

**Commercial mobilities in contemporary Brazil**

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Distribution channels in Brazil have never been controlled exclusively by official distributors, formalized wholesalers or registered retailers. They shared the distribution channels with other actors; informal ones, if by that we mean that they are unregistered intermediaries. Through Brazilian history, several figures capture the figure of itinerary merchants. The *mascate* was the name given in Brazil to the travelling salesman, who carried the merchandises from production and distribution centers to the interior of the country. In Amazonia, they were called *regatones*.<sup>1</sup> However, since the 80's a new figure appeared in the Brazilian commercial landscape, expressing a new configuration of trade mobilities: the *sacoleiros*. Focusing on the *sacoleiro* circuits, a world in movement will appeared connecting capillary the Brazilian cities to dynamic poles of production and commercial districts that specialize in the supply of imported merchandises.

**Following the *sacoleiro* circuits: Ciudad del Este, São Paulo, Caruaru**

Located on the eastern border of Paraguay, Ciudad del Este is a huge marketplace for imported goods from all around the world, especially from China and East Asia. What started as a shopping and casino tourist destination at the end of the 1960s became the supply center of imported goods for traders from all around Brazil during the 80s and 90s. Thousand buyers traveled to Ciudad del Este to buy imported goods that they would resell at their cities. They were called *sacoleiros*; known in this way for the bags (*sacolas*) where they carried their goods.<sup>2</sup> *Sacoleiros* are merchants that stock up themselves in Ciudad del Este to resell in malls, shops, fairs, on the street, or in private

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<sup>1</sup> *Mascates* and *regatões* are travelling salesmen; the later one circulating through rivers. During the first half of the XX century, they were associated with migrants from the Middle East –particularly, Lebanese and Syrians. The itinerant commercial representative was known as *caixeiro-viajante* or *cometa*. The social mobility of the Syrians and Lebanese in São Paulo was analyzed by Truzzi, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> A parallel flow of Brazilian products is imported or smuggled into Paraguay by several merchants and *paseros* –the Paraguayans specialized in moving goods into their country through the border.

homes at their cities of origin. Some *sacoleiros* operate in wholesale circuits; others in retail. They traveled by bus, generally rented ones, but they also use public transportation and private cars and vans.

During the peak years of 1994–1995, more than 60,000 Brazilians buyers arrived weekly in Ciudad del Este from different parts of Brazil. During my fieldwork in 1999–2001, estimates were less than 20,000 buyers. The significance of this flux can be seen in the proliferation of popular markets in almost all Brazilian cities fed by products that came from Paraguay. But these products were not only restricted to popular consumption. Certain goods—electronic and computer devices, for example—were, and still are, consumed by middle- and upper-class sectors.<sup>3</sup>

The emergence of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur)—the regional trade agreement between Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay—and the confluence in the reduction of taxes for imported goods in 1995, modified the privileged place that Ciudad del Este had enjoyed for many years. Since the end of the 1990s and throughout the last decade, *sacoleiros* to Paraguay have been systematically controlled and repressed. São Paulo, the biggest city of the country and its industrial and financial center of gravity, gradually, became the import destination of Brazil, being nowadays the center of the *sacoleiro* circuits of imported goods. Today, the products sell at the Paraguayan Fairs – that is the popular name given to them in several Brazilian cities – are bought in São Paulo.<sup>4</sup> But *sacoleiros* do not only buy imported goods in São Paulo. They also go there to buy the local industrial production, especially garment production.<sup>5</sup>

The combination of local garment production and imported products is what gives the immense dynamism of São Paulo, the contemporary mecca for Brazilian *sacoleiros*. The commercial districts of 25 de Março, Brás and Santa Ifigênia are visited by 400,000 buyers everyday according to the commercial associations (800,000 during festive seasons). They buyers are not only *sacoleiros*, of course, but they represent an important segment because of the magnitude of their purchases. These districts present the same agitation and dynamism that Ciudad del Este had in the 90s, but on an even larger scale. The *Feira da Madrugada* (Dawn Market) – were the street hawkers were

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<sup>3</sup> For Ciudad del Este and the border trade, see Rabossi, 2012; Cardin, 2015 and Pinheiro-Machado, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Silva (2014) focused on the seller side of this configuration, specifically on the Chinese traders and their commercial infrastructure. See also Piza, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> For the garment production in São Paulo, see Silva, 2008; Cortês, 2013; Souchaud, 2014; Laffont, 2017.

accommodated – is one of the privilege sites of encounter between the garment production and the *sacoleiros* from different parts of Brazil.

Garment production is not restricted to São Paulo. During my Postdoctoral research I followed a particular circuit of *sacoleiros* that traveled to Ciudad del Este from Caruaru (in the Brazilian Northeast) in a journey that lasted more than two days. The peculiarity of the *sacoleiros* from Caruaru was that they operated in a two-way flow. They brought *muamba* (as the imported goods load is known) from Ciudad del Este to the *Paraguayan Fair* in Caruaru; a resale point for the *sacoleiros* of the Northeast. On the other hand, they carried *sulanca* to Paraguay – as the garment production of the Agreste region of Pernambuco is known – to be resold on the streets of Ciudad del Este to Paraguayan buyers who distributed it in Paraguay or to Brazilians who re-entered it into their country –generally, without knowing its origin.<sup>6</sup>

The main form of commercialization of the garment production are the fairs that occur once a week in each city that compose the so-called *Polo de Confecções do Agreste Pernambucano* – the garment production district of the region. Even when huge shopping structures re-organized the spatial configuration of the marketplaces, they operate at their highest in particular days, like in a weekly fair cycle. The customers of the fairs are mainly buyers that come from other cities and from other states. *Sacoleiros*, as they are also called there.<sup>7</sup>

The *sacoleiro* figure thus transcends the buyer who went to Paraguay or who traded imported goods, referring to the practice of long-distance trade: a merchant who buys products from other places to resell them in her city.

### **Marketplaces of garment and imported goods**

Following the *sacoleiros* circuits we can find dynamic districts of garment production and marketplaces of imported goods. Regarding the garment production, I have already mentioned the Agreste district in Pernambuco (the cities of Caruaru, Toritama –the “jeans’ capital of Brazil”-, and Santa Cruz de Capibaribe). It is also Barro Preto neighborhood in Belo Horizonte city, in the state of Minas Gerais, where 350.000 buyers pass everyday looking for clothes and style. The *Circuito das Malhas*

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<sup>6</sup> I analyzed the connection between Ciudad del Este and Caruaru in Rabossi, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> For an historical overview of the district, see Gomes, 2002. For an analysis of the district, see Lima, 2002, Souza, 2011; Espirito Santo, 2013; Veras de Oliveira e Braga, 2014 and Milanês, 2015.

(something like the Knit Circuit), in the south of Minas Gerais state, near São Paulo: the cities of Jacutinga and Monte Sião, together with Albertina (MG), Borda da Mata (MG), Inconfidentes (MG) and Ouro Fino (MG), where 100.000 buyers pass during the months of autumn and winter looking for knitting and crocheting clothes. Also, the so called “wholesale route” of Vale de Itajai in Santa Catarina state, where the city Brusque is searched for its clothes. The cities of Teresopolis and Nova Friburgo, in the foothills of Rio de Janeiro where a textile and garment production flourished, and nowadays, its commercialization have moved to the periphery of Rio de Janeiro city, in the neighbors of Duque de Caxias and Nova Iguaçu.<sup>8</sup>

These are garment and textile districts with different productive arrangements, where one can find enterprises, even of renown, but generally, productive units combining family labor, small scale operation and, when they start to grow, they outsource their production processes to faction arrangements. Districts described by analysts, and even by the actors themselves, with the concepts employed to describe the new configurations of work: flexibility, precariousness, informality and entrepreneurship.

But the *sacoleiro* circuits also illuminate the marketplaces of imported goods that are relevant for Brazilian internal market. Marketplaces that grow following the state of the currency and the levels of tolerance of customs controls. The border towns of Ciudad del Este, Pedro Juan Caballero and Saltos del Guairá in Paraguay; the free-shops of the Uruguayan cities of Chui and Rivera; the Argentinian cities of Puerto Iguazú, Bernardo de Irigoyen and Paso de los Libres that were important destinations for buying Argentinean beverages and perfumery; the Bolivian city of Puerto Quijarro, Cobija and Guayaramirin in Bolivia, where *sacoleiros* buy products from China but also from Bolivia –products of the growing garment production of Bolivia that advance with the influence of the Bolivian immigrants that circulate to and from São Paulo and Buenos Aires in Argentina.

These *sacoleiro*'s circuits operate mainly over routes and by bus, but they intersect with other circuits that move around by plane. In the cities of São Paulo and Fortaleza, they meet with other buyers that came from Cabo Verde –the *rabidantes*, as the re-sellers that stock up themselves outside the islands are known- and from Angola, who buy Brazilian products and garments.

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<sup>8</sup> For the *sacoleiro* circuits operating in this region articulated with the garment production, see Coletto, 2010.

In the big cities, other circuits also operate by plane, being known as *sacoleiros de luxo* (“luxury sacoleiros”): Brazilians who travelled abroad –Miami, Nova York, Panama, Lima in Peru- to buy imported goods, usually trended ones, mostly traded in other circuits of commercialization –in established shops or on internet.<sup>9</sup>

### **Some remarks on the *sacoleiro* circuits**

The emergence and expansion of the *sacoleiro* category signaled a transformation of the commercial practices in Brazil. First associated with the long distance commerce that had as its reference Ciudad del Este in Paraguay and the imported products that were purchased there, the term was used interchangeably with another category, *muambeiro*. The category *muambeiro* was older and it refers to the person that traded *muamba*; a word of kimbundu origin that in Brazilian Portuguese stands for smuggled goods. Gradually, the category *sacoleiro* was used to designate the traders that traveled to other cities to buy the merchandises that they would resell in their cities of origin.

The proliferation of the term is associated with the consolidation of marketplaces that depends of long distance buyers that resells in their own cities; something that is associated with the establishment and expansion of the Brazilian highway system and the expansion of road transport fleet. The moment when Ciudad del Este grew as a *sacoleiro* destination – at the 80’s – is relevant to punctuate the temporality of that consolidation.

The circulation over long distances turn the incidence of accidents and robberies a critical problem for the *sacoleiros*. The response is an emergent market of protection and the development of several strategies for constructing trust and confidence among the fellow travelers. The state controls does not only affect the *sacoleiros* bringing imported goods, but they operate similarly when the production is not properly registered –something that characterize the informal garment production. Controls, accidents and robberies are good references to search for marketplaces relevant for *sacoleiros*’ circuits in the media.

As important as the conditions for circulation were the confluence of two other processes that explained the proliferation of the marketplaces for *sacoleiros*: the

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<sup>9</sup> According to the Central Bank of Brazil, in 2014, Brazilian buyers spent US\$ 24,98 billion (in Brazilian Portuguese, corresponds to 24,980,000,000). For a description of Brazilian buyers in Peru, see Rangel, 2015.

consolidation of district of garment production and the multiplication of flows of imported goods.

Garment production outside the factory was the result of the multiplication of the means of production – sewing and cutting machines – and the reduction of its prices. Different configurations of access to resources, organization of labor regimes and adaptation to demands and tastes produce an heterogeneous map of garment districts. Despite the heterogeneity, they managed to stay in the business by producing and selling in scale for buyers that come from different cities to stock up for their own selling. On the other hand, marketplaces for imported goods were the result of the intensification of commercial flows that characterized the globalization of the economy since the 80s. Both processes deserve an analysis and presentation of its own.

The actors engaged in commercial mobilities already presented are not necessarily restricted to the popular world. *Sacoleiro* strategies are alternatives of commercialization and capitalization; they can represent fortunes and failures and they can involve vertical mobility – both upward and downward.

The markets that we have already seen are not exclusively attended by *sacoleiros*, of course. Border cities are marketplaces for regional consumers but also for the resellers from nearby and far away cities. Depending on the context, the importance of each category can change. The same can be said about the commerce in garment in cities like São Paulo or Fortaleza.

Finally, the form of spatialization of vending in the cities of origin of the *sacoleiros* will be crucial to understand the different conflicts over the market that will occur in several Brazilian cities during the last decades, turning the public space (and the private indoors) variables of control and repression, tolerance and regulation.

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