



From politicisation to redemption through consumption: The environmental crisis and the generation of guilt in the responsible consumer as constructed by the business media

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abstract

This paper follows a line of studies that have questioned the notion of politicisation through consumption, especially regarding the way in which consumer responsibility has been constructed within the organisational and marketing contexts. This article analyses how the environmentally responsible consumer has been 'produced' by the business media, considering it to be a mirror to the corporate world that reflects and re-signifies corporate practices and dominant social discourses. This research involves the analysis of two magazines during the period from 1996 to 2007, Britain's *The Economist* and Brazil's *Exame*. The method employed for this research was discourse theory, which was founded by Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and extended by contemporary authors based on Lacanian psychoanalysis and its concept of the Real. An empirical analysis, supported by an extensive bibliographic review of the relationships that exist between sovereignty, responsibility and guilt within the contemporary context of the enterprise culture and new environmental paradigm, allows us to offer some reflections: first, whether and to what extent the media's construction of the responsible consumer has combined the liberal discourse of the sovereignty and the moral sentiments of the consumer with the notion of culpability that is a part of the environmental crisis discourse; second, whether the combination of these elements has resulted in a discourse that produces guilt and redemption as merchandise.

Introduction

In the midst of the contemporary discursive production on the environmental crisis, the theme of consumption is becoming increasingly prominent in light of

the way in which the act of consuming has become associated with issues related to mitigating damage caused to the environment. It was not always so; the relationship between consumption and environmental degradation was already addressed by some of the authors and environmentalists of the ecological movement that started in the 1960s. However, at that time, this concept was largely ignored by the hegemonic Environmental Movement,

which was produced by institutionalised and socially legitimate means comprising the state sectors of central countries, intergovernmental institutions and [more recently] companies and major NGOs that circulated in this environment. (Portilho, 2005: 16)

The concept was only considered by the previously mentioned movement in the context of the discursive production of the environmental crisis of the 1990s. As a function of the dislocation of the focus from production to consumption (Eden, 1993; Stern, 1997; Spaargaren and Vliet, 1998; Goodman and Goodman, 2001; Urry, 2010; Smart, 2010), the concept started being publicly debated, requiring companies and consumers to adopt a position. This discursive dislocation also allowed what was called ecological, green, sustainable, or environmentally responsible consumption to become integrated into the politicisation of consumption (Blee, 1985; Buechler, 1995). Generally, consumption as a *political act* refers to a purchasing (or non-purchasing) process, in which concerns about the impact that the consumption process could have on the economic, social or cultural environment are implicit. This is confined to the fact that the consumer thinks and is concerned with the effects that his or her choice of purchase might have on others and on the world: for example, the treatment of workers involved in producing a particular product or its environmental impact.

Considered to be a political player, the responsible consumer can therefore be involved with different causes: defence of the environment, fair trade, the non-exploitation of human labour and the non-exploitation of the body in terms health and quality of life. In the proposals of Lang and Gabriel (2005), these critical manifestations of consumption can only be considered political when they are condensed into a consumer movement; what the authors call *consumer activism*. In outlining a brief history of consumer activism, these authors show how such movements go back to the 19th century when certain products were already being boycotted and cooperatives were being established. These movements have their own histories and persist today through various British and international institutions.

The debate about the possible reach of consumer movements has been strong in academic circles, whether from the perspective of citizenship (Trentmann, 2007; Soper, 2007; Jubas, 2007; Clarke, 2007; Schild, 2007) or of New Social

Movements (Buechler, 1995; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). Authors working on this subject seek to define this type of consumption as *ethical*, *activist* or *citizen*, always emphasising the importance of a movement that positions itself politically and questions the values and excesses of the consumer society. At times, such movements have the connotation of being consumer movements, while at others, of being anti-consumption movements (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Harrison et al., 2005; Soper, 2007; Jubas, 2007; Clarke, 2007; Schild, 2007; Trentmann, 2007; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Varman and Belk, 2009).

However, it is the individual consumer who has gained prominence in the business discourse about the relationship between consumption and the environment within the context of seeking to construct broader corporate sustainability. From this perspective, the most commonly used terms referring to consumers are *conscious*, *responsible*, *ecological*, *sustainable* or *green*, and the focus is almost always on discussing the role of individuals in their consumption decisions (Holt, 2002; Caruana and Crane, 2008; Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Carducci, 2008; Szmigin et al., 2009). In this context, the discourse in defence of the environment is linked to corporate social responsibility strategies, with the aim of reaching consumers who are willing to make choices that recognise and attribute value to such business strategies. Individual consumers are hailed as sovereign and empowered, capable of making decisions and taking responsibility for their actions (Davies and Elliott, 2006).

Research, however, is already beginning to question the true reach of this individually responsible consumer. In a study by Caruana and Crane (2008), who sought to understand the role of corporations in constructing the nature, meaning and implications of *consumer responsibility*, the importance of corporations in shaping this consumer, who is necessary to the new relationships between consumption and the environment, is evident. The authors, however, question this role, suggesting that the *responsible consumer* category 'emerges from a highly institutionalised, technical marketing discourse predisposed to differentiate, position and enable consumer choice' (ibid.: 1496). Connolly and Prothero's study of *green consumers* concludes that

the feeling of individual power is accompanied by the added uncertainty of knowing what to do. So in a sense, individuals are left with a sense of *I don't know what is the right thing to do*. It is unsurprising, then, that alongside these attempts at making the right decisions there are also feelings of guilt, ambivalence, compromise and inconsistencies in addressing environmental issues at the personal level. (2009: 133, italics in original)

Elsewhere, in a study based on 33 structured interviews focused on understanding 'the environment and political action in Denmark', in which 'one of the central themes of the study was the ways in which environmentalist represented consumer practices discursively', Jorgensen and Phillips claim to confirm 'Bauman's pessimistic view that the privatisation of human problems and of the responsibility for their resolution mitigates against political action which challenges existing forms of social organisation' (2002: 155-169).

This paper follows this tradition of studies that reflect on the limits of politicisation through consumption, as well as on the role that corporations can play in building environmentally responsible consumers. With this in mind, a survey was conducted of two magazines, the British magazine *The Economist* and the Brazilian magazine *Exame*, in order to understand how environmentally responsible consumers have been created. The period from 1996 to 2007 was analysed, ranging from the year that preceded the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, when the role of consumption in the environmental crisis had already become part of the public agenda, and the year in which the research was finalised. Bearing in mind the climate change issue, which put the relationship between consumption and the environment on the public agenda, we start from the assumption that the business media could be heavily influential in terms of focusing the debate on the construction of the discourse that the consumer is responsible for the environment, which has served the interests of the marketing world. The media (printed and electronic newspapers, films, TV programmes, blogs, documentaries, specialist journals, etc.) have generally been considered important players in constructing the concept (Yearley, 1991; Phillips, 2000; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2009; Corbucci, 2011).

The business media are an integral part of this broader media context and are understood as mirroring the corporate world. In this sense, they reflect certain organisational and marketing practices that are already in operation. Within the context of the production of the environmentally responsible consumer, as already shown by Caruana and Crane (2008), it is obvious that the latter has been constructed in a permanent dialogue with actions of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Thus, the authors state that consumer responsibility

involves an essentially contested discourse about what it means to be a 'responsible' consumer, how (or which) responsibilities can or should be mobilised through market transactions, and what the implications might be of doing so. Focusing precisely on the central role that corporations play in the construction of consumer behaviour and the market, the authors state that 'they

have largely dominated the debate around social responsibility more generally' (ibid.: 1496).

In the case of the Brazilian magazine we researched (*Exame*), academic studies have already demonstrated the importance of this publication in disclosing certain practices of the Brazilian and international corporate worlds. The magazine itself states in its editorial profile that it is the 'Brazilian leader in both publicity and circulation among business magazines [and that] it brings its qualified readers ... profound analyses of the main happenings in the world of business'¹. This is not, however, a mere reflection. In being registered in this media scenario, corporate practices are re-signified, and the media discourse itself starts exercising an influence over what corporate practices *should be*. Paraphrasing Boltanski and Chiapello (2009), who analysed the management and administration literature in order to understand the spread of the new spirit of capitalism, it is also possible to state that because the business media is public literature, destined to obtain adhesion to the exposed precepts and engagement of a great number of players, it must be backed by normative views that are linked to a more general orientation towards the common good, the purpose of which is to say what should be. Furthermore, because the *The Economist*, was researched, the challenge in articulating the '*should be*' is even greater because it cannot be considered to be *just* a business magazine. In its editorial profile, *The Economist* states that it is an international news weekly and a business publication that is read by more world political and business leaders than any other². Given this publication's importance for registering the *enterprise culture* in the neo-liberal years that started with the administration of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, it was not chosen by chance. As we shall see, the *enterprise culture* is central to the analysis of the production of the responsible consumer.

By analysing these two magazines, we can reflect on the extent to which the questioning of the responsible consumer initiates the production of guilt in order to allow the market to provide redemption in the form of merchandise. The reports from the two researched magazines that referred to the question of guilt and redemption through consumption led us to this thought. Based on the reports, we searched the existing literature for how guilt emerges amid the dislocation caused by new environmental paradigms (Stravakakis, 2000), which produced an eschatological view of the end of the human species because of the hyper-consumerism of modern societies. When guilt is re-signified within the media and marketing context, the idea of the end persists but is shrouded by the

1 See <http://publicidade.abril.com.br/marcas/exame/revista/informacoes-gerais>.

2 See http://www.economistgroup.com/what_we_do/our_brands/the_economist_brand_family/the_economist.html.

logic that it is possible to continue consuming provided it is via environmentally responsible companies. Carried out in an individual and responsible way by consumers, the choice of these particular companies guarantees that the consumption of individuals does not lead to the end for everyone.

To make this analysis we begin by presenting some of the theoretical and methodological fundamentals underpinning the research. Then, we present the empirical research and, based on the presented data, discuss how the ideas of responsibility, guilt and redemption appear in the construction of the environmentally responsible consumer. Next, the discourse of the two magazines is analysed in light of 1) the discourse of accountability, which is based on the liberal project and was provided with new dimensions by the neoliberal ideas and practices that were expressed throughout the 1990s and gave rise to an enterprise culture and the notion of the consumer as a moral agent; and 2) the discourse of blaming the consumer, which is found in the environmental crisis discourse and also gained strength during the same decade. Our argument is that the analysed business media have rearticulated these two discourses to a demonstrable degree. The motivation that underlies the analysis, bearing in mind the objective of this special issue, is to indicate the challenges that such discursive construction poses for the politicisation of the consumer.

Theoretical and methodological fundamentals

The main theoretical and methodological premise on which this article is based is that discourses are contingent constructions of reality. This premise is in line with a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective, especially regarding the conception of the Real and the inconsistency of the Other (Lacan, 2008). The Other is the symbolic field, a space in which discourses seek to be constituted and become firmly established as unquestionable truths. The Real is the excess that cannot be symbolised and that, therefore, disturbs the symbolic field to the extent that it reveals that there is always incompleteness and inconsistency in the Other. The Real, says Lacan, lacks for nothing (Lacan, 2005). According to philosopher Slavoj Žižek, one of the most prominent contemporary interpreters of the Lacanian reading of the Real, Lacan considered psychoanalysis to be 'a method for interpreting either oral (the patient's words) or written texts' (Žižek, 2010:12). However, Lacan did not really develop a method that can serve as our guide in analysing contemporary social discourses. In our view, this undertaking was carried out by the authors of discourse theory, both those who were involved with its foundation (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) and those who extended it, particularly by especially emphasising the Lacanian theory (Glynos, 2010; Stravakakis, 1997, 2000).

Discourse theory is not simply a method of analysing data, nor can it be separated from its theoretical and methodological foundations. It is mainly characterised by being a *problem-driven* approach and not a *method-driven approach* that is more motivated ‘by the techniques of data-gathering and analysis than by a concern with the empirical phenomena under investigation’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 167). From the *problem-driven approach* perspective, ‘a range of disparate empirical phenomena have to be constituted as a problem, and the problem has to be located at the appropriate level of abstraction and complexity’ (ibid.). We have taken discourse theory as the framework guiding this research. As noted by Laclau in the introduction of a book on the application of discourse theory to case studies, the articulation of an

alternative approach to the understanding of the structuralism of socio-political spaces by articulating a novel conception of discourse... was constructed out of a plurality of theoretical matrices (post-Heideggerian phenomenology, Wittgenstein’s conception of language games, post-structuralism), but it is undoubtedly the latter which has been the chief influence. (Laclau, 2000: xi)

Laclau continues by reminding us that the term post-structuralism covers a vast field of intellectual tendencies, involving authors such as Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and others. In this research, we were influenced by Lacan in constructing the discourse analysis method, especially regarding the notion of the *point de capiton* (or *nodal point* in the discourse theory terminology) that comprises a ‘privileged signifier which fixes the meaning of a signifying chain’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:112). The purpose of nodal points is to realise the objective of any discourse, which is to make it dominant in a particular social field. Inspired by the Lacanian theory of the contingency imposed by the Real, the authors of discourse theory understand that no discourse is capable of fully dominating the field of discursivity. A discourse can only partially be fixed by its nodal point, although ‘discursive formations consist of related elements that can in certain contexts of exteriority... be signified as a totality’ (Howarth, 2000: 102). We also work with the psychoanalytic concept of *dislocation*, as discussed by Laclau (1990), by assuming that discourses are contingent and continuously submitted to the dislocatory effects of social and political events. Such a focus, for Stravakakis, focuses on elevating

to the epicentre of our discourse what is foreclosed in more traditional approaches: the element of negativity inherent in human experience, on the element of rupture and crisis threatening and subverting the field of social objectivity. (Stravakakis 2000: 100)

Stravakakis’ interpretation of the *dislocation factor* is doubly important to the objectives of this research, to the extent that, in addition to looking for support in the psychoanalytical stream of discourse theory, the author also closely examines

a theme that is very similar to that discussed in this article: the emergence of a *green ideology* in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead of looking for the origin of this new ideology in positively existing causes and rational explanations, the author uses dislocation theory as ‘the moment of failure and subversion of a system of representation [that] introduces a rupture in a normal – or rather normalised – order of things’ (ibid.: 105-106). For Stravakakis, the emergence of the green ideology occurred because of a

lack created by the dislocation of our (imaginary/symbolic) conceptions of nature by a feeling of environmental crisis, a lack that coincided with another lack created by the dislocation of certain currents of ideological discourse in the radical political spectrum. (ibid.: 107)

It is important to emphasise that what the author refers to as ‘green ideology’, which results from a double dislocation, is restricted to different versions of parties, movements, groups and ideologies that have a radical environmental agenda. In many other cases, such as eco-feminism, eco-socialism, eco-fascism and eco-capitalism, the green element remains ideologically peripheral. Because of this, when we analyse the production of the environmentally responsible consumer by the business media, we know that we are not dealing with the field of green ideology. Therefore, the first dislocation is of interest to the purposes of this work: the dislocation related to our way of understanding nature, which has generated the perception of an ecological crisis and, consequently, the ‘new environmental paradigm’ (ibid.: 109). By creating a void at the level of meaning, dislocation promotes ‘new discursive constructions, which attempt to suture the dislocated structure’ (Howarth and Stravakakis, 2000: 13). The dislocation that resulted in the new environmental paradigm starting from the 1960s and 1970s has been continuously re-signified and has gained a special importance in contemporary political discourse.

According to discourse theory, then, ‘a discursive structure is not merely a ‘cognitive’ or ‘contemplative’ entity; it is an *articulatory practice* which constitutes and organises social relations’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:96, the authors’ italics). Taking an example of this definition from *Thatcherism*, which in turn can be taken as a typical example of the predominance of the neoliberal ideology that will be presented and discussed in this paper, David Howarth shows that

the ideas, policies and actions of Thatcherism can be seen as a discourse. Not only did it consist of a set of ideas (‘freedom’, ‘monetarism’, ‘law and order’), it also inculcated a certain set of practices (‘strong leadership’, ‘entrepreneurship’) and involved attempts to transform institutions and organisations. (Howarth, 2000: 103)

Within a context that is restricted to the marketing field, this discursive re-articulation refers to issues that are related to the responsibility of the consumer with regard to guilt and redemption by the market. This is the anchor point of this article. The above studies indicate just how dominant the role of the media has been at times of dislocation and the need for new articulations, especially when constructing the current environmental crisis scenario (Yearley, 1991; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). It is obvious that the media exercise a type of 'soft power' to the extent that they have no regulatory authority in the sense of establishing policies and law. Their power lies in constructing truths. In the theoretical and methodological field in which this paper is situated, it is understood that this is a powerful force. *The Economist*, one of the magazines analysed in this research, itself emphasizes the importance of green business by noting how important the media are in the construction and dissemination of green consumption practices:

Al Gore's documentary on global warming, 'An inconvenient truth', helped get Hollywood on board. Last summer Brad Pitt teamed up with Global Green, a non-profit group, in a contest to design environmentally friendly homes for New Orleans. In April Robert Redford's series on ecology and green living was aired. Vanity Fair, Newsweek, Forbes and Fortune magazines have run green issues and Entertainment Weekly, a Hollywood monthly, featured Al Gore on its cover. All this has helped Americans see that green building is easy, rewarding and responsible. The lesson is being learned in Scottsdale, a place whose extraordinary growth in recent decades has often meant swimming pools and green lawns somehow engineered in the desert. At Camelview Village, a multifamily development designed by Mr Hovey's father, who is also an architect, a 'desert garden' covers the roof of each house. It is made of plants that require minimal watering, keep the roof cooler than black roof tiles and absorb lots of carbon dioxide. With 16 months to go until the complex is finished, 586 of the 709 units have been sold already. At Sterling Ridge, the Scottsdale property, solar panels and energy efficient glass will keep windows cool in the searing Arizona summers. The power savings are phenomenal, Mr Hovey junior says. (*Economist*, 2007)

Based on an analysis of the business media discourse, this article demonstrates how the dislocation in the concept of nature, which has led to the contemporary concept of environmental crisis and consequently to a new environmental paradigm, has been re-signified by the media and marketing discourse with the aim of developing a new discursive articulation based on the production of guilt and the promotion of redemption as merchandise. We suggest that an analysis of the business media, especially of a publication like *The Economist*, helps us to understand how the dislocation that resulted in the new environmental paradigm has also been re-signified by neoliberal ideology. The responsible consumer discourse can be understood as a reflection of neoliberal thinking that has sought to rearticulate the environmental crisis discourse around the belief in science, the free market, individual initiative and other elements.

Empirical research: *The Economist* and *Exame*

Method and Procedures

Bearing in mind that the analysis period of the two magazines was extensive (1996-2007), we chose to use text-reading support software (Atlas t.i). We sought to include the term *responsible consumer* because the media use many terms, as does the academic world, when defining a type of consumption that is marked by a concern for the environment. According to the meaning provided by discourse theory, these terms would be *elements*, ‘signs whose meanings have not yet been fixed; signs that have multiple, potential meanings (i.e. they are *polysemic*)’ (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 27). A set of the definitions that are most widely used in the media and most prevalent in the examined academic literature was created to establish sufficiently broad categories to account for the articles in the two researched magazines during the investigated period. We started with the following categories: conscious consumption/consumer; green; sustainable; ethical-activist; efficient-rational; healthy; responsible.

In addition to these categories of consumers, other terms were highlighted that could indicate the existence of these categories even if they were not explicitly mentioned: Greenpeace, WWF (World Wild Fund), global warming, climate change, environmental movements, Kyoto Protocol, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), environment, sustainability, ecology, recycling, environmentally responsible companies and clean technology. After inserting all of these categories into the programme, reports were generated that indicated how, where and when the magazines directly or indirectly mentioned the theme of responsible consumption. A full interpretation of these reports was undertaken, and some standard reports were employed to identify some of the categories that are central to the analysis and that became predominant over the surveyed time period: environmentalist movements, the role of governments, solutions through science and technology, market opportunities, and the roles of companies and individual consumers.

General Analysis: The environmental crisis and the role of companies and consumers: the relationship between corporate social responsibility and the de-politicisation of consumer

A nodal point – ‘the notion of a particular element assuming a “universal” structuring function within a certain discursive field’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xi) – found in the discursive construction of the business media was ‘environment’, associated with the idea that nature is in crisis and that something needs to be done about it. In this context, companies and consumers (individuals) appear as fundamental moral agents of this process. The

environmental discourse is therefore articulated with an organisational discourse that focuses on corporate social responsibility (CSR), as well as on a consumer discourse that identifies a type of consumer who is morally engaged in resolving the environmental crisis. In the discursive construction of the business media, purchasing from companies that are socially responsible is the feasible path to becoming a responsible consumer. Others are excluded from this discursive construction, which can be clearly understood within the logic of the social antagonism of discourse theory, whose

role is thus constitutive of social objectivity, as social formations depend upon the construction of antagonistic relations between social agents 'inside' and 'outside' a social formation. (Howarth, 2000: 106)

The disqualification of environmentalist movements in both magazines was evident, indicating that they do not have sufficient and correct information about the environmental situation in addition to often having *suspicious* interests. In the case of *The Economist*, the most critical treatment of the environmentalist movements came within the context of the so-called anti-globalisation movements after the *Battle of Seattle* in 1999. The articles referring to this topic have titles such as 'living with the enemy'; 'non-governmental organisations and business' and 'virtue for sale'. In these years, both magazines were marked by articles that aimed to disqualify activists, although the tone taken in *Exame* was always more radical.

With security high, the few anti-globalisation protesters who were allowed into Qatar had no chance of repeating Seattle. But they were still creative. Small groups used surprise tactics, springing up outside meeting rooms to chant 'Zoellick go home', or plastering the conference walls with enigmatic messages, such as 'Do you know what the green man is up to?' But most non-governmental organisations were too busy lobbying to protest. Greenpeace, the environmental titan, persuaded Pascal Lamy, Europe's top trade man, to visit its boat, Rainbow Warrior, for a photo opportunity. And José Bové, the French farmer famous for driving his tractor into McDonald's, spent much of his time hanging around the press room, pipe in hand. (*Safety*, 2001)

According to the new ideology, the world today is dominated by enormous corporations interested in earning a lot of money at the cost of the health of people and the planet. It is up to the NGOs to assume the heroic role of fighting them. In this struggle, the pillars of the capitalist system need to be challenged – companies, multinational organisms, governments – with all the arms that are at hand. It might be by dressing up as a chicken. It might be by demonstrating at meetings of the International Monetary Fund. It might be by disclosing information that is often doubtful or simply wrong about deforestation in the Amazon and about the impact of the construction of the São Paulo beltway. There was a delay of four years in the granting of the license to build the southern stretch of the project, which was considered fundamental for alleviating traffic in São Paulo, reducing the emission of pollutants from the trucks that cross the city and

improving the quality of life of the population. Among the problems, the NGO Instituto Socioambiental [Socio-environmental Institute] argued that there was a rare type of frog in the region of the construction work. Studies proved that it was a common species. The construction work was only approved in September this year. (Seibel & Gianini, 2006)

In fact, the survey data shows how the construction of environmentally responsible consumers is linked to the construction of companies that are also socially responsible. Initial data from this study also motivated an article (Fontenelle, 2010) whose objective was to determine how the claims promoted by anti-globalisation movements were crucial in the construction of the discourse of socially responsible companies. Thus, the analysis of the data reinforces the literature that exists about how the responsible consumer, considered from the perspective of the business context that is of interest to us, is inseparable from the emergence of the discourse of corporate social responsibility, which became dominant at the dawn of the 21st century (Caruana and Crane, 2008; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Harrison et al., 2005).

Just as corporations have been exhorted to practise corporate social responsibility (CSR), so too have consumers been charged with a responsibility to use their 'purchase votes' to effect positive social outcomes. (Caruana and Crane, 2008)

These fragments of discourse clearly indicate that the path to responsible consumption does not involve conflict and political protest. It is in this context that consumers are beginning to appear, in a construction that aims to demonstrate their strength/force, but distances them from movements that are perceived as negative:

The power of the green wave is currently manifested through what I call eco-awareness, or the attitude of people who realise the importance of nature for our own survival. As soon as eco-awareness reached the general population, it became irreversible. It is this phenomenon that we are observing now, not only in the First World but also in countries such as Brazil. If consumers give preference to products that protect nature, those manufacturers that do not change their conventional products are going to lose market share. (Richers, 1996)

There is an apparently ambiguous relationship with the government, where any type of regulation is judged as being a mode of censorship or a form of intervention in the free market. At the same time, there are articles in which the government is called upon *to act*. Such articles always indicate that the government has been incapable of acting, which is why companies need to act in its place.

But the systematic subordination of this profit for environmental or social factors leads to risks. The first, and largest, of these is in the dangerous confusion of roles between the State and the private sector. It is very convenient for a bankrupt

government to push tasks that are its responsibility in the direction of companies. When the State fails so miserably, companies are encouraged to do what it has neglected, says economist Eduardo Giannetti da Fonseca. (Gurovitz and Blecher, 2005)

The new initiatives championed by Mrs Merkel might just add to the embarrassment. The EU's politicians are not only telling businesses to cut emissions, but also dictating how they should do it (rather like communist central planning, muttered the Czech prime minister, accurately). (*Climate*, 2007)

While players such as governments and social movements appear with their disqualification discourse, companies present themselves in this discursive construction as playing a central and predominantly positive role. There is a certainty in solving the environmental crisis through the use of technology linked to successful corporate initiatives. The environmental crisis is also a great business opportunity, and entrepreneurship is highly emphasised, especially in the Brazilian magazine:

Many companies, including BP, also see the chance to make money from providing things that help reduce global warming-from clean coal-fired power-stations, to wind farms, to mortgages with better rates for homes that are carbon-neutral. GE plans to double its revenues from 17 clean-technology businesses to \$20 billion by 2010. HSBC's decision to become carbon-neutral is part of a plan to develop a carbon-finance business, both for retail consumers and corporate clients... (Can, 2006)

'The companies that are now concerned with climate change will be the leaders in the future', says Philippe Lisbona, director of a new environmental fund created by Stratus Bank. Or, as British environmentalist, Jonathon Porritt writes in his book, *Capitalism – Why the world matters*, which is still unpublished in Brazil: 'Preservation of the planet may be the biggest business opportunity of this century'. (Teixeira Jr., 2006)

It is in this context that the construction of the responsible consumer occurs in a permanent dialogue with environmentally responsible companies that will only be able to sustain this role if they have a consumer as a counterpoint, an individual who is also morally engaged, feels responsible and knows how to value these corporate actions. There are many articles that name companies that are working towards mitigating environmental damage and mention how consumers must recognise such actions through consumption. The responsible consumer is here constructed as someone who is well-informed about the environmental crisis, decides with his *conscience*, and is morally responsible with regard to the consumption choices he or she makes.

One of the main voices in the Brazilian articles that mentioned *conscious consumption*, a more common term in Brazil, is the Akatu Institute for Conscious Consumption, an NGO that evolved from within the Companies and Social

Responsibility Institute (ETHOS), therefore relating CSR to the responsible consumer. In other words, in Brazil, the debate about responsible consumption has already been launched by a movement of business people without the participation of the consumers who are associated with social or environmental movements.

The business world has increasingly been worrying about a figure who, in many ways, is unfathomable – the conscientious consumer. The difficulty, however, lies in defining precisely who he is and how he thinks and acts when choosing between one product or service or another. The Akatu Institute, an NGO whose mission is to encourage responsible behaviour among Brazilian consumers, has carried out research to determine the level of awareness of the population when making purchases. (Almeida, 2004)

In a discursive context that produces the idea that protesting is negative, as previously mentioned, action and individual responsibility become predominant in the media discourse. In this context, the consumer is free to make his own decisions and impose his limits; not doing so leads to the assumption of a guilt that can easily be expiated if he chooses to patronise responsible companies. It is clear that research data cannot indicate if the consumer actually feels guilty and consumes from environmentally responsible companies to expiate his guilt. The research can clearly show, however, that the media have naturalised this mode of response

Bearing in mind the objectives of this paper, the central issue is to understand how this media discourse related to the production of guilt and redemption, far from politicizing the category of the consumer, has the opposite effect. The responsible consumer does not represent a single and unquestionable category. Different players, including environmentalists, companies, governments, academics and the media, are arguing over the definition of this category. Therefore, we need to understand the meaning of the term responsible consumer from a given discursive construction and based on world views and specific interests. The purpose of this paper is to understand this construction in a very particular field: the business media, particularly because we believe they reflect and reinforce a type of responsible consumer who is a follower of the corporate world.

The eleven years' worth of analysed texts reveal that, beyond merely presenting the issue of environmentally responsible consumption as 'business as usual' (Smart, 2010), the magazines clearly deny the idea of the consumer as a political player. It is even possible to state that this is one of their central objectives, given the negative way in which the analysed articles portray any type of critical movement relating to issues involving consumption and the environmental

crisis. It is in this context that the themes of guilt and redemption emerge in different ways and form according to the analysed magazines.

Responsibility, guilt and redemption by the market in the analysed magazines

Let us now examine the meanings that the business media attribute to categories such as responsibility and guilt. Here, we shall differentiate between the discourses of the two magazines for reasons that will subsequently be explained.

The Economist: An environmental discourse that attributes responsibility to the individual through guilt

The Economist empathises with the idealised figure of the responsible consumer in many articles but assumes an accusatory tone in others, indicating that, although this responsibility is necessary, the consumer is still not morally engaged. This led the research to explore the perspective of the production of guilt.

A recent academic study concludes that, although the firms have created favourable attitudes and enjoy high brand loyalty, customers still consider non-green attributes more important in making their purchase decisions. (*How*, 2000)

How to persuade people to go green? Last month British Airways (BA) announced it would give passengers the chance to do their bit for the planet by letting them pay a few pounds extra on every ticket and use the money to offset the carbon emissions from their trip. Last week the airline admitted that, so far, hardly anybody seems interested, with fewer than 1 in 200 passengers willing to cough up. That sits oddly with people's professed anxiety in polls about climate change. BA points out that the scheme is new. Greens accuse it of failing to do enough advertising. Economists spy an example of what they call revealed preferences - the idea that talk is cheap and actions provide the best guide to somebody's beliefs. The cost of cutting carbon emissions is immediate but benefits are deferred and thinly spread. Appeals to people's better natures tend to fall flat if they involve demands on their wallets [...] BA itself illustrates the point: whatever the airline's green scheme does for the planet, it has done BA's brand no harm. (*Virtue*, 2005)

Within the context of the articles, it is clear that *The Economist* is operating under the assumption that contemporary consumers should feel guilty about the environmental crisis because they are not always prepared to be environmentally responsible. It is within this context that the discourse of redemption appears in an obvious way:

The sale of indulgences by the Catholic Church in the early 16th century, whereby people could, in effect, purchase forgiveness of past sins by handing over enough money, was condemned by Martin Luther and other reformers. Today, some

environmentalists are denouncing the ‘offsetting’ of carbon emissions in similar terms... critics of offsetting argue that the ability to buy retrospective forgiveness for sins of emission is no substitute for not sinning in the first place. ... Another problem with offset schemes is the lack of standards: can you really trust those who promise to eliminate emissions elsewhere on your behalf? (*Sins*, 2006)

This excerpt indicates the ambiguity of the ‘consume and be redeemed’ action while also showing how important the guarantees of environmentally responsible companies are for redemption. Thus, if the first part of the excerpt uses the critics of offsetting to question the process of consumption to redemption, the second part takes a different approach: it does not question the process itself but instead focuses on the credibility of those who promise to eliminate emissions.

In the excerpt below, the relationship between guilt and redemption is direct, although *The Economist* indicates that it just reflects a market practice. However, considering the methodology used in this research, the media vehicle was taken as an enunciator that has an active position towards its discourses. Thus, the media not only transmit but also create a different way of seeing the environmental crisis from specific nodal points.

If you think you can make the planet better by clever shopping, think again. You might make it worse... If you are worried about the environment, you might buy organic food; if you want to help poor farmers, you can do your bit by buying Fair-trade products; or you can express a dislike of evil multinational companies and rampant globalisation by buying only local produce. And the best bit is that shopping, unlike voting, is fun; so you can do good and enjoy yourself at the same time. (*Sins*, 2006)

In *The Economist* magazine, the discourse that builds the environmentally responsible consumer can only be clarified when it accounts for the context of the construction of the enterprise culture, which will be explored later on in this article.

Exame: *An environmental discourse that attributes responsibility to the individual through redemption*

In the case of the Brazilian magazine, the development from responsibility to guilt and redemption is even stronger, although the tone does not accuse the consumer, who is already constructed as being someone who is morally involved with environmental causes. In this case, guilt is merely an assumption, bearing in mind that the opportunity for redemption through the purchase of products from environmentally responsible companies appears as the main focus. Because it is linked to the business world much more directly than *The Economist*, the case of *Exame* demonstrates just how much this closeness allows its discursive

production to be less ambiguous and its discourse more univocal. The following report shows how this mentality is absorbed by the discursive construction of the business media based on the logic of redemption:

In using the Ipiranga Zero Carbon credit card to fill his tank, the consumer has the company's commitment that trees will be planted to neutralise the vehicle's greenhouse gas emissions. (Herzog, 2007)

By engaging the identity of the consumer as being individually responsible for his consumption acts, the business media reflect and re-signify a marketing logic of guilt production, while at the same time presenting a way of moderating this guilt through the sale of redemption. They propose a series of products and measures that *reduce guilt* through consumption in a society permeated by the discourse of global warming, such as through buying ecologically responsible organic products or investing in neutralising carbon through the planting of trees. Therefore, the consumer does not need to concern himself with consuming products that have already given him the guarantee of making the right choice: in consuming ecologically responsible products, he can rid himself of his guilt because others have made themselves responsible for him. He only has to be responsible when taking a decision about which product or brand to buy, or after consuming it, about neutralising his ecological footprint.

If in *The Economist*, the environmentally responsible consumer must be constructed under the main discourse of the morally engaged consumer of the enterprise culture, in the case of *Exame*, the environmentally responsible consumer emerges under the larger discourse of the business opportunity that arises from the existence of this type of responsible consumer who purchases from corporations that are also environmentally responsible. The responsible consumer also appears to be individually engaged in the resolution of the environmental crisis through his purchases. Such data are very similar to what Jorgensen and Phillips found in their research. The authors noted how 'ecological discourse is articulated together with a consumer discourse: personal engagement is defined as consumption behaviour' (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 166). Having therefore presented a broader panorama of the research, and keeping in mind the context of the discourse of de-politicisation and production of guilt and redemption, we now return to examining the two main axes of this paper's analysis in more detail.

A return to moral sentiments: Responsibility and consumer guilt within the context of the enterprise culture

As we have already seen in the review of the literature as well as in our data, the responsible consumer is constructed as an individual who thinks about the impacts of his consumption decisions, which, in turn, are reflected in his choices regarding the companies that satisfy his social and environmental concerns (Dickinson and Carsky, 2005). This analysis shows that this responsible consumer has accepted the notion of consumer sovereignty, especially in terms of empowerment (Schwarzkopf, 2011; Wright, Newman and Dennis, 2006).

However, there is another perspective that is less explored by studies on the responsible consumer and that stands out in the discourse of the analysed business media: that of the philosophical basis of the liberal project, which takes us back to the theme of moral sentiments. These are understood as a *conservative reaction* to a more calculating view of the 'homo oeconomicus of interests' of the liberal economy (Foucault, 2004; Laval, 2007; Dardot and Laval, 2009) and which, reinterpreted within the context of the enterprise culture, indicates a first elucidation of the production of guilt in the media and marketing discourse. As shown in an interesting study of contemporary relations between economic man and emotional power, the theme of moral sentiments arose in opposition to the concept of a society that was implicated in calculating interests, seeking to 'preserve and re-establish the traditional moral authorities that were progressively dislocated by the economic relations of the free market and by new forms of government' (Andrade, 2011: 39). The study also indicates how this type of thinking has strong moral and religious origins and how, in this context, individuals were summoned to submit to moral laws and sacrifice themselves in the name of the common good.

Much could be said about the different forms taken by the conservative discourse, which promoted moral sentiments and their impact on the field of consumption. However, it suits the purposes of this paper to more precisely understand how these notions have been rearticulated in contemporary society and reflected in the discourse about the responsible consumer within the media and marketing contexts. We therefore need to understand the way in which interests and moral sentiments were re-signified by the neoliberal movement that was dominant in the West and whose most emblematic governments were those of US president Ronald Reagan and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, although this movement also affected a large part of the Western world, including Brazil. The neoliberal programme is very extensive, and this article does not intend to examine it all. The intention is only to understand how, within its context, consumption gains a new and central dimension when the

principle of consumer sovereignty and the idea of the individual as a moral agent are combined. Various studies have been undertaken, especially in the United Kingdom, on how this re-articulation occurred around the construction of an *enterprise culture* (Keat and Abercrombie, 1991; Peters, 2001; Norris, 2001; Heelas and Morris, 1992).

The promotion of an enterprise culture begins by reinforcing the importance of consumer sovereignty, which was already extremely prevalent in marketing discourses about the culture of consumption, but also includes the notion of a consumer who is morally responsible for his choices, something that is still rarely discussed in these same discourses. Consumer sovereignty therefore became ‘the link between freedom and dynamism. The model of consumer choice came to be seen as the most adequate model for *all* forms of modern citizenship and social action...’ (Slater, 1997: 37; the author’s italics). However, this empowered consumer had to be equally willing ‘to take risks and to accept responsibility for his actions...’ (Keat and Abercrombie, 1991:3). Benevolence, moral conscience and a sense of the common good, the basic pillars of the conservative reaction found in the history of liberal philosophical thinking (Andrade, 2011), also begin to form part of this new neoliberal conservative turnaround, especially in the reform programme proposed by Margaret Thatcher based on the following principle: ‘Economics are the method. The object is to change the soul’ (Heelas and Morris, 1992: 8).

In this moralistic crusade of the *conversion of souls*, a discourse about guilt also begins to be outlined: individuals ‘have only themselves to blame if they do not bother to set about improving their circumstances’ (Heelas and Morris, 1992:8). Guilt refers to the wrong choices made by the sovereign individual who is responsible for his actions. No one can be blamed for unemployment, poverty or the harmful consequences of consumption of a certain type of product (alcohol, tobacco, junk food) except the autonomous self, who is capable of freely taking responsibility for the consequences of his choices (Rose, 1992; 2007).

From the analysis of each category that was constructed for the survey of the magazine articles — conscientious consumption/consumer, green, sustainable, ethical-activist, efficient-rational, healthy, responsible — it was possible to observe how this idea of consumers as moral and responsible agents who were possibly blamed for their wrong choices clearly articulated this view of the enterprise culture. For example, in the ‘healthy consumption’ category, there were different articles in both magazines about the accountability of consumers for the choices they made relative to their health and quality of life.

A recent conference in Washington brought together some 100 lawyers from the biggest food companies to discuss ways of defending themselves against legal proceedings. One of the recommendations was that if the case reaches trial, those chosen for the jury should be physically active. They would tend to sympathise with the idea that controlling weight is a question of individual responsibility. (Cohen, 2004)

New research shows that most Americans are well aware of the risks of obesity... some 90% of American consumers believe they are personally accountable for their weight. (Big, 2003)

We can see that the consumer as moral agent also clearly appears in relation to the field of fair trade.

A growing number of coffee drinkers seem to prefer their morning grande skinny latte without a foul-tasting double-shot of social injustice. The hugely successful Fair trade brand allows coffee addicts to get their fix with a clearer conscience, safe in the belief that no farmers have been exploited along the way. Coffee has become a testing ground for what it means to be an ethical consumer. (Storm, 2006)

If we were to pause to analyse each specific consumer category, we would see different discursive articulations. In the case of healthy consumption, for example, the main articulation has to do with litigation because of the challenges that it poses to the corporations in the context of the dissemination of 'a culture of blame' (Lau, 2009). In the case of ethical consumption, fair trade appears in the headlines because of the consumer movements that have invested in denouncing the abusive practices of companies, thus affecting their corporate images (Fontenelle, 2010). In this study, the focus on responsible consumption via the environment requires that we examine another type of discursive articulation in more detail: the environmental crisis.

Guilt and redemption in the construction of the environmental crisis

We have already seen that green ideology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as the product of an articulation between a series of political elements and involved a certain concept of nature. Problematic consumption can already be localised in this period by authors and environmentalists who represent the radical ecological movements of the 1960s and who were already connecting the consumerism of modern societies with environmental degradation (Stravakakis, 2000). However, as stated in the introduction of this article, this did not occur from the perspective of the hegemonic environmental movement. According to Cohen (2001), *The Limits of Growth* report, which was published in 1972 and is considered a milestone in the history of the hegemonic environmental movement, makes no explicit mention of the question of consumption as a social

activity. It was only on the perspective of industrial production, and this continued at least until the 1990s when there was a dislocation of the emphasis from production to consumption, which coincided with an historic moment in which various authors started referencing the shift of contemporary societal paradigms from production towards consumption.

For Portilho (2005), an event that clearly marks this discursive dislocation was Eco-92, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It was at this conference that the term *sustainable development* first appeared, as proposed by the UN report produced in 1987, *Our Common Future*, which expressed its total confidence in the capacity of technological developments and economic expansion to satisfactorily manage environmental problems.

This confidence in technological capability is evident in the articles we analysed. It is no accident that Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Norwegian who was the head of the UN commission that produced the report and is considered to be the creator of the term *sustainable development*, admitted that the broader notion of sustainable development has been 'kidnapped' by companies. Sustainable development, she says, is something broader and the concept in its totality, the vision of economic, environmental and social pillars with a long-term approach never happened anywhere (Roge, 2012).

According to Cohen (2001), other players (social/environmental movements and developing countries) challenged the interpretation of the UN report and incorporated the debate about consumption into the discussion agenda, especially regarding lifestyles in rich countries. The focus on consumption as a factor in the environmental crisis, however, cannot be considered sufficient in causing wider public environmental awareness (which already existed in the ecological movement). According to Yearley, 'the existence of social problems depends on the continued existence of groups or agencies that define some condition as a problem and attempt to do something about it' (Yearley, 1991: 103). For this author, to generate a certain environmental conscience, environmentalist groups and the media have played a central role in the construction and promotion of contemporary environmental issues with society.

It is important, therefore, to understand how these players have constructed the discourse about the environmental crisis and how consumption appears in this context. Stravakakis argues that the construction of the environmental crisis was caused by a dislocation of our imaginary and symbolic concept of nature. In other words, beyond the experience of a real ecological crisis, there has, more importantly, been a dislocation of our imaginary and symbolic construction of

the Real of nature, which has led to the consequent construction of the environmental crisis as a serious, urgent and pressing social problem. Stravakakis uses Lacanian analyses of the Real, especially in Zizek's interpretation of how the ecological crisis started a period of encounters with the Real (Zizek, 1993), given that our representation of nature, which always incorporated a notion of the severity and unforeseeability of natural forces, has suffered new shocks in contemporaneity. As a matter of fact, Zizek suggests a new twist to the title of the Freudian study on cultural malaise because currently 'discontentment moves from culture to nature itself: it now appears as a fragile mechanism that may explode at any moment in a catastrophic way' (Zizek, 2011: 430). Throughout history, every age has sought to integrate a concept of nature, while at the same time trying to dominate it. According to Stravakakis,

In modern secular techno-scientific societies it is usually science that provides the symbolic framework for the symbolisation of nature. Predicting the unpredictable, mastering the impossible, reducing the unexpected to a system of control, in other words symbolising, integrating the real of nature, is attempted through the discourse of science and its popularisation in the media. (Stravakakis, 2000: 108)

However, this ideal is morally in crisis. Science itself, by way of technological development, has been accused of causing the environmental crisis. Analysts of the environmental crisis have insisted that it is impossible for science to cope with the challenges presented by environmental degradation except through a radical change in our development model. It is within this context that indicated the limits of nature that criticism of consumption emerges, given that consumer society is structured upon the idea that nature is subject to limitless consumption. Here, we should ask some questions posed by the study developed by Corbucci (2011):

What is the relationship between the consequences of a society subjectively based on consumerism and a certain representation of nature? What nature exists (beyond the one that is barely surviving) in consumerism? Or rather, what type of representation of nature is consistent with a society in which merchandise form gains full status? (Corbucci, 2011: 34)

Corbucci tried to investigate the dominant imaginary with regard to 'Nature' and 'future life', a future life that can be understood in light of the construction of environmental discourses based on an analysis of images used in generalised environmental awareness-building media campaigns (e.g., Brazil's most popular magazine, *Veja*; a business magazine, *Isto é*; a magazine that specialises in sustainability, *Página 22* and the websites of some environmental movements, such as *Greenpeace*). Using a psychoanalytical approach, the conclusion is that what is in play in these images is an 'aesthetic of the pulse of death', based on a portrayal of degraded environments and apocalyptic phenomena. This

eschatological scenario, the destruction of the Earth and especially of mankind, is in fact recurrent in environmental articles and the media and has invoked the feeling of guilt as ‘something that is characteristic of the impasse of man with culture and civilisation, regardless of the cultural formation in which it develops’ (Corbucci, 2011: 163). Discourses about environmental catastrophes related to blaming our daily acts of consumption have also been recurrent in documentaries, such as *An inconvenient truth*, by former US vice-president Al Gore, and films such as *The day after tomorrow*, which are two prominent examples.

The problem, as Corbucci’s study demonstrated, is that feelings of guilt combined with feelings of catastrophe act are immobilising. This is why the author shows how the images of destruction aired by the environmental *awareness* campaigns invite individuals to express a fundamental ambivalence:

On the one hand such images may be taken as an expression of good sense and of the desire to avoid catastrophe: they justify the need for risk prevention through technological investments and a change in daily habits. On the other hand they present an irresistible and inexorable spectacle; the power of man to destroy what before was considered indestructible. (Corbucci, 2011:164)

Final considerations

According to discourse theory, dislocation leads to different reactions and discursive articulations. This study has tried to demonstrate how the business media has dealt with this issue in the construction of the responsible consumer. It is interesting to note that references to environmental catastrophes, the need to save the planet and the extinction of certain species are not the key points in the articles analysed in this research. Such themes are surreptitiously interspersed in the texts merely to sustain other central arguments: the power of science and technology, the proactive role of companies in their responses to the environmental crisis, the guilt and de-politicisation of consumers and the possibility of their redemption through the market.

The production of guilt is especially linked to this broader crisis scenario and the possibility of an environmental hecatomb, which is reported upon by the broader media; but what is emphasised is the possibility of consumers to redeem themselves through responsible consumption. One of the nodal points of the media and marketing discourse is the ‘environment’, with the two magazines rearticulating this notion in their own terms: the environmental crisis is not presented from the perspective of nature but from the perspective of the agents that are central to this process, which are companies and responsible consumers.

Continuing with the discourse theory we therefore observe how the construction of the responsible consumer by the business media may be understood as the articulation of a number of pre-existing elements (climate change, the environmental crisis, responsibility, ecological conscience) within a new configuration that transforms these meanings, producing a new discourse that results in the proposal of redemption as merchandise; in other words, it is not necessary to stop consuming, but to consume in the right way, from the right companies.

In this scenario, there is no politicisation but a market of redemption: from the end of consumption to consumption of the end. This is why consumer movements that are critical of the consumer society are denied. Our consumption patterns can only be questioned with the permission of and regulation by the consumer society itself with the purpose of defending it. The most telling example of this is the way in which the most radical activists involved with the defence of the environment have been classified as 'domestic terrorists' (Smith, 2008). By radicalising their criticism of consumption and vandalising the icons of consumer society, these eco-terrorists, who in Lacanian terms could be considered the *excess* of the consumer society, challenge 'the ideology of endless growth and cornucopian choice and therefore the ontological security of this model' (Schwarzkopf: 121).

In other words, radical criticism of the consumer society also affects the way in which contemporary society has learned to subjectively constitute itself for at least a century, since the consumer culture became hegemonic. The Real also appears from this perspective of the end of the symbolic references that sustain the idea of the subject of the consumer society evoking, therefore, the theoretical and methodological premise of this research that discourses are constructions that are contingent on reality. This is why this media and marketing discourse can perhaps establish its meanings better in this discursive war about the environmental crisis.

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