

**THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES FOR
INTERPRETATION OF TASTE AND CONSUMPTION IN THE ORNAMENTAL
PLANTS MARKET**

**POSSIBILIDADES TEÓRICAS E METODOLÓGICAS PARA INTERPRETAÇÃO DO
GOSTO E DO CONSUMO NO MERCADO DE PLANTAS ORNAMENTAIS**

**POSIBILIDADES TEÓRICAS Y METODOLÓGICAS DE INTERPRETACIÓN DEL
GUSTO Y CONSUMO EN EL MERCADO DE PLANTAS ORNAMENTALES**



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ABSTRACT: Ornamental plants are rarely the subject of study in Social Sciences. To address this problem, we propose, in addition to consideration as a market, the categories of taste and consumption as central to the construction of this research agenda. To this end, we mobilized a bibliographical review on the themes of consumption and taste, in addition to consultation on the topic of ornamental plants in the SciELO database and the Capes Theses & Dissertations Bank. Regarding taste, we consider that it could demonstrate that ornamental plants would represent certain lifestyles and sociability. Like this, measuring the consumption of ornamental plants could also verify the extent to which there is a relationship between the economy, lifestyles, and specific plants. From the mobilization of these two categories, taste, and consumption, we demonstrate the possibility of building a research agenda that considers ornamental plants as a relevant social phenomenon.

KEYWORDS: Ornamental plants. Market. Taste. Consumption.

RESUMO: *As plantas ornamentais raramente são alvo de estudo em Ciências Sociais, para enfrentar esse problema, propomos, além da consideração como um mercado, as categorias de gosto e consumo como centrais para construção dessa agenda de pesquisa. Para isso, mobilizamos uma revisão bibliográfica sobre os temas do consumo e do gosto, além da consulta sobre a temática das plantas ornamentais na base de dados do SciELO e no Banco de Teses & Dissertações da capes. Sobre o gosto consideramos que poderia demonstrar que as plantas ornamentais representariam determinados estilos de vida e sociabilidades. Assim, mensurar o consumo de plantas ornamentais poderia também verificar em que medida existiria uma relação entre economia, estilos de vida e plantas específicas. A partir da mobilização dessas duas categorias, gosto e consumo, demonstramos a possibilidade de construir uma agenda de pesquisa que considere as plantas ornamentais como um fenômeno social relevante.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Plantas ornamentais. Mercado. Gosto. Consumo.

RESUMEN: *Las plantas ornamentales rara vez son objeto de estudio en Ciencias Sociales. Para abordar este problema, proponemos, además de la consideración como mercado, las categorías de gusto y consumo como centrales para la construcción de esta agenda de investigación. Para ello, movilizamos una revisión bibliográfica sobre los temas del consumo y el gusto, además de consultas sobre el tema de plantas ornamentales en la base de datos SciELO y en el Banco de Tesis y Disertaciones de la Capes. En cuanto al gusto, consideramos que podría demostrar que las plantas ornamentales representarían determinados estilos de vida y sociabilidad. Como esto, medir el consumo de plantas ornamentales también podría verificar en qué medida existe una relación entre la economía, los estilos de vida y las plantas específicas. De la movilización de estas dos categorías, gusto y consumo, demostramos la posibilidad de construir una agenda de investigación que considere las plantas ornamentales como un fenómeno social relevante.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: Plantas ornamentales. Mercado. Gosto. Consumo.

Introduction

In the 1630s, visitors to the prosperous commercial cities of the Netherlands could not help but notice that thousands of citizens, workers from all walks of life, were caught up in an extraordinary *frenzy* of buying and selling. Therein lies the first financial bubble in human history. His motive was not real estate securities, corporate stocks, or modern cryptocurrencies, but something prosaic: tulips. Delicate and exotic ornamental plants came from the steppes of central Asia to Europe through their process of territorial expansion.

This *frenzy* of consumption that bewitched horticulturists, nobles, and tavern owners saw these rare plants change hands for incredible and ever-increasing amounts of money. That is until single flowers started selling for more than the cost of a house. These facts led historians such as Mike Dash (1999) and Anne Pavord (2014) to call this moment in history tulipomania. The demand for tulips was such that it resulted in the creation of the first futures market in history, with the sale of titles from subsequent harvests by producers. This speculation collapsed, affecting the European economy.

Given this, the same plants that occupied stardom in the imperial gardens of Constantinople, that occupy the religious imagination as a symbol of paradise and purity and that even produced financial bubbles, in 2018 moved, in Brazil, around R\$8.1 billion in reais, equivalent to approximately 1% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) (OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2021). This amount increased to R\$8.7 billion in 2019 (IBRAFLOR, 2019) and even with the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic in 2020, this market managed to sustain growth of around 5% per year (GLOBO, 2020).

This Brazilian production chain has 15,600 hectares of planted area and 8,300 producers (OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2021). Of this market, the southeast region corresponds to 65.9% of the planted area and 73.7% of the gross value production (GVP) (JUNQUEIRA; PEETZ, 2014). In the Southeast, the city of *Holambra/SP* stands out, which accounts for 40% of the production of ornamental plants in Brazil. However, unlike other agricultural products, such as soybeans and sugar cane, Brazilian production of ornamental plants supplies the domestic market, with only 3.5% of this market's revenue coming from exports (SEBRAE, 2015). According to estimates by Junqueira and Peetz (2008), the national average consumption of ornamental plants is R\$ 26.00 per person.

With this in mind, we intend to consider some theoretical and methodological possibilities for the sociological measurement of this market, especially through the categories of consumption and taste, which are widely debated in the Social Sciences. To this end, the

text's objective would be to provide some possibilities that could guide, to some extent, future work on the topic, bearing in mind that, as we will demonstrate below, it is not usually considered a relevant topic in Social Sciences.

To do this, firstly, we highlight the historical antecedents of this market and present the work on the topic found by us, both in Brazil and internationally. Subsequently, we mobilized some classic authors from the Social Sciences to offer theoretical and epistemological elements for considering the topic. Finally, we show how the categories of consumption and taste, widely discussed in the knowledge in question, can contribute to this consideration.

Taste and consumption of ornamental plants in question

Floriculture began in Brazil as a secondary activity of fruit growing through the actions of companies such as *Diberger Oléos Essenciais*³ and *Roselândia Agrícola*. Floriculture, as a specialized branch of commerce and service provision, was only formed in 1950, with consolidation in the 1970s. This consolidation occurred mainly due to the stimulus of Dutch immigration and the formation of the Agricultural Cooperative of Holambra in 1972. Through the Cooperative, ornamental plant production and distribution flows were organized for Brazil's main retailers (JUNQUEIRA; PEETZ, 2008).

Despite this evident relevance, the ornamental plant market in Brazil is rarely the subject of scientific study, whether in Social Sciences, Economics, Administration, or Marketing. In consultation with the Scielo Org database, the term "ornamental plants" in the titles of Brazilian scientific articles is only 34. Of these, we have 28 in Agricultural Sciences, 3 in Biological Sciences, 2 in Human Sciences, and 1 in Applied Social Sciences. In Human Sciences, the first article we found (SIVIERO *et al.*, 2014), identifies a variety of ornamental plants used in urban backyards in the Amazonian city of *Rio Branco*.

In addition to having an aesthetic value for its residents, to gather around them, ornamental plants would have social and symbolic uses to protect the house. To this end, women, over 50 years old, would be the guardians of the knowledge of such uses, stimulating the construction of an internal market in the city where exchange relationships predominate through barter. The second work identified (MARQUES; CAIXETA FILHO, 2002) has as its empirical *locus* CEAGESP (*Companhia de Entrepósitos e Armazéns Gerais de São Paulo*) and its flower fair that has been taking place since 1990. At CEAGESP, the largest ornamental plant

³ *Diberger Oléos Essenciais* website. Available at: <https://www.dierberger.com.br/>. Accessed in: Nov. 16, 2023.

fair in Latin America, the authors identified a seasonal nature of consumption, distributed on Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, Grandparents' Day, Father's Day, and All Souls' Day.

This gap in studies on ornamental plants in Brazil in Human Sciences is also seen in the production of theses and dissertations on the topic. In consultation with the CAPES Catalog of Theses and Dissertations, we found that in postgraduate programs in Social Sciences only in 2016 was it published, together with UFSCar (Federal University of São Carlos), on the topic of ornamental plants, by researcher PhD. Juliana Dourado Bueno (BUENO, 2016).

Bueno (2016) conducted fieldwork in the region of *Holambra/SP*, where he analyzed the labor trajectories of workers involved in flower production. In this work, she highlighted the importance of the Brazilian Federal Government in the development of the production of flowers and ornamental plants. At the end of the 1940s, the Brazilian State promoted a campaign to whiten the population by encouraging Dutch immigration to Brazil. This stimulus was provided in the form of a letter of credit to purchase land for settlement. This fact would be linked to the development of flower agribusiness in the *Holambra/SP* region.

Historically, the growing consumption of ornamental plants only came in the 17th century, with consolidation in the 18th century. Encouraged by European territorial expansion, especially by the action of the Dutch West India Company, multiple forms of decoration began to appear with plants illustrated on carpets and curtains from Asia. Concomitant with this was a rise in bourgeois and working-class interest in gardening and botany. The sum of these factors built a network for the international movement of ornamental plants from East to West, with an emphasis on lotuses, roses, and tulips. Next came camellias, peonies, magnolias, wisteria, and others (GOODY, 1993).

One of the hallmarks of this process was the development of the science of genetics, through the studies of Gregory Mendel in the 19th century. Through it, plants began to be selected according to the preferences of consumers and sellers. As the work of Amy Stewart (2008) demonstrated, ornamental plants went through a broad process of genetic selection, based on the principles of durability, color variation, and size. Thus, in addition to viewing these plants as something natural or pure, genetic science was able to artificialize them and adapt them to human taste, and market needs.

Still on ornamental plants, the bibliography produced focuses on the contributions of Jack Goody (1993), with a certain specialization through his relations with the theme of immigration in the studies of Juliana Bueno (2016) in Brazil and Hondagneu-Sotelo

(HONDAGNEU- SOTELO, 2014) in the United States. There is, therefore, an apparent lack of interest on the part of Social Sciences to consider ornamental plants as scientifically relevant.

A possible explanation for this fact involves the argument of Norbert Elias (2008; 2016), that modern science and the Human Sciences, develop on a dualistic belief, which divides scientific phenomena into natural and non-natural ones. Natural Sciences would be responsible for studying so-called natural phenomena, while Social Sciences would be responsible for interpreting the non-natural. Thus, objects linked to the so-called natural, such as plants and animals, are rarely objects of study in the Social Sciences. For such duality, so-called natural objects would not have a relevant historical, political, and cultural substrate.

According to Elias (2008), one of the main distinctions between Social Sciences and Biology and Chemistry is their inability to study human beings in isolation from their relationships with the context in which they are inserted and with other human beings. This means that it is not a question of considering ornamental plants as isolated entities in a pre-human environment, but of measuring them as a product of the social. In this way, we consider ornamental plants as carriers of a social substrate, which cannot be measured and explained separately from their meanings and significance attributed to human beings.

Therefore, to study the theme of ornamental plants, we must adopt, in addition to an exercise of constant epistemological vigilance, techniques of rupture (BOURDIEU, CHAMBODERON, PASSERON, 1999) to circumvent the spontaneous sociology crystallized in its scientific measurement. This common-sense essentializes ornamental plants into merely biological entities. For this common-sense, it would be a construction of a supposed Darwinian evolutionary process, emptied of any human, social, and cultural influence.

It is necessary to question and confront interpretation schemes for ornamental plants that seek to empty them of a historically, politically, and culturally situated context, and consider them as carriers of relevant sociological and anthropological meaning and significance. Furthermore, as highlighted by Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1999), this spontaneous sociology creates practical explanations such as images and interpretations that discourage the search for answers that go beyond appearances.

In other words, some of these images could be classified according to the nature, biological or mechanical, to which they refer or according to the implicit philosophies of the social that they suggest: balance, pressure, force, tension, reflection, root, body, cell, secretion, growth, regulation, gestation, weakening, etc. Such interpretation schemes, almost always taken from physical or biological nature, threaten to convey, under the appearance of metaphor and homonymy, an inadequate philosophy of social life and, above

all, to discourage the search for a specific explanation, providing without great effort an appearance of explanation (BOURDIEU; CHAMBODERON; PASSERON, 1999, p. 34, our translation).

In this sense, the common sense that ornamental plants cannot be considered sociologically hides their social meanings under the appearance of biological scientific jargon. According to Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1999), these essentialist beliefs often escape refutation because they offer universal explanations that awaken family experiences. As we will demonstrate below, taste is one of those experiences, which, despite being hidden, would be present in the history of ornamental plants, especially in their consumption, as a market.

Max Weber (1999) criticizes the use of scientific theories to enclose reality in specific theoretical models. In other words, when considering ornamental plants as merely botanical objects from a natural world, uprooted from the social world, a value judgment is constructed on the theme, detaching it from its empirical reality. Therefore, the author defends the agenda of an empirical social science, which is capable of scientifically confronting these beliefs.

To counter these universalist beliefs about ornamental plants, we can adopt a relational perspective, in that it considers ornamental plants as “things”. By “thing”, we highlight four meanings, rescuing the study by Émile Durkheim (2007): 1) external phenomena that are independent of the theoretical and epistemological framework mobilized; 2) phenomena that can only be apprehended by empirical investigation; 3) phenomena independent of individual wills and 4) phenomena that can only be apprehended externally.

This means that ornamental plants can only constitute an object of research in Social Sciences to the extent that their socially constructed meanings and significance can be scientifically apprehended. In this sense, ornamental plants can only be understood through observation and experimentation and not through introspection or common sense. By imposing on individual and collective consciousness, these ways of interpreting common sense ornamental plants are characterized by their generality and universality, as they create groups that collectively adopt the same beliefs and tendencies.

Furthermore, taste is an indispensable aspect of the sociological study of ornamental plants and is largely neglected. Even studies by Jack Goody (1993), Juliana Bueno (2016), and Hondagneu-Sotelo (HONDAGNEU-SOTELO, 2014) did not consider taste as a sociologically relevant phenomenon. Especially for Goody (1993), in comparative anthropology, ornamental plants would be inserted into cultures. What he calls Flower Culture would be the result of a

cultural expression of a continent. In this way, taste would be just an appendage manifested by universalist cultures.

To address this evident gap, we consider taste as a relevant sociological phenomenon through its established tradition in the Social Sciences. This research front has as its main references Pierre Bourdieu (2007) and his partnership with Monique de Saint-Martin (BOURDIEU; DE SAINT MARTIN, 1976). Furthermore, this universe of study maintains a dialogue with the studies of Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (2006) on consumption.

For this research agenda, consumption would be a relationship between human beings and things (DUMONT, 1977), in addition to being socially and culturally constructed, it would be linked to taste. Studies on consumption are developed on the most diverse themes in Social Sciences, such as music (COULANGEON, 2005), fashion (CANTISTA; SÁDABA, 2019; HADDAD, 2021), television (KUIPERS, 2016), cinema (AUSTIN, 2016), food (PACHUCKI; MALO, 2014), body (DE CASTRO, 2003), own home (PORTIONATO, 2016), and sexual affective love (JARDIM, 2019; 2021).

To this end, in this research, we consider consumption as a marker of social distinction and differentiation between classes and social groups. Thus, the symbolic aspects of socially constructed and socially explained consumer economic rationality stand out. Based on the works of Bourdieu (BOURDIEU, 1979, 2007; BOURDIEU; DE SAINT MARTIN, 1976), this line of interpretation of consumption considers that, in addition to a dispute for the appropriation of goods and services, consumption is a means of symbolic distinction.

Furthermore, as anthropologist Mary Douglas and economist Baron Isherwood (2006) demonstrated, the consumption of assets can give meaning to the lives of social agents. This meaning is conferred through the establishment of social borders beyond economic rationality. To this end, consumers establish symbolic relationships with the good consumed that transcends the physical world. After all, the goods consumed are full of symbolism, capable of demarcating and expressing social relationships and lifestyles.

The consumption of ornamental plants is especially interesting, as it converts plants into ornamental plants, that is, into cultural and symbolic products, historically situated. As Marx (2008) highlights, a product becomes a product only in the act of consumption. Until then, a plant, in an ideal state of nature, only becomes an ornament in the act of consumption.

Furthermore, consumption also creates the need for production. Consumption creates a specific object, meeting particular needs. However, as Marx (2008) highlights, it is not just the product that consumption provides. Consumption also confers characteristics, as in the case of

ornamental plants, in which specific colors, sizes, and shapes are sought, which have been selected historically.

One example of this is the genetic selection of chrysanthemums in Japan. Since the 1990s, there has been an initiative by several laboratories to create blue ornamental plants. This process culminated, in 2015, in the creation of the first blue chrysanthemums. In the case of the species *Chrysanthemum morifolium*, scientists introduced genes from two other flowering plants to give it a blue color. Initially, they added a gene from bluebells (or *Campanula medium*) to the chrysanthemums' DNA, resulting in purple flowers. Scientists also manipulated chrysanthemums with a gene from *Clitoria ternatea*, a plant that has blue flowers (Público.pt/2017).

The need to build specific shapes, sizes, and colors varies according to consumer needs. In our argument, this need would be related to taste, as a marker of lifestyles and social relationships among consumers. Or better, as in Bourdieu's terms (2007), taste is classifying and classificatory, classifying the classifier, made explicit in the social and collective trajectory of consumers, inscribed in their body and mind through habitus, indicating, ultimately, Power relations.

Thus, consumption and guidance, through taste, would be, as Frederico Neiburg (2010) states, a process specific to the constitution of subjects, in the way that the subjectivation of things and the objectification of people would make up the same circumscribed social space in politics, culture, and history.

Considering taste, as an embodied, classifying, and classificatory *habitus*, in the sense that it also classifies the classifier, we objectify ornamental plants as a socially constituted market, which expresses distinction and lifestyles. For this, we use the work of Bourdieu (2006) in which markets are considered according to their arrangement in a social order, this historically, culturally, and politically situated, in which its agents would be endowed with different positions.

Thus, agents in this market would buy assets or services not because of their rarity or necessity as per mainstream economic theories. The practice and materialization of consumption, therefore, would be ordered in a symbolic alchemy of taste prescribed in a historical matrix of perception and action (*habitus*) that would find assets or services in circulation.

This encounter, the *habitus*, and the social and collective trajectory with the availability of a good or service would result in the dialectic of the practice of consumption situated in a

universe of social distinction. In this way, agents engaged in the phenomenon of buying and selling would have a dual role, that of exchange and symbolic reproduction.

In other words, the market for ornamental plants, as a market for symbolic assets, would be composed of socially appreciated instances of consecration, which, when faced with individual and collective trajectories of taste, materialize in the practice of purchasing ornamental plants. Ornamental plants, in addition to a material manufacturing process within greenhouses, are manufactured symbolically, attributing qualities, and emotions typical of a process of social consecration.

To this end, taste would be a practical operator in this market, capable of transmuting plants into distinct and distinctive signs. As a result, the differences between ornamental plants inscribed in the physical and material order guide differences in the symbolic order, creating distinctions and declassifications. At this origin, there is a classificatory and distinctive grammar that reveals lifestyles as expressions specific to specific groups and classes.

This lifestyle, classified and classified, would be adopted by those who gather practical knowledge of ornamental plants and their distinctive signs, such as aesthetics, size, coloring, and rarity. This practical knowledge of the social world and symbolic goods also prescribes incorporating the social structure, transfiguring objective singularities into preferences.

Final considerations

As we demonstrate throughout the text, ornamental plants are rarely the subject of study in Social Sciences. Throughout the text, we propose that, in addition to considering it as a market, the categories of taste and consumption are central to this analysis. In our argument, this lack of interest among Social Sciences researchers in this topic is due to the specialization of scientific knowledge. In this sense, ornamental plants would be the subject of study only in Biology, as they are supposedly linked to the so-called “natural world”.

In this regard, we mobilize the arguments of Norbert Elias (2008), Max Weber (1999), Karl Marx (2008), P. Bourdieu, J-C. Passeron, J-. C. Chamboderon (1999), P. Bourdieu, M. Saint-Martin (1976), Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (2007), to offer methodological and epistemological tools that can consider ornamental plants as a measurable phenomenon in the Social Sciences. In this regard, we highlight the need to build an empirical agenda on the subject that is capable of confronting common sense and the spontaneous sociology that has crystallized over it.

In this sense, considering consumption and taste means, in addition to demonstrating that ornamental plants are a cultural and historical product, they are shared symbols representing specific lifestyles. Thus, they would be inscribed in a symbolic order that would reveal different ways of acting, thinking, and feeling in addition to specific human beings.

The fact is that their distinctive signs, such as size, color, rarity, and the like, would reveal not only specific plants but also an order specific to the social structure. This revelation would be through sharing and the homology of the provisions inscribed in the social space. After all, a plant, as a classificatory and classifying symbol, would also represent a place in social space.

Therefore, this text is a preliminary foray into the topic, which does not hope to exhaust it nor even offer a single possibility for its measurement. We hope, in addition to offering a possible path, to encourage more research on the topic, which will fill this gap in Sociology.

Furthermore, the article enables and encourages understanding the possibility of integrating new themes into the social science research agenda. In some way, this integration could construct new theoretical and methodological arrangements capable of apprehending and understanding “cultures”, in the broad and restricted sense they would be inscribed.

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