PERCEPTION AND ACCEPTANCE OF SOCIAL STRUGGLES – AN INCREASE OF VIOLENCE IN BRAZILIAN PUBLIC OPINION ON DIGITAL AGE

Abstract
We live nowadays, in Brazil, an estrangement, concerning social mobilization around collective struggles, to the point of being criminalized by the public opinion declared in the vehicles of wide-circulation of information. At the 2014 World Cup street manifestations, pulled by the black bloc tactic or by traditional union strategies, were widely rejected and ridiculed by the so-called Brazilian public opinion. This phenomenon reveals changes in the perception and acceptance of public space, political demands, and also the individual's senses of the common good. A very rapid change, if we consider recent re-democratization processes experienced during the last 30 years. The political opening in that season triggered social movements with political flags, as protection for children and teenagers, the elderly status, land reform among others. Such movements occupied the national scene and the popular imagination as legitimate ways to fight the government. How and why such changes in Brazilian public opinion were given is the present investigation about,
bringing analysis of behaviors and opinions built at virtual spaces, during the 2014 World Cup. Are there new habitus of collective life and struggles been formed at digital age? Which new senses of the common good can be pointed as directing such formation?

**Key-words:** Public opinion; Brazil; Social struggles; Habitus; Norbert Elias.

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**A percepção e o reconhecimento das lutas sociais – um aumento da violência na opinião pública brasileira na era digital**

**Resumo**

As mobilizações sociais em torno de lutas coletivas, no Brasil, têm sido criminalizadas pela opinião pública presente nos veículos de comunicação de largo alcance. Durante a Copa do Mundo de 2014, as manifestações nas ruas, feitas conforme a tática *black bloc* ou as estratégias sindicais tradicionais, foram rejeitadas e ridicularizadas pela opinião pública brasileira. Este é um fenômeno social que revela mudanças nos sentidos da percepção e da aceitação sobre o espaço público, as demandas políticas e, ainda, sentidos individuais em torno do que é comum a todos. São mudanças velozes, se considerada a recente redemocratização do país, ocorrida nos últimos 30 anos. A abertura política de então legitimou os movimentos sociais com bandeiras de luta como a proteção à infância e à adolescência, o estatuto do idoso e a reforma agrária, dentre outros. Tais movimentos ocuparam o cenário nacional e a imaginação popular enquanto meios para enfrentar os governos. Como e por que tais mudanças ocorrem na opinião pública brasileira é o que se propôe aqui investigar, ao trazer análises sobre comportamentos e opiniões construídos nos espaços virtuais, durante os eventos da Copa do Mundo em 2014. Haverá novos habitus coletivos em formação na chamada era digital? Quais sentidos do comum orientam tal formação?

**Palavras-chave:** Opinião pública, Brasil, Lutas sociais, Habitus, Norbert Elias.

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**Introduction**

Brazil lives a very particular context since the latter 2014 within the World Cup, the president elections events and the beginning of a political reform and a fiscal adjust, in 2015. In this scene, two social phenomena call attention: 1) the collective struggles that take a new character by direct and fragmental leadership actions and 2) the so-called Brazilian public opinion, expressed in digital mass media, which shifts in relation to social struggles, considering the last thirty years. Both phenomena reveal an objective/subjec-
tive increasing violence on social relationships nowadays in Brazil. Is there a new sense of the common good behind this increase of violence?

Thirty years ago Brazil was finishing a military dictatorship that lasted twenty-one years (1964-1985) and now, in October 2014, people went to the streets to ask for the return of military government. What has been shifting on Brazilian people expectations, hopes and needs? What’s happening with Brazilian’s public opinion? Where are the people whom struggle for democracy? Where are the flags that grew up in that season pro human rights, citizenship and liberty?

Nowadays, Brazilian people get up flags of violence, against everyone and anyone. Discourses are hate, punishment, prison, expulsion. Oppositional cultures, middle classes insatisfaction, democracy fragilities, as social theories are pointing, do not explain the shifts present on Brazilian public opinion. This paper intends giving another view to those phenomena, by interpreting them on a sociogenesis perspective from Norbert Elias studies, asking how and why Brazilian public opinion has changed in a period of thirty years.

On a sociogenesis perspective, the main argument is that in the last thirty years (1984-2014) Brazil social organization has been based on inequality and injustice as cultural habitus legitimated everyday by a tense local use of democratic instruments - as the access to official services, and to social, political and civil rights. Tension and conflict can be seen on practices of the every-day life as in the use of public transport, and sidewalks; in urban cleanliness or stranger compassion by indicate a place or so on. Since Norbert Elias contributions to social life study, some subjectives as perceptions and acceptances and involvement and detachment\(^1\) allow a deeper investigating basis to deal with subtle shifts on collective behaviour and public opinion. Those subjectives constitute dynamic relationships between people on their social nets.

In Brazil, almost ever, inequality practices are also stated and legitimate by conventional media as an actor who’s involved into public opinion processes. From the last ten years, a digital or virtual sphere is re-configurating relationships and building new cultural and individual habitus. Nonetheless, virtual media and nets constituting a new element on a new figuration in which old social and cultural bases of injustice and inequality still permanent. An explosion of violence appears in that new digital public sphere. How do virtual media, digital technologies and upload/download internet culture enclose public opinion? How does this public opinion enclose social fights and

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(des) legitimate them? How does public opinion reveals individual affections that spotlight the common sense of struggles, identities, stigma, intolerance and violence? Answers to these questions can be formulated as possibilities of interpretation by looking carefully to some vehicles of wide-circulation, published on internet support during the 2014/2015 – which is presented as an investigating exercise at this paper.

1. Public Opinion: perception and acceptance of violence

Suicide, incest, abortion, homicide – i.e., hard thematics in large periods of time can allow to consensus that may be interpreted as public opinion. Nevertheless, peace and consensus are not conquest conditions at all and the dynamic of social life frequently disorganizes the collective agreements. According to Durkheim, «Under the influence of some great collective shock in certain historical periods social interactions become much more frequent and active»\(^2\). By the author, collective life change to a state of intensity so «The result is the general effervescence that is characteristic of revolutionary or creative epochs… People live differently and more intensely than in normal times»\(^3\). Changing practices change opinions; so, it can be consider that public opinion is something in permanent construction on public spheres.

Once one’s consider contemporary epoch a «great collective shock» characterized by revolts, urban wars, digital identities and cultures, globalizations processes and, into them, fundamentalisms and radical movements, it should be asked about public opinion tendencies. But also it might be formulate questions about how and why some opinions became public and how and why social and cultural processes converge to construct a so-called public opinion.

Philosophers and sociologies had discussed the concept of public opinion and its involvements in modern societies and either in social theories. That perhaps is an outdated debate since Pierre Bourdieu affirmed that «Public opinion does not exist»\(^4\). However, people do continue increasing the uses of media to extern and to public their opinions nowadays all over the world.

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\(^3\) Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life*, op. cit., p. 213.

– which reposes the problem of public opinion as a social problem and as a sociological question.

The public opinion constitution – or the one which Habermas considers in «The criteria by which opinions may be empirically gauged as to their degree of publicness»⁵ originate from the games between public and private, and into them the constructions of visibilities and invisibilities. Such criteria have been developed «in reference to this dimension of the evolution of state and society»⁶. Yet, by the author, «such an empirical specification of public opinion in a comparative sense is today the most reliable means for attaining valid and comparable statements about the extent of democratic integration characterizing a specific constitutional reality»⁷. As Santos⁸ appoints, it is necessary to keep a distance from Eurocentric universal concepts – like public sphere – in an effort to open minds and possibilities of interpretation about social formations in their diversity and uniqueness.

In the same sense and looking to a prior figuration (that origins the bourgeois society), Elias⁹ analyses the French court-aristocratic figuration of the Ancient Regime (XVI – XVII centuries). Elias appoints to social games that an individual gets involved on at the expectative of been well accepted on court-aristocratic: etiquette, ceremony and conducts are manners of perception and acceptance by individuals in society. Elias points out those games based on objective and subjective habitus like the avoidance of some social opinions and the perception of social opinions’ pressure on individual prestige. These habitus conduct dynamics of involvement and detachment in collective questions, which is a so relevant theoretical locus to understanding a public opinion constitution process.

Thus, the following lines are the result of a confrontation to that question, by the examination of recent social history in Brazil’s democracy, guided by the theoretical perspective of Norbert Elias in the sense of human society’s reconfigurations. And, in consequence, a carefully look to changes in a raising of violence scales on processes of communication, relationship and public opinion construction supported by digital media and digital culture.

⁶ Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, op. cit., p. 244.
⁷ Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, op. cit., p. 245.
⁹ Elias, A sociedade de corte, op. cit.
2. Re-democratization and social struggles in Brazil

In Brazil, procedural mechanisms for constitution and enlargement of a public sphere – or what else converge to express, circulate and consolidate opinions – have been fixed by national characteristics as a long-term illiteracy and an insufficient educational system; a political practice ruled by a patriarchal and western Europe orientation in its structure, as a result of a predatory colonization. Those are old objective habitus, as pointed by Norbert Elias, that have been signifying a national identity and culture for so long. Also subjective habitus, as indulgence and empathies with elite groups, internal and external, have been contributing to build perceptions and acceptances of what is a Brazilian citizen – self-images and stigmas which are reinforced by conscious and unconscious acts of individuals and groups.

In consequence of those habitus, collective spaces of information and communication in Brazil have been figurate mediated since its origins by vehicles of wide-circulation of information as private enterprises. Since 1922, when radio broadcast was founded as a friend society; thus in 1950, when television broadcast was inaugurated by Assis Chateubriand and a few others press’ men, information’s circulation in Brazil has been done as an individual capturing of social demands and a general habitus of privatizing practices, spaces, abilities and resources of communication. Introduction of internet in Brazil, in the 1980’s, has obeyed the same logic of privatizing and capturing, legitimate by indulgences and empathies from people to their elites. Such figuration reveals a Brazilian habitus of social differentiation been produced across its social history by artificial limitations of access to infrastructure.

The construction’s dynamics of an information sphere – started by private people and institutions figuring a communication mediated by vehicles of wide-circulation of information – reveals a lack of public project to the Brazilian society and its people. Communication area and its configuration on capitalism basis are interesting examples of the Brazilian habitus to trend to detachment in spite of involvement – as it is discussed in Elias – in social questions and political struggles. In the 1980’s a storm of protests based on the idea of citizens’ rights changed slightly this habitus for a small period, carrying to the streets some demands and problems, for a moment assumed as

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collective questions. Nonetheless, the digital age carry people back to home as if the problems were solved and tip the balance again pro an individual behaviour.

In 1980’s scenery, some people have come to a new place in the Brazilian public sphere – or into discourses flowing at that time: women, children, agricultural workers, landless, native Indians have appeared as rights bringers. Flags like land reform and direct presidential election have occupied the streets and the collective imaginary on major Brazilian cities\(^\text{12}\). Adjusted to a global orientation in pro of democratic governments, Brazilian elite and people had been involved with the mechanisms of a Constituent Assembly and, half-unwillingly, with social problems and actors invisible until there. The Brazilian Federal Constitution – so-called a citizen one \(\rightarrow\), proclaimed in 1988 had opened the nation to a wide system of civil and social rights guarantee – not finished until now\(^\text{13}\). Constituent and Constitution processes had deflagrated organized social movements and orderly political protests mostly conducted by civil institutions from intellectual elites as the Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analyses (IBASE) and the Pastoral Care for Children, founded in 1983 as a National Conference of Bishops of Brazil’s organ for social action. That was the air of re-democratization lived in the 1980’s in Brazil\(^\text{14}\).

In the 1990’s and after the impacting movement for president Collor’s impeachment, Brazilian society had fallen asleep. Struggles had lead on an institutional paper or mission, concentrating efforts to build their acting spaces and to legitimate some questions as social problems, like domestic violence against women and children, (homo) sexuality, housing conditions. Gradient of perception and acceptance of re-democratization tipped to micro questions and these struggles’ flags, for many reasons, had a lower impact to involve Brazilian’s elite.

For example, IBASE had mobilized Rio de Janeiro’s society, in 1993, to a Citizen Action against hungry and misery and for life\(^\text{15}\). After an enchantment atmosphere, Brazilian society had given up the involvement, and hungry, misery and violence keeping on as conditions of life and as artificial con-


\(^{15}\) Portuguese original name: *Ação da cidadania contra a fome, a miséria e pela vida*. See more in [http://www.ibase.br/pt/linha-do-tempo/](http://www.ibase.br/pt/linha-do-tempo/)
ditions to detachment between social groups. The Brazilian people’s habitus to empathize with elite’s style do not allow them to involve with poor people’s problems or with themes that weren’t on media and public spheres. A public opinion about themes like land reform, poverty, health and education had consolidated as individual problems or a problem of the others; not as collective questions. In addition, world was changing fast its configuration by many globalization processes during those years. Economic transformations due to adjustments in work conditions were experienced in different countries, including Brazil. Brazilian people had heard the echoes of these transformation processes and isolated themselves in individual practices.

In the 2000’s, movements, activists and civil entities were dispersed over forums, associations and various fronts of struggles presented as rights to be guaranteed. The need for self-understand into struggles and movements’ institutionalization had detached people from social and political struggles. The first World Social Forum, in 2001, maybe was an answer’ seek to that state of affairs on Brazilian – and perhaps worldwide – public sphere. And even an attempt to public opinion in sense to re-placing collective questions, social problems and political acts. According to Santos16 the World Social Forum performs in a sense of raising the global left. It aimed to legitimate and turn visible common actors, flags and struggles all over the world to each other. Table 1 – as follows – is a briefing of flags and spheres of public opinion by periods at the last thirty years in Brazil.

Table 1- Social flags on Brazil’s *public sphere* by periods at the last thirty years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Flags</th>
<th>Public opinion spheres</th>
</tr>
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| 1980/1990 | Direct Presidential Elections  
Children Protection  
Land Reform  
Collor’s impeachment  
Democracy | Streets;  
mass media (mainly radio and diary news papers) |
| 2000/2010 | New rights as Culture and Communication  
Digital Television and Radio  
Against urban violence | Internet (email and restrict nets);  
Specific meetings and events |

As Table 1 shows, social figuration on Brazilian public spheres and on the development of public opinions about social struggles and collective problems changes since 1980’s until near the World Cup Meeting in 2014. In the 2000’s, a digital culture has been consolidate in Brazil’s society, in spite of the largely number of individuals not users of internet and computer. Such a cultural transformation – the introduction of a virtual space on relationships – means a significant shift in perceptions and acceptances by individuals in their habitus of consensus and opinions.


Digital media and digital culture reconfigure social and political organization and constitute new bases to relationships and processes of agreement. Many studies have already been trying to understand present and future characteristics of digital and virtual configurations into human life. But it is also important studying the long processes of formation and sharing of private opinions and public opinions on digital bases. So, this is the central point: current digital and virtual configurations revealed stocks from social history of a nation that converge on actions, expectations and needs to a new space of coexistence into which the tension between involvement and detachment could be partially reconciled.

Into a digital culture, distance and agenda do not exist. Life is really just now; online and in networks. By digital media one is able to convince others, begin a war, make peace and love, overthrow a government and destroy reputations, share emotions and opinions, using conventional (internet portals) or alternative media (blogs, photologs, social nets). Everyone, potentially, can upload a virtual space. Everyone can enunciate things, thinks, ideologies, feelings and fallings. That’s the scenery so expected by democratization’ struggles. Nevertheless, a question disturbs the exercise of democracy on digital con-
figurations’ societies: What does signify data in virtual spheres? Which senses of community and common good sustain social dynamic there?

In Brazil, media are – since ever – a reflex of the global North style on doing journalism. The creation of radio, television and newspaper did not originate as a social commodity but as a business one and was historically undertaken as an elite playing. An economic elite forged by the agrarian structure reserves information practices on mass media for its own pleasure. Practices of that elite reproduce on the communication field the culture of latifundio and oligopoly. What is original is that on the digital age, channels of communication and information have proliferated and, technically, all individual can express their opinions and know the opinions of others, whatever wanted, independent of the traditional media. Practically, what is happening? Brazilian society is reproducing that latifundio culture on its uses of virtual world and digital technologies. Each person on the virtual space seams to look for colonizing that space and the ideas circulating on there.

In contemporary Brazilian society, internet is used as a protagonist, what is revealed by number of users on blogs, sites, Facebook, Youtube and others channels. But comments of hot notices and posts on social networks are the most representative stage of virtual relationships. Racism, homophobia, social prejudice, machismo, region hates, xenophobia, religious fundamentalism. Four examples can be mentioned: a) the demand of a military government; b) a campaign to divide Brazil into North and South after the last president election in 2014; c) the black bloc mobilization and the counter-black bloc mobilization during the events of World Cup by 2013/2014; d) and mostly astonishing, the users’ commentaries’ posts on blogs.

All of those events were in virtual nets. During election period, users fought with each other publically, and many persons posted appeals of peace and control by their friends of Facebook. A military government request was the top of a high gradient of violence externalized on virtual nets. What’s the filter to a gradient of violence like it? Perhaps, a public opinion could guide the construction of intense expressivity and discussions’ spaces – in a word, a democratic space of communication – acting as a good filter established on respect and self-control. Nonetheless, the digital space is been used as a waste-land – yet in the latifundio culture.

Virtual nets attempt to necessities of speech and share knowledge, information or data – for a long time denied to people by the mass model of communication operated by capitalisms’ institutions. Nonetheless, the logic of analogue and mass culture continues on, exacerbated by an impunity sensa-
tion that comes from the wasteland digital space. It is possible to understand this phenomenon by interpreting the black bloc phenomenon during the World Cup at 2013/2014.

3.1. The black bloc mobilization and the counter-black bloc mobilization

The black bloc mobilization has occurred as a new in the Brazilians’ public scenery during the Confederations Cup in 2013. Known as a social struggles’ tactic, the black blocs in Brazil has brought together people from various virtual networks. Those people went to the streets in different cities holding the flags of education, health, public transport but also democracy, respect and liberty. They were organized as the north-American stream, that attacks State and capitalism icons. The Black Bloc is a concept and a tactic of direct action on political struggles, which had already occupied the streets all over the world. Their origins, as pointed by Dupuis-Déri, might be placed between the anarchists and the «West German Autonomous movement (Autonomen in German)». To the author: «The Autonomen strived to carry out ‘here and now’ an egalitarian and participative political practice, without leaders or representatives, in which individual autonomy and collective autonomy were complementary and of equal importance».

Virtual nets may bring out to social movements and social activists a perception of success in the direction of equality, autonomy and democracy. Nevertheless, conventional media – mass or digital one – act as a hard filter against equality, autonomy and democracy. In this sense, it brings the use of masks by the black bloc tactic, which appears as a big discomfort to the Brazilian’ public opinion what was exposed on conventional digital media in 2013. For example, on an online article from Veja it affirms: «Masked preparing to throw a Molotov cocktail, on a protest against World Cup at Rio de Janeiro» – as in photo 1. A masked is one who believes in political actions as social struggles, and that is the keynote of black bloc tactic. Though, on media discuss the mask represents criminality and vandalism – a stigma that follows up the matter of how public opinion interprets social struggles in Brazil.

The top was in the World Cup 2014 opening event, when a 16 years old activist has been taken off a protest march by his father, «literally des-masked by his father publically», according to the blog BrasilPost, associated to Abril, a Brazilian published house. A video clip made during the event has become the example of a self-image of father (responsible and clear-sighted) and of a stigma of younger (naïve and obedient). After that, a new media episode: the
young activist and his parent have been invited by Senator Eduardo Suplicy
to watch a Brazil’s game caring for the Constitution. Senator Suplicy wrote on
Facebook: «it is important the youth participation in protest marches, but not
with violence». The blog BrasilPost pointed out: «Black bloc pup has decided
to pull back, dismiss his masked friends […]. Whereas the private school tu-
ition has been paid, guaranteed by the sweat of a good dad, it is easy to have
time to literally detonate the capitalism system, isn’t it?!».

Photo 1 – Social struggles as violence

That public mass opinion reveals an increasing acceptance of objective and
subjective violence, which justify instruments of regulation, like the Masks
Law, sanctioned by São Paulo government in 2014. More revelatory is the
fact of site G117, act on this social history constructing a discuss that wants to
legitimate the Law, based on a reportedly information from military policy
that «violency in protests decrease when there is not ‘masked’ people».18

It is been configurating an age in which democracies are founded on vio-
lent social practices by enclosure the freedom to expression into stigmas and
self-images that legitimate discuss and performances, either on the streets or
on virtual nets. It is been configurating, as a result of long-term processes, a
digital age into which the seeming security at virtual nets allows to a new and
fragile freedom sensation.

17 See http://g1.globo.com/index.html
18 Original text: «a violência nos protestos diminui quando não há a presença de ‘mascarados’.»
Informational elite behave in virtual nets as the ones whom have privileged access to information and also know how to use that information (nor voting in a corrupt politician, neither involving into streets’ struggles as black blocs, for examples). Those commentaries playing the same role the gossip does into small communities, as pointed by Elias\(^\text{19}\): they derivate into coercions to the way of life for groups and for a singular person – a subjective violence practice. Nevertheless, it remains a question: How and why cyberspace changes public opinion in its discourse about political and social life in an increasing gradient of violence?

For such a question, it’s possible to go with Elias studies of emotion’s control. In virtual spaces, gestures and facial expressions are absent, which is a guarantee of security in relation to interlocutors’ interpretations. In court-aristocratic figuration, take control of emotions was a grand art at social life. In digital figuration, it is suppressed the art or ability to control emotions. Distance and mediation guarantee dissimulation and suppress the fear of been dis-masked by interlocutors, as if non enduring relationships allow ones relaxing the control of emotions.

**Last Considerations**

Specifically in Brazil, public opinion cools down in the last thirty years on perception and acceptance of political and social struggles despite of justice, equality and community. A subjective violence has been increasing and also its acceptance. Nowadays just individual freedom stills as a political flag that legitimate discourses. Is there a shock or an emergent fracture, as pointed by Durkheim? Is there a new stage of civilization, as theorized by Elias, in progress? Are there new senses of living in community emerging from this enlarged violent digital figuration?

What has changed on public spaces and public opinion at digital age remains an open question. The recent social history in Brazil’s democracy, as described here, offers some interesting clues in a perspective of changes on perceptions and acceptances that configure human society’s stages and specifically the subjective/objective significance of violence. These changes are transforming digital spaces into new public spaces of practices and relations. Are there new habitus of collective life and struggles been formed at digital

\(^{19}\) See Elias, *The established and the outsiders*, op. cit.
age? Is it possible to affirm that violence is a fundamental characteristic of the new civilization’ stage?

Virtual nets become a possible new locus of political expressivity, social struggles organization, and also of violence manifestation and regulation. After all, expectations and needs of individuals on societies define directions, meanings and involvements of collective life – so, the uses of digital spheres, which can be a locus to organize and spotlight the individual’s senses of the common good. Norbert Elias studies of emotions control and the civilizing processes offer a rich way to interpreting the news bringing by changes on objective/subjective behaves and opinions – particularly the violence with social struggles, and to reveal individual affections that spotlight the common sense of struggles, identities, stigma, intolerance and violence.

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