it is not possible to see the consumers analyzed in this study as an organized social group, it is easy to verify that they share a set of discourses, practices, skills, and worldviews related to a certain lifestyle, a way of inhabiting the world and of using natural resources (Portilho 2009a, 2009b). In addition to organized social movements, this study aims at analyzing the use of consumption as an individualized political practice (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005). It is, as we shall see, a type of innovative and non-institutionalized political action that, unlike the privatization of politics, can be understood as a politicization of private life, expanding the space devoted to politics.

Concerning the phenomenon of consumption politicization, authors such as Halkier and Holm (2008) and Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti (2005) emphasize the consumer’s adherence to two sets of consumption activities – boycotts

and boycotts. In the first case, consumers refuse to buy products and services due to social or environmental issues. In the second, consumers intentionally choose socially and environmentally friendly products and services. Nevertheless, considering the Brazilian context, where boycott and buycott are not so common, it is necessary to take into consideration household consumption activities, such as electricity and water use and recyclable waste separation (as often mentioned in the increasingly frequent sustainable consumption education programs).

In Brazil, the materialization of environmental and social values and concerns in practices of “responsible consumption” is normally interpreted as an individualistic and depoliticized solution, since it would strengthen market mechanisms to face collective issues, thus favoring the decline of the public sphere. Additionally, it is usually analyzed as transference of responsibility from the state and the market to the individual consumer, lightening their load of responsibility. According to these analyses, governments and companies encourage consumers to materialize their values and concerns for the environment through the strategy of “voting with their wallet” instead of traditional political actions, such as voting, demonstrations and protests. Thus, the responsibility of the consumer would be nothing but a false environmental awareness produced by the new right wing, perpetuating some of their myths, such as the weakness of state regulation and the denial of genuine collective identity (Pepper 1999).

The problem of these approaches is that they adopt a universalizing theoretical perspective on consumption without distinguishing its various meanings and social uses among different social groups and they also neglect how social agents perceive their own actions (Barbosa 2004).

Nevertheless, since economic resources are poorly distributed in society, this “wallet participation” is obviously problematic and limited. However, Halkier (1999) reminds us that the meanings and possibilities of participation in organized political activities through the conventional channel of “voice” are also unevenly distributed among social groups and that emphasis on action through daily consumption activities could raise groups of citizens without political resources or unwilling to participate in the public sphere.

Instead of analyzing the possible transference of responsibility, it seems to me that one accurate method to understand and explain responsible consumption is to analyze, through empirical data, the process of self-attribution of responsibilities by consumers who engage themselves in this practice. This approach assumes that responsible consumption can be perceived and used as a real and effective political tool (instead of a depoliticization move), strengthening individual interest and participation in the public sphere as part of a new culture of political participation.

When one considers the politicization of consumption, one sees that the concept of consumption is broader than the approaches that automatically

identify it as a synonym of consumerism, materialism, individualism and conspicuous consumption. Miller (2002) shows that consumption and the act of buying are usually associated with compulsively spending large amounts of money on unnecessary and superfluous goods. He also says that although this happens in some shopping malls, the act of shopping cannot be analyzed in an universalized way, removed from its cultural context. A sort of Western myth could also contribute to representing ourselves as a society of unlimited desires, part of an idealized opposition between the “authenticity of savage noblemen” and our inauthentic shallowness. Miller suggests we understand consumption mainly as the daily purchase of goods necessary to the material and symbolical reproduction of any society.

Regardless of these theoretical debates and similarly to what is happening in central countries, the environmentalization and politicization of consumption through strategies such as “responsible consumption” is also spreading in Brazil. In this country, we can see (1) NGOs created specifically to deal with this issue; (2) news about “responsible consumption” constantly published in mass media; (3) programs to provide “education for conscious consumption” offered by governments, companies, and NGOs; and (4) many Brazilian social movements whose main political strategy is directed to the market, such as solidarity economy, fair trade, and slow food.

In this context of environmentalization and politicization of consumption, the act of buying would be understood as a means to materialize and grant objectivity to political, moral, and environmental values. Buying is also understood as one of the primary means to exercise solidarity and the ethics of responsibility, as participating individuals feel they are directly responsible for improving their own life, the environment, and the lives of others.

The self-attribution of responsibilities has been analyzed specifically on what concerns the consumption of organic foods.<sup>2</sup> This subject was chosen due to its significant political visibility considering the perception of social, environmental, and health risks of conventional agriculture and processed foods. It is important to emphasize some recent changes in the field of feeding and eating habits. Studies in this area have come to include not only nutritional, sanitary, symbolic, social, and historical analysis, but also an ethical, political, and ideological dimension relating food consumption habits and places

2 The agro-food literature shows an intensive debate about the paradoxes of organic agriculture (Campbell and Liepins 2001; Wilkinson 2006; Guthman 2001; Reynolds 2004). In Brazil, the alternative agriculture movement is still highly debated, mainly addressing issues as the construction and normalization of the organic food market, the relations between producers and consumers, and the public policies of this market (Fonseca 2005; Naves 2008; Darolt 2005). However, this article will not analyze this debate, since our goal is to analyze discourses and practices of organic food consumers who, most of the times, do not take part in these debates, and see organic food as an ethical and sustainable way of producing food (Goodman and Goodman 2001).

to purchase and prepare foods to environmental conservation and to the solidarity with small local producers (Goodman and Goodman 2001; Lien and Nerlich 2006; Barbosa 2007; Halkier and Holm 2008). In this context, food choices would expand past the individual sphere (individual preferences, cultural habits, nutritional and medical recommendations, healthcare) and would enter the realm of politics and ethics, seeking to take responsibility for the environmental and social consequences of daily choices.

The consumption of organic foods shall be considered here as a nutritional ideology, i.e., a symbolic and cognitive system that defines the qualities and attributes of foods, whether they should or should not be consumed. Therefore, not everything that could be eaten or considered as food is seen as “the ideal food” (Menasche 2004; Barbosa 2009). The consumption of organic foods as a nutritional ideology is seen as a combination of medical and nutritional recommendations, and ethical, ideological, political and environmental values disseminated as an answer to the risks of modern eating habits and as a materialization of cosmologies and lifestyles. Therefore, it is part of a feeling of belonging to an “imaginary” community (Halkier 1999) that has a similar lifestyle and expresses its identity, values, utopias, and way to inhabit the world through this lifestyle.

The Feira Orgânica e Cultural da Glória (Glória Organic and Cultural Farmer’s Market)<sup>3</sup> takes place every Saturday morning in the city of Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, and was chosen as the fieldwork setting for this study. I visited this street market weekly during the second semester of 2007 and the first semester of 2008 and conducted a qualitative research using the following data collection methods: participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured qualitative interviews, and follow-up on some of the regular consumers during their weekly grocery shopping. For Miller (2002) it is very important to observe the interviewed while they purchase so that we can compare their actual behavior with their discourse about the shopping.

The interviewees were selected according to the profile found in previous studies (Instituto Gallup 1996; Cerveira and Castro 1999; Rucinski and Brandenburg 2002; Fonseca 2005): middle- or upper-middle-class women, mostly married with children, from urban areas, between 30 and 50 years old, with good educational level. I personally selected the women interviewed during the time I spent in Feira da Glória. Interviews were about one hour long and were conducted in the homes of the women interviewed, except one that was conducted at her workplace. The questions asked focused the beginning of the consumption of organic foods; what influenced this choice; how they obtained information about the subject; what were their motivations; how

3 Despite the increase in the consumption of organic foods in Brazil (Fonseca 2005), Feira da Glória still is the only certified organic farmer’s market in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

they perceived healthy eating habits, eating restrictions, and risks; what were the types of products purchased at the market; how much they trusted the products purchased; price; how does Feira da Glória compare to other places where you can buy organic foods; environmental and social concerns; political participation. The five women I interviewed were between 25 and 70 years old and had different occupations: graduate student, elementary school teacher, geologist, pottery maker and retired. Except one, all live in neighborhoods close to Feira da Glória. All of them have been going to Feira da Glória for at least five years and have been eating organic foods, with different adherence levels, for more than ten years. Nevertheless, they do not consider themselves to be “radicals” or “fundamentalists”. All of them eat red meat, even though all claim to avoid it.

#### SELF-ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The use of consumption as political action can be understood by analyzing a broader phenomenon that points in the direction of a change in contemporary political mobilization, in which actions would tend to the individual sphere. Alexander (1995) explains this phenomenon by the deterioration of both radical-collective actions that prevailed until late 1970s and post-modern theories of the fragmentation of the individual, and also by the end of the great revolutionary narratives that prevailed in the 1980s. Contemporary social theories (termed neo-modern theories by Alexander) identify a certain deflation of radical-collective movements that would be substituted by romantic-individualistic actions in private life, which are more realistic and pragmatic. This would come to emphasize the action of real individuals and not of historical collective subjects (nation, social class, social movements). Therefore, the current narratives – emancipating, romantic and heroic – are connected to a wide range of daily and individual actions.

Authors such as Eden (1993) and Herculano (1995) explain the self-attribution of responsibilities of environmental activists using the hero archetype: “the historical being who represents the spirit and is able to see the truth of his time” (Herculano 1995). Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, I did not consider the behavior of environmental activists as an object in this study, but instead focused on that of “ordinary” consumers, many of whom refuse to play the role of activist and to participate in institutionalized movements. These consumers seem to adopt a sort of “heroic” attitude, even though they do not identify themselves as activists or environmentalists.

Some passages of the interviews point in this direction, showing, on the one hand, a mistrust in collective actions and institutionalized movements and, on the other hand, dedication and sometimes enthusiasm and devotion to typical actions of political consumption:

I do not [participate in other actions for the environment], I do not like to... I do not trust NGOs. I have never been an activist, never have I been involved in demonstrations, this sort of thing, I am not interested in these things. At home I separate the garbage, but I do not know if it is collected for recycling by the garbage collection company. We are careful not to waste water or electricity. We do not use the car much... we only have one car, we use ethanol because it is cheaper and less of a pollutant. My husband wanted to buy another car, but I did not want to. So we take turns, one drives and the other takes the bus or the subway.

I never made donations [to NGOs or environmentalist associations], or participated in demonstrations, campaigns, protests [for the environment]. But I do separate the garbage. The truck comes every Friday to collect recyclables...

Collective action is harder... I would have to join other people...

I never joined any NGO... but I really support them... [laughs]

Despite the mistrust, discredit, or lack of interest for collective actions seen in the interviews, the subjects interviewed strongly believe in their responsibility and in the role consumers play; they believe in the possibility of opposing the establishment, affirming themselves as active individuals who can choose and cause changes. Thus, consumption practices seem to be construed as a favorable field of action to the interviewed subjects:

I think consumption is a powerful weapon. So if you choose to consume consciously, you can make quite a difference in people's lives, especially for those closer to you. It is not that you will not make a big difference in the life of a child working for ten cents a day in a pirate factory in China. Of course, you can refrain from buying pirate [products] because of that. But I think that... within your state, especially... if you consume local products, you will avoid use of fuel for food transportation, you will help people who live in your state, you will generate income within the state, you will bring tax money for your state, you will bring investments to your state. I think this improves everybody's lives...

If we consumed more consciously, if we invested our money in things that would generate income for those in need instead of buying, say, two thousand dollar dresses by Jean Paul Gaultier, the world would be a better place, just to use a cliché...



The consumer is the main [responsible], I think that consumption ends up dictating policies. For instance, if everybody stopped buying conventional products people would have to produce organics. It is like that story of the bus boycott, so I can't sit in the front? I have to sit in the back? Then I am not going, and everybody stopped taking the bus. And what happened? They changed the law and now everybody can sit anywhere. I think the consumer is the most important.<sup>4</sup>

And it is something recent, I don't remember having seen companies concerned with being environmentally correct in my teenage years. And nowadays it is very common. I believe it is a result of consumer's pressure. I believe consumers make a difference.

If each one does their share... I believe consumers have an important role... there are concrete consequences to the improvement of the environment.

Oh, I believe [organic food] is the salvation of our world, right? Eating organics is a way... a very interesting purpose.

All of my actions are for a greater world... I recycle...

These testimonies exemplify what Canclini calls "opposition consumer" or what Gabriel and Lang (1995) call "citizen-consumer". Regardless the constraints to consumption by social, moral and economic context and beyond the debate around structure versus agency, the surveyed seem to be in search of a way to increase their autonomy and participation in the collective sphere, retaking for themselves knowledge and competency once lost to experts (Halkier 1999).

The self-attribution of responsibilities may also be understood as the consequence of some factors that have transformed local practices and social experiences in the last four or five decades, such as globalization, detraditionalization, and social reflexivity. Giddens (1994: 13) underlines that our daily activities are increasingly influenced by events that take place on the other side of the world. In an opposite way, habits from local life styles became globally determinative.

In the social order, which he calls post-traditional, we have lost the references given by traditions and have to decide and choose, by ourselves, as individuals and collective humanity, how to live and organize our lives. Therefore, individuals need to become used to reflect on and select the information about

4 Reference to the famous bus boycott in the United States in the 1950s.

all regular aspects of daily life and make decisions having these reflections and knowledge as a foundation. When incorporating social reflexivity, the self-attribution of responsibilities could be interpreted as an important way to renew the contemporary political action. The relative growth of consumers' freedom of choice is connected to a search for emancipation, personal identity and autonomy in the private realm, pointing to new ways of political action.

There is no linear or simple connection between exercising political consumption and gaining emancipation, empowerment, and freedom. However, for Giddens (1994), emancipation means freedom in many senses: regarding tradition, shackles from the past, religious dogmas, arbitrary power, and poverty restrictions. His concept of emancipatory policy is therefore a way to build life opportunities and autonomy in actions. After the phenomenon of detraditionalization and the disappearance of nature, diagnosed by Giddens (1994), new concerns are aggregated to emancipatory policies, giving way to the so-called policies of life, which point to a pattern of engagement related to the struggles of how we should live, as individuals and as humanity, in a world that used to be determined by tradition and nature and now finds itself increasingly submitted to human decisions.

In a similar way, Beck (1997) emphasizes that as a counterpart to the lack of belief in traditional political institutions (parties, unions and social movements), a non-institutional politics is reborn, in which different social areas come to be a new political culture, which he refers to as sub-politics. Therefore, if the politics concept meant leaving the private sphere to dedicate oneself to politics in classic modernity, there is now the need to allow the invasion of the political into the private arena, in such a way that experiences that were once considered a decline or death in politics can be rethought as political repositioning. This new quality of politics is strengthened precisely by the expansion of the ecological concern with the risks associated with technological development.

All of this can be seen as a way to not underestimate private life as a place to claim and struggle for rights and autonomy (Canclini 1996; Giddens 1994, 1997; Heller and Fehér 1988; Halkier 1999). Giddens (1997), for example, points to the need of a dialectic interaction between personal and collective dimensions, since private life is not a simple residual dimension of the collective, but an active sphere that compound reactions in such a way that the changes on the inside also affect the globalized institutions of modernity.

This possibility of reorganizing the public and private spheres opens new spaces for negotiation between the individual and the collective life and, in the process, broadens the ways to practice politics and to exist as a political figure.

The surveyed consumers showed a high level of interest and information about subjects such as food consumption, health, and the environment:

I am always looking for information about food. For example, if I'm reading a newspaper and I see something on food, I will stop to read it. Because it interests me.

Something I always see is where the product was manufactured. I always read labels. I always read them to see where it was manufactured, the chemicals and other ingredients, the gluten content...

The self-attribution of responsibilities can mean, thus, an expansion of the consumers' authority over their own life and their own body, since one decides to take for oneself knowledge and capabilities once lost to specialists. When realizing the meaning and the consequences of their actions upon the environment and other social groups, consumers may increase their feelings of citizenship and of belonging to an "imaginary community" (Halkier 1999) that helps to make their practices more useful and meaningful with regard to the improvement of the environment and social quality.

Consequently, when consumers deal with daily dilemmas related to the demands for environmental considerations about consumption, they are experiencing environmental and political conflicts. The characters and institutions involved in such conflicts should be responsible for different problems and solutions. This can be perceived with suspicion regarding the way companies act:

I don't believe it is their value [companies], it is not part of their ideology. They are going with the flow because it is a society demand. Society is valuing this. It is not their core value, you know. I believe they have another value. Profit. If they see something is profitable, they do it. For example, if you are an eco-boring and have to choose between two banks, one that reforests the Atlantic Forest and one that doesn't, you will chose the one that reforests. Therefore [the bank] is interested in profiting and targeting a specific consumer, who is only concerned with a specific issue.

I saw an ad [from a bank] on television: "have overdrafts and help reforest the Atlantic Forest". We see a lot of that recently. I think it's nice, but I'm suspicious about it. I believe it is something secondary for them [companies]. I believe it should be a priority to the government and to consumers. And then what ends up happening? Companies follow... I believe maybe that's what is going on. People become more environmentally responsible and then [companies] have to be as well.

I see it like this: it's trendy, eco-something... That isn't eco at all, is it? Environmental responsibility, social responsibility... Companies are doing

this but I believe it is secondary to them; they only do it because it is a trend.

The act of selecting and purchasing goods consequently cannot be understood as an individual and individualizing act. On the contrary, according to Miller (2002), consumption is related to two ways of alterity. In the first one, consumption expresses a relationship between the buyer and those for whom it is being bought, usually the family. In the second one, it expresses a cosmological relationship that transcends any immediate usefulness, because it takes on the form not of a subject or object, but of the values to which people would like to devote themselves to. Therefore, purchasing is to Miller an act of love and responsibility regarding family members. Hence, selecting goods is related to social relationships and to the most important values for the person in charge of this task. However, the author states that love should not be isolated as something opposite to broader social concerns. It is what allows us to expand the idea of responsibility to other social groups and to the abstract ideas of “world”, “nature” or “planet”.

Testimonies of surveyed consumers show this:

Instead of giving the money to a monoculture system, I will give money to the local farmer, who is poor and is there, supporting his family selling lettuce. I feel a lot happier and better by doing that. Knowing that I'm not filling the pockets of any capitalist, I am helping people survive of the land and not being forced to come to cities to be underemployed, have bad living conditions and problems. I know that by acting like this, consuming this way, I am helping them to support themselves in the field.

I think it is nice buying straight from the producer at Glória street market. I know I'm helping that producer.

I think all those who are there [in the street market] are much alike, with the same purpose... a better life, health and the world's health as well, right? I believe the world's health is very connected to the planet, right? Atmosphere, water, earth... organics don't pollute the earth, air and water, that's it.

Surely, the social context from which an individual comes, including its levels of income, education and social mobility, will stimulate or inhibit the self-attribution of responsibilities. Consequently, pro-environment behaviors would be particularly identified in privileged groups that have a broader scope of choices and few budgetary restrictions for themselves. That would allow a change in economic priorities, favoring the environmental aspects of choices,

making any personal financial sacrifice more bearable. However, socioeconomic factors alone are not seen as sufficient to explain the self-attribution of environmental responsibility.

In the case of the responsible consumers analyzed here, it is possible to see that this self-attribution of responsibilities appears to be related to the largest possibility of intentionality in choosing behaviors and to the identification of a moral obligation in certain actions, regardless of the perceived effect or the real impact of said actions. The social context of individuals affects their possibility of choosing certain behaviors, which are affected by knowledge about the consequences of that behavior and also whether other people or social characters are seen as equally responsible.

Schwartz (1998) suggests that self-attribution of responsibilities happens when there is a lack of other social agents who will take on the responsibility and/or when there is the individual possibility of choosing behavior.

I believe the [price] difference is less for me than it is for other people.

[What makes it harder is] the price. But I believe it is worth the investment. Because it is something different. The plant will grow with another...

I buy because I can. But it is hard for those who cannot buy these products; they have to buy the conventional ones. I believe it is worth the price because the product is so much better.

This price issue is a barrier for people to consume. Because the price variation between conventional and organic products is huge.

But in the survey made with the consumers at the Glória street market, I heard accounts that justify the option of consuming organic foods, although the price is high, as an “investment”, since they believe they will save on medication:

Even if it is expensive it’s worth it, because I end up spending less money on medicine later...

I buy, I buy... I invest in my food consumption.

According to some studies, like the ones conducted by authors such as Halkier (1999), Eden (1993), and Paavola (2001), the self-attribution of responsibilities may have created, on the one hand, excessive rationalization of our daily lives and, on the other, excessive guilt and responsibility upon the

consumer. Responsible, surveyed consumers seem to avoid this excessive feeling of guilt and responsibility when stating “not to be extreme”:

I eat organics, but I’m not extreme. And I can’t always go to the Glória street market on Saturday, either because I’m away or because I have other commitments. So, buying at the Glória street market is very restricted, because it has to be only on that day, at that time. Then, when I can’t go, I buy organics at the supermarket, which offers a better time flexibility.

You can’t be that extreme because, for example, there are people at the Glória street market who don’t even drink milk... nothing from animals, ok that’s their ethics, it’s right, it’s coherent, but it gets to a point where coherence can become fundamentalism. Then, I also don’t know if I could become a fundamentalist.

All this discussion indicates that deep ongoing modifications change and reshape the ways of sociability, identity, and political action. In the same way, the hypothesis of political and environmental influence on consumption practices rewrites the culture of political action, reassembling the relationship between the public and private sphere.

The theoretical approaches considered here and the collected data lead us to reflect over the possible limitation of social theories on social change and political action as something exclusive to organized and institutionalized social movements.

Perhaps it is necessary to consider the possibility of a change in the way contemporary political actions are understood. Therefore, if the actions in the consumption realm were interpreted as being “on the edges” of classical political arenas, in contemporary modernity it seems as if they are going in the direction of establishing themselves as an innovative and central form of political action.

## CONCLUSIONS

Considering this article, I would like to draw a conclusion to these reflections emphasizing that the simple act of going to the street market presents itself to its more frequent consumers as a way to materialize an abstract desire of contributing towards the search for alternatives to agro-industrial production, the solidarity with local producers and the responsibility towards the social and environmental impacts of their consumption options. It includes the choice a “healthy food” to maintain their own health and at the same time the “world’s health”. They are a social group that self-attributes responsibilities whether it is towards their own body, their own health, their own family, the local

community, “nature” or “the planet”. When they engage in this, they bring their commitment and political actions to their daily private life. The analysis of the data collected leads me to conclude that the way they live and experience “responsible consumption” cannot be explained through the approach of politics privatization, but through the politicization of private life.

Even though there is diversity of values and practices, consumers that self-attribute responsibilities seem to have in common (1) a mistrust in other social agents and (2) the trust in the importance and effectiveness of their actions.

It is important to ask, finally, if it will be possible to match the political struggle in the collective sphere to the new ways of exercising citizenship and political action in the individual sphere, promoting a new emancipatory strength, especially in countries like Brazil.

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**Auto-atribuição de responsabilidade: consumo de alimentos orgânicos em uma feira certificada** ♦ Fátima Portilho ♦ Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), Brazil ♦ [faportilho@uol.com.br](mailto:faportilho@uol.com.br)

Este trabalho busca contribuir para as análises do consumo, em particular o consumo alimentar, como um ato político. Para tanto, enfatiza o processo de auto-atribuição de responsabilidades por parte de consumidores engajados em práticas de consumo de alimentos orgânicos em uma feira certificada da cidade do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil. A conclusão da pesquisa, discutida à luz de algumas teorias sociológicas e antropológicas do consumo, além da sociologia do risco e da teoria da modernização reflexiva, mostra que tais consumidores parecem agir e participar da esfera pública mais através do "consumo responsável" do que através das formas coletivistas de participação política via movimentos sociais institucionalizados. Apesar de existir uma diversidade de valores e práticas, estes consumidores parecem ter em comum (1) a descrença em outros agentes sociais e (2) a crença na importância e eficácia de suas ações.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** auto-atribuição de responsabilidades, ambientalização do consumo, consumo político, alimentos orgânicos.