

The Street Carnival of São Paulo reflecting the polarised Brazilian society in 2019¹

Vera da Cunha Pasqualin²

Complutense University of Madrid

Abstract:

The intention of this article is to discuss how the *street carnival* of São Paulo (Brazil) reflects the polarization of society motivated by recent politic debate and the fragmentation of families and friendship circles in consequence of antagonistic discourses. The street carnival is a centenary popular cultural phenomenon that historically combines different cultural expressions to reflect the political moment of the society. São Paulo is the biggest city of Brazil and 2019 is the first year of former congressman and army military Jair Messias Bolsonaro administration as president of the country, in a controversial environment. Especially in this year, the carnival celebration in the city exposed the differences of public and ideas according to the neighbourhood and carnival block that the revelers choose to enjoy. It is possible to analyse the differences in sex, gender, corporeality, attitudes and political views across the diversity of carnival blocks that paraded through the streets of São Paulo, reflected in songs, discourses, political claims and corporal expression.

Keywords: Carnival, polarised society, cultural phenomenon, cities, communication, identity.

¹ Article presented in the conference “Emotions, Populism and Polarised Politics, Media and Culture”, University of Helsinki, August 2019.

² Master in Communication and Consumption Practices, ESPM-SP, Brazil. PhD Student. Doctoral program in Audiovisual Communication, Advertising and Public Relations, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain.

Introduction

Carnival is a mix of passions and a moment of tension relief, when Brazilians can dress up as their favourite characters and, for a lapse of time, pretending to be someone else, to have other roles, until Ash Wednesday. And everything goes back to normal, with the work routine resumed, the year starting over but with the energy recharged after intense days of celebration and, sometimes, lust.

This article will address the street carnival blocks in São Paulo, which often have their origin linked to the identity of one or another soccer team or region of the city, symbolizing the passions and thoughts of individuals who choose to enjoy this pagan party. An individual experience that expresses itself collectively to purge evils and recognize / be recognized for their ideals.

The focal point of this paper is to understand how the party is turning from pure leisure to a setting full of political symbolism. Carnival is traditionally a special, extra-ordinary, non-everyday moment, a ritual of bursting free expression, of fantasizing and being what you cannot be on other days of the year. It is a purge, a relief, an accepted excuse; however, what is currently observed in Brazil is that the individual who thinks she/he is expressing her/himself freely and individually is actually representing a mass expression, without even realizing that her/his party moment is transformed into a political act. The reveler is yet another piece of the antagonistic idea game, manipulated by imperceptible forces in the midst of much glitter, confetti and serpentine.

For decades the idea was cultivated that Carnival is the only party without an *owner*. Is that so? Today it can be said that however *democratic* and *open* this party is, the power and hierarchy manifested in the party always appears in one way or another and the intertwining between party and politics is what we are interested in expressing in the following pages.

Street Carnival

The street carnival is a popular cultural expression that helps to create the Brazilian identity. It is very sensitive to social values that can be reflected in its multiple cultural manifestations and can be considered as a unique point in the country's calendar that helps to shape the society according to the specific moment.

Carnival is essentially popular and without a clear *owner* despite having private organizations taking care of the party and governments supporting the event in a broader sense. Originally, neighbours or soccer team fans that wanted to express their passions, created the carnival groups to enjoy street parties during the week of carnival. Nowadays, local governments take ownership of the party and what once had a more local character expands through the media and spreads throughout the city and increases duration, making choices more ideological, with a variety of niche options, reflecting different tastes, rather than only geographical distribution.

Brazilian anthropologist Roberto DaMatta explains that, in his country,

The individuality is strongly marked by Carnival as a moment in which a whole set of gestures, attitudes and relationships that are lived and perceived as instituting and constituting our own heart can be combined. Carnival is therefore close to those perpetual institutions that allow us to feel (rather than abstractly conceive) our own continuity as a group. (DaMatta, 1997, p. 30)

DaMatta (1997:46) continues defining Brazilian carnival *as national ritual, founded on the possibility of dramatizing global, critical and comprehensive values of Brazilian society.*

This particular party can be understood as individual expression, making part of the collective, as a mass that communicates its identity using different cultural ways, exposing opinions in songs, dances, styles, gestures. Although it takes place in public spaces and is considered a democratic event with popular shades, street carnival can be recognized as a place of distinction and hierarchy. It is a place of power dispute and consolidation of ideology.

São Paulo as a communication platform to express political views

São Paulo is the biggest city of Brazil, with more than twelve million inhabitants, and the financial centre of the country. Its population is formed by an amalgam of different cultures, migrants from all over Brazil and the world, making it one of the most diverse cities.

Financial and industrial development is not the only perspective that can explain the importance of São Paulo for the Latin American region. Although the city has never been the capital of the country (as is the case of Rio de Janeiro), São Paulo has always been in evidence in national political decisions, yet it is possible to say that one of its most important assets is its cultural dynamics.

Néstor García Canclini contributes to understand the city as per its communication aspect and how cultural experiences help to build its identity.

Are we transforming cities through knowledge and culture or are we turning them into a cultural show without modifying structural disorders? The spectacularization of the social has existed for centuries (masses, parades and other mass rites), but its hypertrophy in times of industrialization of culture increases the risk of deviating from the satisfaction of social needs: in the urban sphere, the reduction of the city to spectacle is associated with the predominance of marketing and the acquisition of investments in the social sense of material and symbolic goods. In Latin American cities, this process was accentuated when there was a change from industrial city to communication city. (García Canclini, 2008, p.19)

Rituals are used as a way of expressing beliefs and values and go beyond the physical boundaries of the event when they are highlighted by the media, transforming formerly local activities into spectacles and producing *consumers* that believe they are *buying* one symbolic good when they participate in a specific festivity but they could be being manipulated to build an hegemonic discourse, without even noticing it. (Lipovetski; Laclau; Mouffe)

Cities are spaces of dispute, places for political debates and manifestation and São Paulo is no different from London, Madrid or Chicago in this sense. The urban parties, such as the street carnival, can be seen as a political expression itself that contributes to create a scenario that, helped by the mass media, can make or destroy images.

Although São Paulo is known for its diversity and extensive cultural offer, the carnival was not strong there until the last decade. However, during the mandate of Mayor Fernando Haddad, between 2013 and 2016, there was a series of actions to inspire the *street* to make part of the daily life of its citizens. Cycle paths were created throughout the city, new public parks and green areas were opened, the public transportation were stimulated and some important public roads such as *Paulista Avenue* were opened on Sundays for pedestrians and bicycles, as a huge public leisure area, where citizens can take ownership of the city and enjoy all its cultural diversity.

This was only the beginning of a movement that promotes the feeling of pride of São Paulo population. Step by step, the *street*, historically dominated by traffic, and the citizens that used to know the city through the window of cars and busses, is now having a protagonism in the life of the city. This approach prompted *tepid* street carnival blocks to break out of latency and dominate public spaces, in a joint initiative of society and local government.

In 2017, João Doria Junior took office as mayor of the city of São Paulo and applied all his business expertise to support the city's street carnival with the infrastructure required to attract revelers in a more organized way. For the carnival of the following year, the local government spread the festivities throughout the city, creating a variety of pathways in streets and avenues for the party, enabling new groups that appeared in different neighbourhoods. The result is that, nowadays, the people of São Paulo, that used to run away from the city during carnival, wants to enjoy the holiday there and people from other parts of the country and foreigners consider this city as one of the top destinations to celebrate this party.

This process, of course, was possible considering not only the participation of Government and society, but also the communication system that plays an important

role to build the new image of São Paulo: from a place to work, to place to partying and enjoyment.

Brazilian political scenario

After almost four presidential mandates with Labour Party taking control of Federal Government in Brazil, the presidential campaign in 2018 was marked by hate discourse, putting the society, families and friends against each other because of political differences.

Fake news, aggressive discourses, manifestations, social media... many different elements were used to create a self-called *myth* who finally won the seat of the highest office in the country. Jair Messias Bolsonaro is now the President of Brazil, a former congressman and army military who is not ashamed to express his admiration for the dictatorial period where torture was common to maintain the order promoted by the conservative right.

But the *Bolsonaro myth* was not only created by highlighting ideas from the ultra-right; what captured part of Brazilian society was the discourse of repudiation of corruption, symbolized by the *Lava Jato (Car Wash) Operation*, a mega investigation made by Brazilian Federal Police. The federal judge who led this operation, Sergio Moro, became a national hero and has reached its media climax by arresting former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, important figure for the left movement. Bolsonaro took advantage of this image and announced during his campaign that Moro would be nominated Minister of Justice if he won the elections. And his speech was clear: Brazilian voters need to choose between *corruption* (represented by Labour Party) and *defence of moral values* (represented by the Bolsonaro campaign).

It is important to note that Brazilian society was tired of many decades of corruption and, considering this scenario, Brazil can be analysed through the use of antagonism to create narratives and mobilization of multiple social groups under a single umbrella and gradually subordinate such discourses to the dominant narrative to build a powerful hegemonic discourse. (Laclau).

The polarization of society is one of the most important aspects of Brazil nowadays and this characteristic can be noticed in cultural experiences, such as street carnival in São Paulo, as will be explored in the following part.

São Paulo Street Carnival 2019

As explained before, São Paulo was not recognized as a touristic destination to enjoy carnival until the middle of this decade. This scenario has changed radically and the São Paulo City Hall released the 2019 carnival balance that reached 14 million people, with 464 parades on 3 weekends between February 23 and March 10, injecting R\$ 2.1 billion into the city's economy. The participation of people from outside the capital has also increased dramatically. The group went from 6.8% in 2018 to 30.2% this year. The stay of tourists in the city also increased on average, from four to six days and the average daily spending increased by 10.7%, from R\$ 663 to R\$ 734. (São Paulo, 2019)

São Paulo street carnival now is bigger than Rio de Janeiro, traditionally known as *the place to be* during this festivity. To analyse this party, it is important to consider the size and diversity represented in São Paulo. The differences between one neighbourhood and another can be huge, as well as the multitude of styles that can be found throughout the city. If we think of carnival, traditionally, the musical style that comes to mind is *samba*, but in the street carnival of São Paulo, it is possible to find quite eclectic mixtures, such as blocks that only play rock, or jazz, or country, or *forró*, or electronics. There are also blocks dedicated to a single band songs, mixed with the typical percussion of carnival, such as the case of Block *Sargento Pimenta* dedicated to The Beatles.

Eclecticism goes beyond the musical style at the São Paulo Carnival. Revelers can also choose from catholic, African Brazilian religion, vegan, carnivorous, ecologically engaged, gay, straight, lesbian, trans, drag queens, only children and families, or whether they want to play during day, afternoon or night, according to their personal preferences. But in 2019 the revelers could choose the block to enjoy carnival also considering their *political ideas*. Different neighbourhoods represent diverse political positions. The polarised society that is so evident in the national political scenario is

now clearly expressed in the biggest popular party of São Paulo. It is possible to analyse the differences in sex, gender, corporeality, attitudes and political views across the carnival blocks that paraded through the streets of the city, reflected in songs, discourses, political claims and corporal expression.

One of the blocks studied at this year's carnival was the *Bloco Bastardos*, which parade in the *Pinheiros* neighbourhood in the afternoon of March 3, Carnival Sunday, a premium day of this festivity. In this particular neighbourhood, the revelers are more politically aligned to the right today, in defence of morality and anti corruption. There were mainly families, straight couples, and traditional carnival marches, without political claims. It was common to see the revelers with mainstream costumes and props and men dressed as women, another carnival tradition throughout Brazil.

In contrast, in downtown, where most revelers are more sympathetic to left political ideas and against the abuses of LGBT, African Brazilians and some minorities' rights, the carnival street blocks expressed an antagonistic position to that observed in the *Pinheiros* neighbourhood. Here, political protests against the ultra-right government were common mixed during the party, expressed in costumes, music, speeches, banners, flags and gestures that symbolized the repudiation of the chauvinist and homophobic ideas of the current president.

Among the contrasts lived in the 2019 São Paulo Carnival, a common discourse can be observed: the respect for women campaign. Typically, carnival is known as the *sin party*, without rules, free sex, liberty and debauchery, when women is usually part of the game. It's common to observe a kind of *competition* among men to define who can conquer more girls each carnival day. Unfortunately, rapes (sometimes collective) are not rare during this time of the year. But the discourse of defence and respect for women is growing internationally and one can observe the intense campaign that appeared in all the blocks of São Paulo, driven by the media, civil society and government, regardless of the political bias.

The campaign #CarnivalWithoutHarassment was widely publicized and São Paulo City Hall distributed more than twenty thousand stickers during carnival 2019 with hashtags: #NoIsNo; #DancingInTheFaceOfChauvinism; and #MyBodyMyRules. This

was a hegemonic point amid polarized discourse and it is important to understand the role of communication tools for subordination to the dominant narrative. It is the commonality of opposite sides.

Although there is a hegemonic discourse in defence of women, it is possible to observe different shades according to the carnival block where this campaign was expressed. The highlight goes to an experience that took place on March 4, in the city centre, in *Forrozin* block. Singer Mariana Aydar, from the top of her truck, stopped singing the forró-rhythm songs to stimulate the revelers through a strong speech in defence of women. But surely, the choice of her words was made possible by the context and the profile of the audience to whom she addressed. In addition to the hegemonic discourse already treated before, the singer included in her speech strong words of protest to the patriarchal, chauvinist and conservative society, in clear opposition to the speech of the current Brazilian government.

Carnival and cultural experiences can be considered a political act as well. It is a powerful tool to build ideas and engage people to consolidate discourses. Day-by-day, cultural activities, empowered by the media, play a crucial role to create hegemonic patterns, using the antagonism to strength discourses.

São Paulo is so diverse that many different speeches can take place and the citizens or tourists can choose what to listen to, how to be involved and express themselves, even having the option of *not* participating in the festivities. It is a democratic yet polarized city in the carnival scene in 2019.

Final Considerations

At this juncture, the relief of playing carnival may be overshadowed by overexposure to the media, fake news and hate discourse. What once was experienced by revelers as a moment of pure forgetfulness to return to the daily work routine, now becomes a struggle for ideas, political manifestations, positioning, rather than pure joy, funny costumes, glitter, confetti and serpentine.

Let's continue to observe the movements of society to identify the behaviours expressed during the experiences of urban festivities to analyse how the political moment and the discourses are reflected in these social manifestations, wishing that revelers could enjoy street carnival with delight and tranquillity.

References

DAMATTA, Roberto. (1997) Carnavais, malandros e heróis: para uma sociologia do dilema brasileiro. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Rocco.

GARCÍA CANCLINI, Néstor. (2008) Imaginários culturais da cidade: conhecimento / espetáculo / desconhecimento in Coelho, T. *A cultura pela cidade*. São Paulo: Iluminuras: Itaú Cultural.

LIPOVETSKY, Gilles. SERROY, Jean. (2013) A estetização do mundo: viver na era do capitalismo artista. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

SÃO PAULO. (2019) Carnaval de Rua movimentou R\$ 2,1 bilhões na economia da cidade. <http://www.capital.sp.gov.br/noticia/carnaval-de-rua-movimentou-r-2-1-bilhoes-na-economia-da-cidade>