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Isleide Arruda Fontenelle

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Global responsibility through consumption?

Resistance and assimilation in the anti-brand movement

Isleide Arruda Fontenelle
Getulio Vargas Foundation, São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to question the possible reach of anti-brand movements and, by extension, those movements that criticize capitalism via consumption, in order to reflect on the impasse in critique, given the new formats that capitalism has assumed.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper takes as the object of its analysis the book *No Logo* and it is supported by qualitative research into the production of the discourse about the responsible consumer in the business media, as well as in books and articles published about the assimilation of resistance, and especially about anti-consumption and anti-brand movements.

Findings – The relationship between the empirical findings of the research – the production of the responsible consumption discourse, in the period before, and after the anti-brand movements – and theoretical articles about empowerment and consumer accountability in the modern day shows how the assimilation of resistance occurred, via the responsible consumption discourse and also draws attention to its limits. Although the qualitative research used in the article was not initially planned for use in it, its findings were incorporated because they are widely applicable to what was being proposed.

Originality/value – The papers originality lies in the fact that it shows the point that a criticism movement has reached after ten years. Although this was already clear to the author in 1999 when *No Logo* was written, a decade later it is possible to state that the movement has been assimilated by the market, especially since the appearance of the discourse of "responsible consumption". What is completely novel in this article is this co-relation. At the end, the article also points to the social risks of attributing a large degree of accountability to individuals for consumption.

Keywords Consumers, Consumer behaviour, Social responsibility, Brand awareness

Paper type Conceptual paper

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1. Introduction

This article argues that the "responsible consumer" discourse is partly the result of the protest movements against global brands that gained a large degree of prominence with the "Battle of Seattle", in 1999, especially in the way in which it was assimilated by the media and large corporations. It reflects on resistance and the assimilation of resistance by the consumption culture, pointing out the limits of a resistance that are based on making the consumer accountable.

In order to discuss the anti-brand movement, the book *No Logo* by Canadian journalist Naomi Klein, was taken as the object of analysis. If, on the one hand, it was taken as a faithful copy of the movement, on the other, the author took on herself the responsibility of being the "voice of the movement". In her own words: "It was good timing for an author-activist. I had the rare privilege of watching my book become useful to a movement I believed could change the world" (Klein, 2009a), as she wrote in

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the article that commemorates ten years since the Battle of Seattle and also commemorates the tenth anniversary of her book.

According to Klein, the anti-brand movement was configured as an anti-corporation movement that used company brands as the targets for criticism that aimed to affect their worth. This could be attacked by targeting the brand institutionally and forcing companies to adopt more responsible practices, like better salaries and working conditions, or seeking to conquer hearts and minds by unmasking the obscene practices of the brands, which could attract consumers and their "activism" to this fight, or at least, to assuming an individual position of denying these brands.

So, all this "patrolling" ended up forcing corporations to look for discourse about shared accountability with their consumers, which led to a boom in "ethical businesses" (Lipovetsky, 2004), among which corporate social responsibility practices, and their correlated "responsible consumption", are the most obvious, as this paper will show.

But if we have more ethical capitalist organizations and a corporate discourse that calls for a responsible consumer, might we not claim victory for this movement? With the purpose of questioning just how "easy" this victory was to achieve, this article poses two central questions: the first questions the quality of the corporate response to this claim, because when it is analyzed in detail the responsible consumer discourse assimilated the criticism for aspects of choice, blame and individual accountability, and sold redemption as a commodity.

On the other hand, at the radical criticism level, it questions the possible extent of the resistance, in other words, the criticism of global brands in terms of consumption, as Klein also proposed: "What the corporate media insisted on calling the anti-globalization movement was nothing of the sort. At the reformist end it was anti-corporate; at the radical end it was anti-capitalist . . . " (Klein, 2009b, p. xviii).

The "reformist" perspective, to which Klein refers, only aims at more socially responsible forms of organization. The evidence that the anti-brands movements have been one of the major promoters of the discourse about "responsible consumption" came, first of all, from contact with academic literature that focused on discussing resistance through consumption, which refers back to analyses that focused on the critique of consumption (Heath and Potter, 2005; Frank, 1997; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Varman and Belk, 2009), on the theories of the resistance of the anti-brand movement (Holt, 2002), on the rise of the corporate discourse about responsible consumption (Caruana and Crane, 2008) and on consumer doubts and insecurity within a context "of growing individualization, in which individuals feel at the same time empowered and responsible for dealing with the global risks to the planet and to themselves" (Connolly and Prothero, 2008). This is, therefore, literature that uses consumption to question the limits of resistance. Some of these articles were directly influenced by the discussion that started in *No Logo*. For instance, Holt (2002) uses the movement as recounted by Klein to carry out empirical research in order to challenge the existing theories about resistance through consumption.

In adding to this academic debate, this article presents qualitative research that was carried out by the author into the responsible consumption discourse in the business media from an analysis of two publications, the English *The Economist* and the Brazilian *Exame*. Based on the discourse analysis methodology (Fairclough, 1993), the 1996-2007 period was chosen to check in what way the discourse of responsible

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consumption was produced over these 12 years and in what way it resignified the struggle of anti-brand movements – a struggle which was based on a collective logic of conflict - becoming a discourse in which the individual is made entirely responsible for consumption. So, the theoretical material, along with the research carried out, sustain the proposition that anti-brand movements have been, in part, responsible for the birth of the "responsible consumer". The intention behind this statement is that they were not the deliberate producers of such a discourse. On the contrary, the basis of the claim of these movements was a collective struggle, but they were absorbed and resignified by the media from a purely individualizing perspective, thus becoming its opposite.

Beyond this perspective of reformist critique, as Klein points out in the phrase cited previously, at the core of the anti-brand movements was a radically anti-capitalist purpose, which refers back to the second question of this article, which is, whether it is possible to construct a radical critique of capitalism from this type of protest. In this aspect, the academic analyses of the movements went beyond being a debate about the book, *No Logo*, to look for an understanding of the meaning of what appeared to be an absolutely new type of resistance and that started to challenge the classic literature on the possibilities of criticizing and triumphing over capitalism.

Analyzed, from academic literature, as being global resistance movements, anti-globalization movements and even new social movements, such forms of protest started to challenge a classic Marxist concept of resistance based on class struggle, transferring the heart of the debate from a policy centered on the state to new forms of policy focused on civil society's capacity for articulation, inspired in identity policies, in post-colonialism and in the search for people's self-determination (like the movements that focused on the struggles of the Indians, blacks, women and others). In this sense, the academic debate revolved around questions like the reach and limits of democracy and of a possible global civil society, as well as dealing with the social, economic, cultural and political transformations that started to challenge the classic model of society conceived in terms of a class of producers (Laclau, 1992; Daly, 1991; Mouffe, 1992; Norris, 1992; Salecl, 1994; Escobar, 2004; Fraser, 2007, Eschle, 2005; Löfgren and Thörn, 2007; Nash and Bell, 2007; Vargas, 2003; Magala, 2006; Kingsnorth, 2005; Murphy, 2009). From this perspective it is important to notice that the role of the consumer as "citizen" and his reformist perspective move out of the limelight and another debate comes into the picture that aims to put the theory about resistance in check, at the same time that it seeks to advance in theorizing on the possibilities of a critique that radically alters the present.

As Parker (2002) points out in the excellent review he wrote of *No Logo*, it is precisely this theoretical articulation about the reach and limits of the critique that is lacking in Naomi Klein's work. For instance, Klein rejects out of hand "the critiques of advertising that have traditionally come out of academe" because these "have been equally unthreatening, though for different reasons. Most such criticism focuses not on the effects of marketing on public space, cultural freedom and democracy, but rather on ads' persuasive powers over seemingly clueless people" (Klein, 2009b, p. 303).

The theoretical production of philosopher, Theodor Adorno, helped clarify this point when he showed how much the effects of marketing on democracy – and therefore on the public sphere – were profoundly influenced by the forming of a subjectivity that was encapsulated by the socialization processes that were already widely conducted by the logic of consumption. Although this article does not intend to

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look in the direction of the subjective logic of the conflict, it is the Frankfurt School theory, especially the formulations of Adorno and Horkeheimer (1976) on the objective logic of the cultural industry, which form its theoretical inspiration taking into consideration that it was critical theory that first pointed to the impasses in the critique of and resistance to capitalism. In this sense, the following two books will be considered throughout this article and will be central for sustaining the theory of the assimilation of the critique by the consumer society: *The Spirit of New Capitalism* by French sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) and *The Name of the Brand: McDonald's, Fetishism and Disposable Culture* by the author of this paper (Fontenelle, 2002). In both books, the authors showed how much the Frankfurt School writings inspired the denunciation movement of the consumption society, at the same time that Adorno assumed the impasse of the critique when faced with its co-option by a capitalism that was increasingly seductive in its responses. In this sense, what this article will try to show is how the relationship between resistance and assimilation in consumption culture arose from the anti-corporate struggles and that its end result was the production of the "responsible consumer".

The article is divided into two parts: in the first part there is discussion about the assimilation process of the anti-brand protests, from an analysis of the book *No Logo*, showing how criticism movements were given new meaning with the rise of "cynical publicity" and the discourse about the "corporate-citizen". These are important for showing the backdrop against which the discourse of "responsible consumption" formed; this will be dealt with in the second and final part, which also reflects on the limits of a resistance that led to global accountability through consumption.

2. From "cynical publicity" to the "corporate-citizen": corporate responses to the *No Logo* movement

If it is possible to attribute a symbolic date to the movement that became known as "anti-brand" it would be when the protests took place in Seattle in 1999, when there were demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO), which brought together representatives from various protest groups: trade unionists, environmentalists, anarchists, humanists and students, who demonstrated against neo-liberal politicians, the attack on human rights, global capitalism, the environmental threat and other issues. For Klein this was just the fuse that set off a broader resistance movement that had been consolidating in different countries around the world: these were the "anti-corporation" movements, a term that indicated the convergence of many movements that aimed to separate their struggles from something ethnic or local, in order to indicate a universal issue and a global enemy: neo-liberalism, as characterized by the worldwide power of the market. Such movements are substituting the traditional movements, now in decline: trades unions, religions and political parties. This is, therefore, a new form of conflict, characterized by non-mediation by the state, which appeals directly to the market and uses as its protest arm the risks to the publicity image of companies.

The intention behind *No Logo* was to look for the first stages of this resistance and to understand "what are the forces pushing more and more people to become suspicious of or even downright enraged at multinational corporations, the very engines of our global growth?" (Klein, 2009b, p. xli). With this purpose Klein undertakes an extensive review of all anti-brand movements and the reasons why they

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sprang up during the 1990s, her hypothesis being that it was the attack on the three social pillars of employment, civil liberties and civic space that was causing anti-corporate militancy, a militancy that was sowing the seeds of a genuine alternative to corporate rule.

After describing how we became a "branded world" and how this world altered our space, our choices and our labor market, Klein dedicates the last part of her book to understanding the different forms that manifestations against brands take, beginning with "culture jamming", a term coined by sound-collage band, Negativland, in 1984, indicating a rewriting of original advertising, which alters its meaning and proposes a meaning the movement considers to be representative of what the advertising is really suggesting. "A good jam, in other words, is an X-ray of the subconscious of a campaign, uncovering not an opposite meaning, but the deeper truth hiding beneath the layers of advertising euphemism" (Klein, 2009b, p. 282).

An example of this movement is the Canadian magazine, *Adbusters*, which was founded in 1989. Seeking to locate the inspiration behind this movement in Guy Debord (1994), and the French situationist movement of the 1960s, Klein emphasizes that, just like those who criticize the whole conformist ethos of a bourgeois society that has already been taken over by dominant capitalism, culture jammers prefer to focus on advertising, which has become the dominant force of our time.

It is also from the advertising area that the first corporate response to this "esthetic of resistance" seems to come. It is no accident that in the same period French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky was already pointing to what he defined as the beginning of "nonsense" advertising: "a commercial that means nothing, has no intention of making sense and that is increasingly taking the 'logic of the absurd, the game of meaning and non-meaning . . . " (Lipovetsky, 1993, p. 138) to the extreme. But as the author himself admits:

> . . . the advertising spot is not nihilistic, does not descend into verbal incoherence and absolute irrationality, because its declarations are controlled by the wish to place in evidence the positive worth of the product (Lipovetsky, 1993, p. 138).

In harmony with this interpretation is American cultural critic, Thomas Frank, author of the book: *The Conquest of Cool* (Frank, 1997), in which he analyses how the counter-culture movements of the 1960s injected new inspiration into the market and into the renewal and perpetuation of the consumer society. In seeking to understand cultural production and corporate power, rather than consumer reception and resistance, in order to clarify how business culture ended up fusing with the counter-culture of the 1960s and generated "hip" or "cool" consumerism, the author captured a type of advertising that is said to be capable of inciting revolt, transgression and revolution.

The 1990s saw an explosion of a type of advertising considered "cynical" by many of its critics. Various brands resorted to this type of artifice, among which the jeans brand Diesel, which even incorporated the critical content of the anti-brand movement that was present in culture jamming and used it in an obvious way in its famous "Brand O" campaign, by showing, among other things, a hoarding with a bus full of exhausted workers alongside a beautiful, thin and glamorous blonde. At the same time in which they propagated this and other campaigns of the same type sales of the Diesel

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brand exploded, going from U$2 million to U$23 million in just four years (Perman, 1997).

Klein was aware of this when she wrote *No Logo*. She even mentioned an unquestionable fact of this co-option capacity: in 1997 the band that created the term culture jamming, Negativland, was invited to do the sound track for a new commercial for the Miller beer brand. In refusing the invitation, band member Mark Hosler angrily exclaimed:

> They utterly failed to grasp that our entire work is essentially in opposition to everything that they are connected to, and it made me really depressed because I had thought that our esthetic couldn't be absorbed into marketing . . . It's not just the fringe that's getting absorbed now – that's always happened. What's getting absorbed now is the idea that there's no opposition left, that any resistance is futile (Klein, 2009b, p. 299).

But Klein says she is not certain of this, betting that this corporate response did not disarm his anti-marketing rancor and that, in fact, it may have had the opposite effect. Is this so? If we are to believe Canadian professors, Heath and Potter (2005), what happened was the opposite: the magazine, *Adbusters*, the flagship of culture jamming, developed its own running shoes, the Block Spot Sneaker, under the signature of its subversive brand and put them on sale. For the authors this was a turning point in the culture of revolt because after this, which happened in 2003:

> . . . no rational person could believe that there would be tension between mainstream and alternative culture . . . After this day it became clear to everyone that the cultural rebellion, of the type symbolized by *Adbusters*, does not challenge the system, but it is the system (Heath and Potter, 2005, p. 3).

The editor of *Adbusters*, Kalle Lasn, argues that his idea was to "to uncool Nike", by proposing cool trainers that were not manufactured in outsourced and "exploited" plants. But for Heath and Potter, fair trade and ethical marketing are revolutionary ideas and certainly do not represent any threat to the capitalist system, because if consumers are prepared to pay more for trainers made by well-treated workers or eggs laid by happy hens, it is because there is money in play in order for these things to circulate in the market. This is a business model that has already been successfully exploited by brands like Body Shop and Starbucks, signaling a new trend for brand capitalism.

In fact, the protest movements against major brands were not confined to a battle of images, but a battle of values, too. These movements can assume many forms, from "the socially respectable to the near-terrorist" (Klein, 2009b, p. 325). But Klein deals with brand-based campaigns that "have succeeded in rattling their corporate targets, in several cases, pushing them to substantially alter their policies" and in doing so have "reached well beyond activist circles and deep into public consciousness" (Klein, 2009b, p. 365).

Because of this, she dedicated a whole chapter of her book to three major brands, Nike, Shell and McDonald's, to show the strength of the human rights campaign when it came to criticizing the exploitation of labor in Nike's plants in Asia, especially in the USA; the environmental militancy against Shell in Great Britain, Germany and The Netherlands; and the rights' activism in the struggle of two militants from London Greenpeace against McDonald's, in what became known as the longest trial in the history of Great Britain and one of the biggest in the world. This even led to a book, in which journalist John Vidal (1997) recounts the story of the legal case brought by

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McDonald's against two London activists who, at the beginning of the 1990s, disclosed information considered to be unfounded by McDonald's and harmful to its image.

By denying McDonald's a "public apology" when the company issued a libel suit in 1990, the militants picked a tough fight that lasted seven years. In the end, in 1997, the court considered that some of the statements in the pamphlet that gave rise to the whole dispute (today known worldwide as "What's wrong with McDonald's?") were exaggerated in some points and found in favor of McDonald's, sentencing the activists to pay a large amount of money that would never have been demanded by McDonald's.

For Vidal, what lay behind this case were questions of image and moral, legal and human rights, which symbolized a struggle between two different worlds that try to be the alternative ideal of society: if McDonald's defended its image, behind it all was the question of the power of "McWorld", a term created by Benjamin Barber (1992) to refer to the free market economy, which is synonymous with homogenization, standardization and globalization. John Vidal considered this the broadest perspective to be discussed because, in his opinion, "McWorld" is one of the most dramatic factors of the change in power relations since colonialism began or communism ended.

For Klein, "the trial, which had been designed to stem the flow of negative publicity ... had been an epic public relations disaster for McDonald's" (Klein, 2009b, p. 387), bearing in mind that the courts are the only place in which companies are exposed to public scrutiny and the lesson to be drawn from the story of these three logos is that the institutional and legal way is possible when it comes to fighting large companies. That is why, for Klein, these movements sprang up together to launch three attacks on the public sphere: the attack on jobs (Nike), on space (Shell) and on the right to criticize (McDonald's). These companies lost the loyalty and respect of citizens "by abandoning their traditional role as direct, secure employers to pursue their branding dreams ... And by pounding the message of self-sufficiency into a generation of workers" (Klein, 2009b, pp. 441-2).

But if, at the level of the advertising image, the corporate response came through a direct and cynical absorption of the esthetic of resistance, in the shape of ironic advertisements, at the institutional level companies also started absorbing the discourse of greater social responsibility and making this their new marketing banner. The 1990s saw a boom in ethical companies. For Lipovetsky (2004) this new corporate discourse reflects a new form of global management that was guided by an ethical need by the organizational world to put the human dimension back into companies.

Although Lipovetsky's perspective leaves no room for thinking that the movement for "ethics in business" comes from social pressure – and not just from company choice – it helps us show how organizations began to react to the anti-brand movement. A concept that allows us to think about this question is that of "risk": corporate risk, as related especially to the losses caused to the reputation of the company by an "image crisis", with negative repercussions that directly affect its consumers' choices.

This, in fact, seems to be the great movement of the moment. For the professor of public policies from the University of California, Robert Reich:

> The social responsibility of companies has been transformed into the expectation of an answer to the paradox of democratic capitalism. This is now a hot subject in the business schools; in 2006, more than half of all MBA curriculums required students to take at least one discipline on the subject ... (Reich, 2008, p. 171).

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Reich remembers that even the United Nations Global Compact, launched in Davos in 1999, began emphasizing the importance of corporate social responsibility. So, even Davos, the headquarters of the World Economic Forum and the scene of so many anti-brand demonstrations, ended up adopting a discourse that seemed to belong to its counterpoint, the World Social Forum.

However, if, on the one hand, it is possible to point to corporate distortions related to the search for the image of the "corporate citizen", on the other, the idea of direct pressure on companies ended up leading to the logic of making people individually accountable. As they incorporated the criticisms of the movement, the business media and companies that serve as its mirror started to "call on" the consumer to be individually part of this process, thus, giving new meaning to the criticism of corporate images and actions, by absorbing another, more neutral discourse: that of the responsible consumer, which will be discussed in the following section.

The year 1999, when the first edition of *No Logo* was published, also saw the appearance of another book that, if it had been read jointly with Klein's book, could have cooled a lot of the tempers that had been inflamed by the journalist's war-cry. This is *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Boltanski and Chiapello who, starting from a rigorous empirical and theoretical analysis of the ideological transformations that have accompanied the changes in capitalism since the end of the 1960s, discuss the limits of resistance to capitalism and show how the critique assimilation process started in this period.

These authors believe it is crucial to make an important distinction between the social critique of the classic Marxist character and "claims of a very different type, with appeals to creativity, pleasure, the power of the imagination, to liberation referring to all dimensions of existence, to the destruction of the 'consumption society'" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999, p. 19), for which they reserve the name "esthetic criticism". While the difficulty of the critical work consisted in the impossibility of unifying the different reasons for indignation that these two types of criteria included, its effects on capitalism were also of a different order, leading it sometimes to incorporate certain critical claims and on other occasions "to escape demand for reinforcing the devices of social justice, making them more difficult to decipher . . . " (p. 63).

Criticism of capitalism in the 1960s had been esthetic, with claims of greater autonomy, creativity and authenticity. The response of capitalism had been extracted directly from this repertoire. In the field of labor these criticisms resulted in new corporate management devices, the aim of which were to make working conditions more attractive, but:

> . . . these themes, associated in the texts of the May movement with a radical criticism of capitalism (especially a criticism of exploitation) and with the announcement of its imminent end, in the literature of the new corporate management, found themselves up to a point made autonomous, transformed into objectives that are in themselves worth something and that are put to the service of forces whose destruction they intended to hasten (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999, p. 130).

This is what is perceived as far as the claim for autonomy is concerned: if in the field of labor this ended up being directed at questions of self-control and responsibility, *vis-à-vis* the demands of work and career risks, in consumption such a demand comes integrated with the idea of the sovereignty of the consumer and consequently of his accountability regarding his choices. In the analysis that he also makes of the

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anti-brand movement, challenging existing theories of the consumer's resistance capacity, Holt (2002) saw in the "commoditization of the consumer's sovereignty" important elements that are united with the theme of the claim of autonomy, one of the central pillars in the discourse of responsible consumption.

In Brazil, also in 1999, a PhD thesis in sociology, by the author of this paper, was finalized. This was published as a book in 2002 (Fontenelle, 2002), the title of which was *O nome da marca: McDonald's, Fetichismo e cultura descartável* (freely translated as *The Name of the Brand: McDonald's, Fetishism and Disposable Culture*). The author, starting from a study of the construction and development of the McDonald's brand, sought to understand the fetish of the brand in a society that had become a consumer of images. In this study, resistance to McDonald's during the constitution of the brand, which seemed profoundly radical at the time, when looked at from today's perspective proved to be just a struggle for insertion in the culture of consumption. The study showed just how much McDonald's incorporated these movements for improving its own brand, leading the author to doubt the effectiveness of the movement against brands.

The McDonald's brand was one of the most widely dealt with in the book, *No Logo*. In a study of the book's index there were 78 references to Nike and 45 to McDonald's. At the time Nike was being attacked because of its outsourcing policy, which used casual labor in Asian countries, and McDonald's became the symbol of negative globalization, assuming this imaginary place of capitalism without opposition after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Since *O nome da marca* was launched in the same year as *No Logo* was translated into Portuguese and the second World Social Forum took place in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, which Naomi Klein attended, comparison between the two books was inevitable, and Fontenelle was urged to include a chapter about those people who had begun to say *No Logo*. But the author took as her starting point the far from natural fact of social fascination with brands to reveal an increasingly depleted society, which encounters in brands its fetish and that makes the task of criticizing images somewhat complex and incapable of taking place on the pure "conscience" level. This critique of brands ended up becoming transformed into its opposite, as will now be seen.

3. Third act of the boomerang effect of brand-based militancy: the rise of the responsible consumer

The term "responsible consumption or consumer", and similarly-applied terms, such as "conscientious", "sustainable", "ethical", "rational", "activist", "citizen" and "green" made the headlines as the twenty-first century dawned and have recurred increasingly in the discourse of the media, companies and academia, alike. Analysis of the main articles published on the theme makes it clear how the terms used alternate, with each author assuming a theoretical position and defining the term from this particular position. It may be inferred that the use of "ethical, activist or citizen" generally refers to a group of consumers, to movements that question the values and excesses of the consumer society, sometimes gaining the connotation of consumer movements and at others anti-consumption movements (Soper, 2007; Jubas, 2007; Clarke, 2007; Schild, 2007; Trentmann, 2007; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Varman and Belk, 2009; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). When the terms used are "conscientious, responsible, sustainable or green", the focus almost always refers to a discussion about the role of

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the individual in his consumption decisions (Holt, 2002; Caruana and Crane, 2008; Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Carducci, 2008; Szmigin *et al.*, 2009).

It is the focus on individual action that is becoming predominant in the media and organizational discourse, as seen in the research of Caruana and Crane (2008), whose objective was to understand the role of corporations in constructing the nature, meaning and implications of "consumer responsibility". Based on an extensive bibliographic and documentary survey the authors showed how this discourse has been supported in the idea of "consumer sovereignty". Based on a Foucaultian concept and an empirical analysis of "ethical" travel tourist agencies, the authors showed how these companies, through their corporate communication, with support from the media and from government bodies, have come up with a discourse on responsibility that refers to a category of consumer "without conflict", thus limiting the possibility of a discussion about the tensions inherent in the question of choice and accountability.

In this article, the term "responsible consumption" is used, although some pieces of work cited here, and that were fundamental for understanding the phenomenon, referred to this process in other terms, as it is the case with the article by Connolly and Prothero (2008), who despite choosing the term "green consumption", dealt with the question of accountability, which has been addressed to consumers because of environmental problems within a social context of growing individualization, in an incisive and clear way. Based on empirical research with Irish consumers, and grounded in the theoretical tradition of the risk society (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) Connolly and Prothero pointed out the dilemmas, doubts and uncertainties of consumers when faced with the risks of making choices about things of which they do not have sufficient knowledge.

But it is precisely the question of individual accountability that has gained prominence in the discourse about consumption. Although it seems to be increasingly linked to the climate crisis, the discourse of responsible consumption refers back to the idea of a broader corporate sustainability, which articulates defense of the environment with fairer labor and trade relations. So from the point of view of concrete reality, a possible response to its rise would be in the fact that, given the pressure of corporate criticism movements, companies are being forced to develop a model of sustainable production as a business and image strategy. So, companies seek to disclose their "socially responsible" image through communication strategies that carry and add value to their actions, the aim being to reach a consumer who is prepared to make a "politically correct" choice and who recognizes and attributes value to such corporate strategies.

In defining such a consumer as "conscientious" the Akatu Institute argues that the consumer starts to have a fundamental role to play, especially "because of the choice of companies from which he is going to buy as a function of their social responsibility, is helping to construct a more sustainable and fairer society". The Akatu Institute is a Brazilian non-governmental organization that sprang up when its directors perceived that companies only became more deeply involved with social responsibility practices as consumers started valuing these initiatives in their purchasing decisions (www.akatu.org.br).

Labeling this form of consumption as "ethical", the authors and organizers of the book: *The Ethical Consumer* (Harrison *et al.*, 2005) say that this form of consumption refers to an act of purchasing (or not purchasing), in which the concerns of the process

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of consuming, with the impact that this may have on the economic, social or cultural environment, are implicit. It is circumscribed by the fact that the consumer thinks and worries about the effects that a choice to buy may generate for others and for the external world, for example, on the treatment meted out to workers involved in producing a certain product or on the environmental impact that certain products cause.

Lang and Gabriel (2005) suggest that such an attitude, which may be individual, only becomes public when it is condensed in a consumer movement or "consumer activism". This differentiation is important for the purposes of this article, bearing in mind that it is necessary to distinguish "traditional" consumer movements from anti-brand movements. Relating a brief history of consumer activism Lang and Gabriel (2005) show that it goes back as far as the nineteenth century, via stories of boycotts and the formation of purchasing cooperatives, such as the English cooperatives that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, formed as a reaction to excessive prices and poor quality products. These movements have their own history that persists until today through various national and international institutions. It is a well-known fact that 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 the new social movements (Buechler, 1995; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004); but it is not intended to get sidetracked on this debate, since it is assumed that anti-brand movements are not characterized as being consumer movements in the sense here attributed.

We started with the hypothesis that anti-brand movements made a strong contribution to the emergence of the discourse of individual consumer accountability. Part of this hypothesis was supported by qualitative research carried out into the discourse of responsible consumption in the business media, the methodology of which was based on Chiapello and Fairclough (2002), Parker (1992) and above all Caruana and Crane (2008), due to the methodological and thematic proximity of this article with the study object here reported.

Starting with an extensive bibliographic review of the theme and some definitions found in the media, a set of concepts were constructed, to be used when it comes to looking for discourse in the journals researched:

- *Conscientious consumption* – concerned with the individual impacts of consumption.
- *Green consumption* – seeks to preserve nature.
- *Sustainable consumption* – tries to guarantee that resources are not going to come to an end.
- *Ethical/activist consumption* – consumption is seen as a conflict area (only exists as a collective movement).
- *Efficient/rational consumption* – the minimum necessary is consumed.
- *Healthy consumption* – preserves health.
- *Responsible consumption* – tries not to cause damage; includes all the previous categories.

For each of these categories a report was issued from which a detailed analysis was made of the texts, in order to draw early conclusions (changes in the discourse over

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time, position of certain agents, and a comparison between the two publications) and to guide continuation of the analyses.

The initial and broader objective of this research, which is as yet unpublished, is to analyze the discourse of accountability that surrounds the climate crisis, the production of guilt and redemption as a commodity, understanding how the crisis was resignified by the business media, by virtue of their strong ties with corporations. The year 1996 was chosen because this was the moment in which negotiations about the Kyoto Protocol began; and 2007 because this was the year the research concluded. However, during analysis of the data it was seen that there were practically no topics related to the theme of consumer in periodicals before the emergence of the conflicts that started in Seattle and it became noticeable how the theme of responsible consumption had become linked to the protest movements. It was also seen how much these publications incorporated a double discourse: on the one hand, leveling sharp and depreciative criticism against the anti-brand movements, using words such as "living with the enemy" (*The Economist*, 2003), while it absorbed their criticisms in a resignified way, relating responsible consumption to individual attitude.

Therefore, research data have been used here with the objective of supporting the hypothesis that responsible consumption grew largely out of a media and corporate response to anti-brand movements. It was seen, for example, that in the 2001-2002 period, the "post-Seattle" years, as the anti-brand movements became known, there were various articles that portrayed the participants of the anti-brand movements in a depreciative way and that this interpretation persisted throughout the decade:

> With security high, the few anti-globalization 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 organizations 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 (*The Economist*, 2001).

> According to the new ideology, today's world would be dominated by huge corporations that would be interested in earning a lot of money at the cost of the health of people and the planet, and NGOs would have the heroic role of combating them. In this struggle it is necessary to rock the pillars of the capitalist system – companies, multinational organisms, governments – with all the arms that come to hand. It might be by dressing up as a chicken. It might be by laying siege to meetings of the International Monetary Fund. It might be by disclosing often doubtful or simply wrong information about deforestation in the Amazon … (*Exame*, 2006).

At the same time, a discourse was being constructed about the individual consumer and his accountability, which absorbed the criticisms of the movements that had by now embarked on another course, that of socially responsible companies, a theme which started to appear more strongly in their discourse:

> "People don't buy hybrids for fuel economy", says Mr Lutz. "They buy one to make an environmental statement" (*The Economist*, 2004).

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> When the consumer demands healthy environmental practices – by buying, for example, only certified wood – it is natural that companies that follow these practices are going to be the most profitable (*Exame*, 2005).

As the post-Seattle years faded from memory, the discourse of the media increasingly constructed a "policy of the individual", emphasizing the sovereignty of the consumer and non-intervention by the state. As it was impossible to transcribe all the phrases found the following is one of the most representative:

> If you think you can make the planet better by clever shopping, think again. You might make it worse "You don't have to wait for government to move . . . the really fantastic thing about Fair-trade is that you can go shopping!" So said a representative of the Fair-trade movement in a British newspaper this year. Similarly Marion Nestle, a nutritionist at New York University, argues that "when you choose organics, you are voting for a planet with fewer pesticides, richer soil and cleaner water supplies." The idea that shopping is the new politics is certainly seductive. Never mind the ballot box: vote with your supermarket trolley instead. Elections occur relatively rarely, but you probably go shopping several times a month, providing yourself with lots of opportunities to express your opinions. 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 globalization 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 (*The Economist*, 2006).

This is, therefore, just a small sample of how much this call for individual accountability is a constant theme in the material analyzed by the two publications over the years 1996-2007, at the same time that the most radical anti-brand movements were being assimilated and given new meanings by corporate and media language.

Even when reinforcing the importance of the collective, Klein ends up fueling the fire of such discourse when she emphasizes that "gathering" knowledge about how the world functions is "crucial to the survival, not just of democracy but of the democracy of the planet". Although she recognizes that it is very complicated, stating that "we embraced that complexity because we were finally looking at systems, not just symbols" (Klein, 2009b, p. xxix).

It has been precisely this complex task that has been attributed to individuals by the discourse of responsible consumption. In research by Connolly and Prothero (2008) the participants:

> . . . felt they had an obligation to and could act to address global (and local/national) environmental issues. At the same time, they also felt uneasiness about how to act. The feelings of empowerment described are not in opposition to or detached from the accompanying feelings of confusion, ambivalence or uncertainty, but are in fact, a result of feeling of being individually responsible (Connolly and Prothero, 2008, p. 141).

Although corporate discourse about the responsible consumer does not result directly from the anti-brand movements, the authors also indicate that this was one of the main reasons for the rise of such a discourse. That is the case of the authors Caruana and Crane (2008), who refer us to the article of Herz (2001) who proposes that the accountability of the consumer is an effective way of achieving political objectives, bearing in mind that companies would respond to this demand.

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The dilemmas produced in individuals when faced with the challenge of assuming responsibilities that are increasingly global have also been pointed out by Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek, considered one of the main representatives of the radical left in contemporary life. According to Zizek:

> . . . the theory of the risk society and its global reflections is correct when it emphasizes that today we are in the extreme opposite position of the classic, universal and enlightenment ideology that presupposed that, in the long term, fundamental issues could be resolved by reference to the "objective knowledge" of the specialists . . . The point at which the theory of the risk society falls short is when it emphasizes the disagreeable, irrational situation in which we, ordinary people, are put: we are increasingly forced to decide, despite being aware that we are not in a position to decide . . . (Zizek, 2009, p. 157).

The problem is not even one of alleging a pretended corruption of science by the major corporations, on account of financial dependence. But not even science has been capable of offering replies, confronting individuals the whole time with the conflicting opinions of the specialists about the environmental consequences of a given product, either on the environment, or in the human body, as the debate about global warming or genetically modified food has demonstrated. Therefore, the individual is called on to "decide, but at the same time he receives a message that he is in no actual position to decide" (Zizek, 2009, p. 158).

Individual responsibility for consumption is, therefore, the end point of a battle that started in the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s, inverting its logic. The radical critique that, although coming from different philosophical orientations, had in common the wish "to put an end to the responsible individual for who the alternative between authenticity and inauthenticity is presented as an existential choice, denounced as pure illusion or an expression of the bourgeois ethos" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999, p. 457), has been turned completely around and is now presented as part of the marketing repertoire.

If, on the one hand, this discourse points to an assimilation of criticism, on the other it is necessary to indicate, in finalizing, some studies that point to the risks that the consumer may run when faced with the impasse of making choices and being held accountable for something that is beyond his capacity to understand and act on, as a result of such exhaustion (Salecl, 2005; Melman, 2003; Davis, 2005). Among the studies, the psychoanalytical analyses of Charles Melman, which point to the risk of a "voluntary fascism", in the sense of an extreme social desire for an "Other" that chooses for us (Melman, 2003), seem to corroborate the research carried out by Connolly and Prothero (2008) on the doubts and insecurity of the consumer with regard to the choices to be made. According to the authors, the fundamental dilemmas that people face challenge the idea that responsible consumption can be presented as a form of "choice policy".

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About the author

Isleide Arruda Fontenelle is an Associate Professor at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, Brazil, who lectures on criticism of culture in undergraduate and post-graduate courses, especially in consumption culture, ideology and public sphere themes. She is the author of the books *The Name of the Brand: McDonald's, Fetishism and the Disposable Culture* and *Post-modernity: Work and Consumption*. She has written various articles and book chapters related to ideology and criticism, and is currently involved in a research project that explores the media discourse relating to responsible consumption and the relation between this discourse and the hyper-accountability of the subject nowadays. Isleide Arruda Fontenelle can be contacted at: idefontenelle@uol.com.br

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