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## **“BRAZILIAN PEOPLE” IN THE EYES OF ELITES: REPERTOIRES AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES OF INEQUALITY**

Translated into English by Thiago Nasser

That their country is one of the most unequal countries in the world has become a commonplace statement for most Brazilians. In fact, even with diminishing inequality in the last decade, Brazil remains among the most unequal nations according to the Gini Index ranking. While the majority of studies on inequality in Brazil discuss the issue analyzing those at the bottom – often emphasizing the possibilities, barriers and strategies of mobility and mobilization (see Neri, 2003; Ribeiro & Scalón 2004; Silva, 2004; Stein, 2006) – recent studies have highlighted the relevance of approaching the issue looking at those at the top (see Catani, 2010; Medeiros, 2005).

In this article, we explore the perceptions of Brazilian elites about Brazilian people, specifically the poor. As we will elaborate when presenting our results, the notion of “Brazilian people” (*o povo brasileiro*) is very salient among Brazilian elites. What is puzzling is that instead of implying a sense of community (i.e. “we, the people”), mention to “o povo” often reinforces notions of otherness. Moreover, conceptions of “the people” often overlap with conceptions of the poor. We found that, in Brazil, the notion of “the people” is an important part of elites’ cultural repertoire to understand poverty and plays a key role in the reproduction of social distance between elites and the rest of the population.

In her study on the consequences of inequality in Latin America, Blofield<sup>2</sup> (2011a, 2011b) argues that the region is marked by great social dis-

tance between the rich and poor. Social distance can be defined as detachment and indifference based on social norms that differentiate individuals and groups on the basis of race/ethnicity, age, sex, social class, religion, and nationality (Williams apud Blofield, 2011a). According to Blofield, great social inequality in Latin America implies that elites and the poor live in very different worlds. This, in turn, helps to explain why Latin American elites would hardly become involved in reducing poverty. According to Reis (1995), greater distance between social strata leads to more abstract notions of poverty in the eyes of elites and thus to lower proclivity to act on behalf of the poor.<sup>3</sup>

Social distance between the elite and the poor, as we argue in this article, is also reproduced through symbolic boundaries between "us" (elites) and "them" (the people, the poor, the underprivileged). Building on Lamont & Molnar (2002: 168), we rely on the conceptual distinction between social and symbolic boundaries: social boundaries translate into concrete forms of unequal access to resources and opportunities; symbolic boundaries are defined as conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects and people. Lamont & Molnar argue that, despite the objectivity of social boundaries, symbolic boundaries are just as real and have important consequences in the maintenance or transformation of objective inequalities. As a possible foundation of collective identities, symbolic boundaries create sentiments of likeness and belonging, thereby becoming a means to attain status or monopolize resources (see Bourdieu, 2013 [1979]). But symbolic boundaries can also be mobilized by subordinated groups as tools to confront social boundaries (see Ellemers, 1993).

Cultural sociologists have emphasized how symbolic boundaries vary even within contexts where social boundaries are similar. For example, Lamont (1992) has shown that the economic boundaries between upper middle classes and working class in France and the United States are similar, however Americans and French mobilize distinct symbolic boundaries to justify them. While in France the notion of high culture is central, in the United States it is rejected, and the symbolic boundaries between classes are more associated to the values of a work ethic.

The study of symbolic boundaries reveals the salient cultural repertoires in different contexts and how they relate to the reproduction of inequality. In exploring how social actors identify similarities and differences among groups, it is also possible to understand how boundaries shape their comprehension of responsibility toward "others". We argue that this is a strong argument in the case of elites, since they control most resources of power – especially in unequal societies.

In this article, our interest is identifying the economic, cultural, political and moral categories used by the Brazilian elites to distinguish themselves from the "Brazilian people", especially the poor. We start by briefly

discussing the literature on culture, poverty, and elites. We then present our methodological strategy, which combined survey analysis and discourse analysis of in-depth interviews. In the results section, we identify the symbolic boundaries mobilized by Brazilian elites to differentiate them from “the people.” We conclude the article debating the possible implications of symbolic boundaries in the general landscape of inequality in Brazil, especially its consequences for political inequality in Brazil.

### **CULTURE, POVERTY AND ELITES**

The relationship between culture and poverty has been traditionally studied in the social sciences from two perspectives: the values of the poor and the analysis of national political cultures. The focus on the values and attitudes of the poor gave rise to the concept of the “culture of poverty” (Lewis, 1975). This perspective emphasizes how cultural values present in poor families limit the possibilities of social mobility. In turn, the focus on national values, generically known as “political culture,” understands societies as if defined by cultural mainlines that may promote or inhibit social development (Almond & Verba, 1983; Lawrence & Huntington, 2000, Inglehart, 1988). These perspectives have been harshly criticized: while the culture of poverty was accused of blaming the poor for their own predicament, minimizing the structural causes of poverty (e.g. Swidler, 1986), the notion of political culture tends to essentialize national cultures as obstacles to development (e.g. Somers, 1995). As a result, these critiques have helped to eschew away the concept of culture from the mainstream of sociological studies about poverty and inequality.

The works of Bourdieu are an exception. Although not directly addressing the issue of poverty, his investigations highlight the role of cultural taste in the reproduction of social inequality. In *Distinction* (2013[1979]), the author demonstrates how the French upper classes succeeded in legitimating its culture as superior to that of the working classes, ultimately reproducing the structure of social domination and inequality. More recently, Bourdieu’s model has been thoroughly criticized for assuming a zero-sum game and for treating economic structure as the ultimate determinant of symbolic structure (e.g. Lamont, 1992).

Recently, studies on poverty have adopted a new theoretical understanding which highlights cultural and moral repertoires of stigmatized groups, seeking to understand the personal strategies of coping with inequality and difference (Small, Harding & Lamont, 2011). The chief question guiding these new studies is: why do people react to poverty the way they do?

However, for the time being, studies within this strand have prioritized the analysis of the moral repertoires of discriminated or excluded

groups (Carter, 2005; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Harding, 2007; Small, 2002, 2004). The repertoires of privileged groups have played a minor role, as if they were easily explained by interest (Lamont, 1992 is one exception). In this article, we argue that the cultural repertoires of dominant groups are a key element in understanding the dynamics of inequality and its effects, and we propose an analysis of the cultural repertoire of elites and their explanations for poverty and inequality.

The concept of elites employed in this investigation is different from the usual understanding of elite as an upper or dominant class. In line with the definition adopted by elite theory (or elitism), in this article elite refers to a group that is smaller than a class, defined by the occupation of strategic positions granting access to resources of power in society, whether economic, political or symbolic (Higley & Burton, 2006; Reis & Moore, 2005; Yamoski & Dubrow, 2008). According to Higley and Burtin (2006), elites occupy the upper echelon of organizations and powerful movements and thus are capable of influencing political life on a regular and substantial basis. In sum, the concept of elites is based on political premises, whereas the notion of upper class is based on economic premises.

Based on this literature, we also assume that elites in complex societies do not form a homogeneous group, nor share the same capacity of shaping political life. According to the most usual definition in political sociology and political science, there is a wide array of elites that emerges from organization and movements within the state, in the market, and in civil society (López, 2013a).

Our proposal builds on an already substantial literature on the reaction of elites to poverty and inequality (Clarke & Sison, 2005; De Swaan et al., 2000; Hossein, 2005; López, 2013b; Reis, 2000, 2005, 2011; Reis & Moore, 2005). Such literature was heavily influenced by the concept of "social awareness" coined by De Swaan (1988, 2000, 2005). Relying on a macro-historical approach, De Swaan argues that the US and European social welfare systems are partly the result of the social awareness of elites, which, in turn, is the product of the combination of three perceptions: (i) inter-dependence (poverty affects the un-poor) (ii) responsibility (the elite must take action); and (iii) feasibility (there are means to mitigate poverty). Applying De Swaan's analytical approach to Brazil, Reis (2011) argues that Brazilian elites also view poverty as a problem to be solved, however do not perceive their own responsibility in seeking a solution, attributing responsibility to "the State". Reis also states that this lack of commitment configures an incomplete state of social awareness. The same notion of incomplete social awareness has been mobilized to analyze the cases of elites in other non-Western countries, such as South Africa (Noushin & Manor, 2005) and the Philippines (Clarke & Sison, 2003).

De Swaan's perspective is by and large sustained by rational choice theory, explaining why studies that adopt this model place little emphasis upon cultural factors. Other authors, such as Verba & Orren (1985) and Verba et al. (1987) focus on the effects of the culture of elites in the legitimation (or questioning) of social stratification. They argue that the values concerning equality are a key element of the mechanisms that engender different types of inequality. These authors chose to focus on elites – and not common citizens, as in the classic work *The Civic Culture*, by Almond & Verba (1963) – because of the assumption that elite values play a more important role in shaping the actions of the state to reduce poverty. This does not mean that the culture of elites is unhitched from broader national or regional patterns. But the close investigation of the perceptions of elites about poverty and inequality are more likely to be translated into policy-making.

Although we share Verba's assumptions about the key role of elites' perceptions in explaining the mechanisms of reproduction of social stratification and the generation of opportunities to overcome inequality (Verba et al., 1987), we also agree with the criticisms to his definition of culture as something far from malleable, and often as a limiting factor in personal strategies (Sommers, 1995). On the other hand, authors such as De Swaan (1988, 2005) go to the opposite extreme of minimizing the role of culture in favor of the analysis of elites as purely instrumental agents.

Combining these two dimensions (values and rational choice), we rely on the theoretical insights of the new cultural sociology, that is, we approach culture as a “culture in action” (Swidler, 1986). We argue that, in addition to considering negative externalities of poverty and inequality, elites rely on different cultural repertoires to draw symbolic boundaries between them and “the people”. These symbolic boundaries are key to understand how poor people are characterized and why certain poverty reduction policies are perceived as legitimate or not.

These symbolic boundaries may also help to explain the apparent tolerance of Brazilian elites towards inequality. In the case of Latin America, Blofield (2011a) considers that the lack of solidarity of the elites is objectively expressed by the low levels of philanthropy in the region and is also manifest in daily life. The inaction of elites regarding the poor was interpreted by Blofield as an effect of the extreme inequality and resultant social distance between them and the poor.

In this article we argue that the cultural tools mobilized to establish and justify this gap cannot be taken for granted by researchers. In this sense, the concept of symbolic boundaries sheds light upon the assumptions used by groups in construing equality or difference, a subject largely neglected by studies on inequality (Lamont & Molnar, 2002: 188). We contend that understanding the repertoires used to outline symbolic frontiers between “us”

(the elites) and "them" (the poor, the people, the underprivileged) constitutes an important step forward in analyzing the behavior and values of elites in Brazil. Our interest lies in identifying the categories used by Brazilian elites to qualify the poor, and simultaneously move closer or farther from them.

## METHODS

In order to analyze the repertoires of the Brazilian elites in relation to the poor, we rely on two data sets:

a) A survey encompassing 238 elites, comprising congressmen, top bureaucrats, and top businessmen, conducted between 1993 and 1994.

b) A set of 51 in-depth interviews with the abovementioned elites (34 of them conducted between 1999 and 2000, and 17 in 2012 and 2013).

For the survey and for the in-depth interviews, we relied on an institutional operationalization of the concept of elite, considering the "elite" those who occupy the top positions in the country's most influential institutions. In other words, our sampling was based on institutional hierarchy, regardless of who occupied the post. This sampling strategy alludes to what Hoffmann-Lange (2007) qualifies as the *positioning method* in elite research. This methodological definition seeks to fulfill a theoretical definition focusing on the concept of power (Yamokoski & Dubrow, 2008; López, 2013a).

The 1993/4 survey was coordinated by the Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro (IUPERJ), currently the Institute of Social and Political Studies of the State University of Rio de Janeiro (IESP-UERJ). Its sample is stratified by three elite sectors: congressmen from both houses (Senate and Congress), upper rung bureaucrats from federal agencies, and top executives (mostly CEOs) of the 300 largest firms in Brazil (according to the ranking of *Revista Exame*/1992).

The 2000s in-depth interviews were conducted by the Interdisciplinary Center of Studies on Inequality of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (NIED-UFRJ). As discussed earlier, the selection of interviewees followed the same institutional criteria of the survey, yet in this case sampling was non-probabilistic. The politicians interviewed are members of the four largest Brazilian political parties. The businessmen are CEOs or CFOs from the 300 largest Brazilian enterprises (according to *Exame* in the 2000s and *Datafolha* in 2010). The bureaucrats occupy posts at the highest levels of the federal, state and municipal governments, including ministries and strategic secretaries (finance, education, planning). The interviews were conducted in four metropolitan regions, two in the southeast (São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro) and two in the northeast (Fortaleza and Salvador). The southeast region of Brazil is the richest and most dynamic one while the northeast region is often portrayed as more traditional and poorer. In total, we analyzed 28 interviews from the

southeast and 23 from the northeast. The number of in-depth interviews followed the logic of saturation, meaning that interviews were concluded when the new material collected ceased generating original information for the questions of the study (Mason, 2010).

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of our interviewees across elite sectors.

Sampling distribution of the survey and interviews				
	Politicians	Bureaucrats	Businessmen	Total
<b>Survey</b>	54 (23%)	89 (37%)	95 (40%)	238 (100%)
<b>Interviews</b>	15 (29%)	19 (37%)	17 (33%)	51 (100%)

Table 1.

Source: IUPERJ, 1994; NIED-UFRJ, 2013.

Although the survey and the in-depth interviews targeted the same populations, the subjects of each sample were not the same. Neither were the subjects of the first set of interviews always repeated in the second set conducted between 1999 and 2013.

The analysis of qualitative and quantitative data followed the logic of data convergence, also known in the mixed methods literature as “triangulation.” This strategy features simultaneous analyses of quantitative and qualitative data in equal standing.

In the survey, we analyzed questions related to perceptions concerning the Brazilian people and the poor, especially those that required the interviewee to qualify such groups. Most questions focused on: (1) qualified descriptions of the Brazilian people (e.g. are Brazilians hardworking or lazy, organized or disorganized); (2) perceptions of the causes of poverty/inequality; (3) perceptions of the consequences of inequality.

In the analysis of the in-depth interviews, we coded for accounts or judgments regarding “the people” or “the poor.” The codes were created inductively, that is, most codes were created during the analysis of interviews and following the points highlighted by the interviewees.<sup>5</sup> In total, 36 codes were used, the most frequent referred to: (1) descriptions of the people or the poor (ignorant/wise, peace-loving/violent, organized/unorganized); (2) the causes of poverty; and (3) the consequences of poverty (pork-and-barrel politics, the menace of revolt, violence). Of course, our qualitative analysis does not aim for statistical inference, but to reveal the logics behind the repertoires concerning poverty and inequality employed by the Brazilian elite (Small, 2009).<sup>6</sup>

## LIMITATIONS OF THE DATA

Our survey and in-depth data could be criticized for the reduced range of the elite sectors included in the analysis – essentially the elites of the state and market. In fact, we acknowledge that there is a wide range of elites in organized civil society and even in other branches of the state and the market that could be assumed as having influence in social policy outcomes. Nevertheless, our selection is based on an institutional definition of elites and includes those who are at the top of the country's main political and economic institutions.

Another possible source of bias is the time gap between the survey and the in-depth interviews. Of course, people occupying top positions in political and bureaucratic institutions in the 1990s are not the same as those in the 2000s and 2010s. We acknowledge that the "elite" is always in a process of renovation but, based on an institutional understanding of the concept, we are consistently targeting the same social group.

This is partly confirmed by the consistency of our results across survey data and in-depth interviews. Even if the survey is the tool that provides greater generalization power, we would like to point out that there is a strong continuity between the pattern of responses given in the 1993-1994 questionnaires and the interviews of 1999, 2000, 2012, and 2013. In short, there is enough compatibility of the results to suggest the permanence of the repertoires of the elites in relation to the poor, despite what some believe to have been a "circulation of the elites" in the 1990s and 2000s. Nevertheless, despite the wide temporal range of the data used, the non-probabilistic character of data collection from the 2000s in-depth interviews prevents us from making reliable arguments about continuity or change.

## RESULTS

### Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality

Countless surveys have evidenced that poverty and inequality are acknowledged as problems in Brazil (see Scalon, 2004). Results from the Latino-barometer survey (2009), for example, show that approximately 80% of Brazilians believe that income distribution in the country is unfair, and 70% cannot see any improvement since the 1980s re-democratization.<sup>7</sup>

The literature on perceptions of inequality usually underlines two popular justifications mobilized to explain the existence of poverty and social inequality: one puts emphasis on individual agency while the other focus on structural causes (Katz, 1989; Verba & Orren, 1985). Explanations based on individual agency tend to attribute poverty to the lack of individual will or merit. This classification usually draws a moral line between poor people who deserve (e.g. due to family tragedies or sickness) and don't deserve (e.g.



laziness or vice) help. Explanations based on structural factors attribute poverty to macro-level economic crises, to policy inefficiencies (e.g. a stratified or privatized educational system) or even to social or racial discrimination.

Results from international surveys, such as of the World Values Survey (WVS), shows that in Brazil the population tends to perceive poverty as an ill generated by social structure and not as the consequence of individual action. As illustrated by Figure 1, this structural perception of inequality stands in stark contrast to the one found in the United States, where poverty is more commonly attributed to individuals. Maybe more surprisingly, the Brazilian results are also very distinct to those of Andean countries, where poverty is also more commonly blamed on individuals.

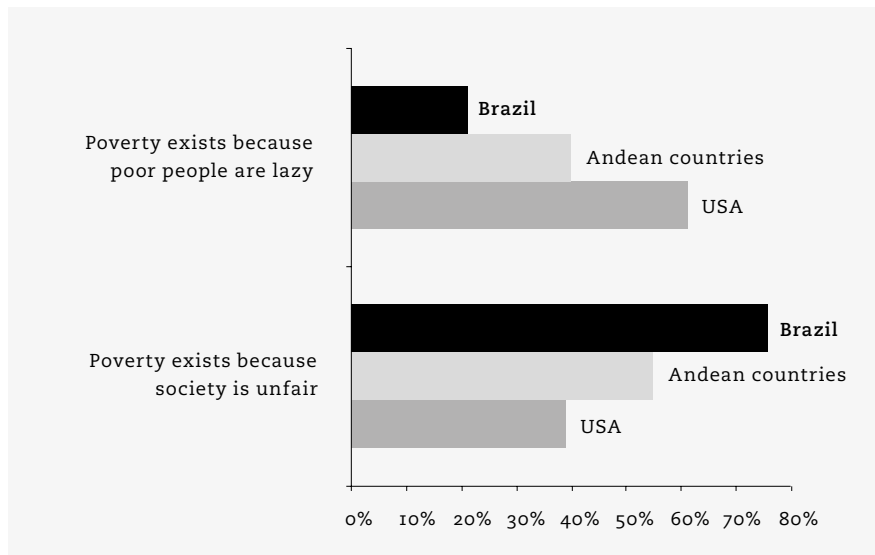


Figure 1.

Perceptions of the Causes of Poverty  
(% of interviewees who agree with statement)

Source: World Values Survey, 1993-1995.

n United States = 1,542;

n Andean countries\* = 9.436,

n Brazil = 1.149.

\*Andean countries in the sample: Chile, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela.

Previous studies have shown that Brazilian elites have perceptions similar to those of the population, largely attributing poverty to structural causes: the state's incapacity or misconduct, as well as historical legacies (Reis, 2004). The 1993/4 survey shows that the most frequent responses of elites about the causes of poverty are lack of political will (46%) and non-fulfillment of State duties (45%), closely followed by lack of economic development (38%). Only 1% of our elite survey respondents mentioned lack of effort as an important cause of poverty.

A growing literature analyzes the relationship between political policies and attitudes, arguing that support for redistributive policies also depends on how the population explains inequality (see Bobo et al., 2012). For example, the relative insignificance of redistributive policies in the United States compared to European countries can be partly attributed to more individualistic perception of poverty (Alesina & Angeletos, 2004). In a recent article, Telles & Bailey (2013) compared the explanations of racial inequality in the United States and Latin America and concluded that a structural perception is positively related to greater support of redistribution policies.

Another frequent distinction in the literature concerning perceptions of inequality is between voluntary and fatalistic attitudes. Relying on the 2001 International Social Survey Program (ISSP), Scalón (2004) identified a greater tendency toward fatalistic perceptions among the less educated and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds when compared to those of better socioeconomic status. The former tend to attribute social mobility to "luck" and not work/merit. According to Scalón, those at the top of the stratification ladder are less inclined to share the same perspective.

Our interviews confirm that elites do not understand poverty (or wealth) as something contingent (luck) but as the result of historical and political causes. Nevertheless, that does not mean they do not have a fatalistic understanding of poverty. In an article about perceptions of the causes of poverty in Finland, Nimelä (2008: 25) argues that there are two kinds of fatalistic perspectives of poverty: conceptions concerning the individual fate of people (the poor are out of luck) and others concerning the fate imposed by uncontrollable social and global phenomena that victimize the poor. Although the latter does not attribute individual responsibility to the poor, it creates a similar perception of poverty as inescapable.

The convergence between the structural and fatalistic perceptions seems to be the main lenses through which the majority of Brazilians see poverty. According to the WVS data, the majority of Brazilians (approximately 70%) believe that "the poor have few chances to escape poverty," a belief that is less common among North Americans (30%) and in Andean countries (roughly 55%). When the structural and fatalistic visions converge poverty is perceived as a problem difficult, if not impossible, to solve.

In the in-depth interviews, a large portion of the elites present this structural-fatalistic view, or a stoic stance toward poverty, accepting it as an almost irrevocable fact. This fatalism would also help to understand why many seem not to believe they could play a role in the transformation of this situation – which relates to the situation of incomplete social awareness identified by Reis (2000, 2005). This perception is aptly illustrated by the quotations below:

“[...] it is no longer a question of having equal opportunities, they did not have them in the past and now it is too late to tilt the balance back.” (Businessman - southeast).

“Some [boys] are poor [and] are already deformed by poor nutrition, right? [...] After a certain age there is almost nothing one can do.” (Businessman from the northeast)

“Once poor, forever poor.” (Top Bureaucrat - southeast).

The perception of poverty as something permanent defines social distance between rich and poor in Brazil, in the eyes of the elites, as something nearly insurmountable. A congressman from a southeastern state exemplified this perception by telling the story of a staff member of his cabinet who had previously worked as a waitress in Europe, where social distances are shorter, according to him:

“[whether] in England or Sweden or Nordic countries, this distance is much shorter. But I don't know how they [these countries] got there [...] I don't know. I know that in developed countries that's the way it is, but how they got there I don't know.” (Congressman - southeast).

This structural-fatalistic understanding of poverty among Brazilian elites is also related to a great amount of discontent in relationship to the state, which is perceived as inefficient in dealing with issues of poverty and inequality (Reis, 2000, 2011a). The constant attribution of responsibility to the state as the sole responsible to deal with inequality also confirms their perception that individual or even collective action are ineffective (or not necessary) in overcoming social problems. Furthermore, attributing responsibility to the state reinforces an important finding of previous studies of political sociology in Brazil: the perception of civil society as passive (Reis, 2011b).

### **Symbolic Boundaries**

To what extent does these fatalistic views also imply a symbolic separation between individuals with the capacity to act and individuals “stuck” in poverty? This question has no easy answer, partly because the questions made to politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen in our in-depth interviews focused on issues of equality and inequality, and not on the description of poor Brazilians.

Nevertheless, when talking about poverty, interviewees repeatedly described what they see as the main traits of the Brazilian "people." The idea of "Brazilian people," as mobilized by them, does not correspond to the notion of a national community of which the elites are a part, but rather a group alien from the elites, comprised mostly by the poor. This is why in our analysis, even if we are aware of this particular understanding, we use the concept of "poor" and "people" interchangeably. It is also important to mention that this conflation is not shared throughout Latin America. For example, in Uruguay, poor are perceived by the elites as "part of the people," understood as a national community (López, 2013b).

The survey's questionnaire contained some questions that directly approached the "quality" of the Brazilian people, requesting those interviewed to choose among positive and negative adjectives, always presented as opposite pairs, such as duteous/unruly. At first glance, the data could lead to the impression that these elites see Brazilian people through a positive light. For example, 96% considered the people "tolerant" (as opposed to "intolerant") and pacifistic (as opposed to violent), 85% as hardworking (as opposed to lazy), 75% as honest (as opposed to dishonest) and as duteous (as opposed to unruly).<sup>8</sup>

However, in a few questions the elites interviewed largely attributed negative features to Brazilian people: 80% preferred to qualify people as ignorant, instead of wise, 86% qualified Brazilian people as unorganized (as opposed to organized) and 64% as apathetical (as opposed to participant). When questioned whether the Brazilian people vote wisely or in an uninformed and irrational manner, the elites in the three sectors almost unanimously opted for the second statement. This tendency, ironically, included the congressmen who are recipients of such votes, as illustrated in Figure 2.

In analyzing these questions, it is possible to identify a pattern: interviewees always portray Brazilian people negatively when evaluating their capacity of decision-making and their ability to act on their own. Elites' descriptions of Brazilian people as ignorant and incapable of making decisions alone are confirmed in the in-depth interviews. As mentioned above, in these interviews the notion of "the people" and "poor people" once again blend into each other. In the in-depth interviews, 33 out of 51 interviewees spontaneously mentioned the people's ignorance or the poor's ignorance, suggesting that the lack of resources is conducive to a state of paralysis. The quotation below, from one senator from the southeast, exemplifies this comprehension:

"The first thing is that [poverty] creates a people that is not able to exercise citizenship. It is a people that is born organically and morally debilitated." (Congressman - southeast).

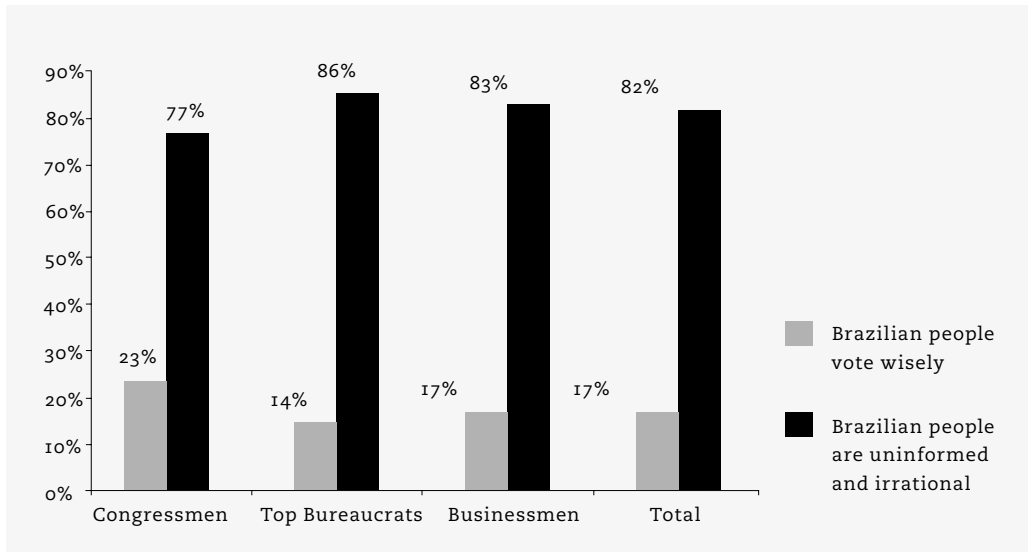


Figure 2.

Perceptions of the People's Character  
 Source: IUPERJ, 1995 (n=218).

The consistency between the response patterns in the survey and the interviews, which Small (2009) termed logical significance, indicates that the association between poverty and inaction is a key component of elite's repertoire about inequality. The people's ignorance is also directly associated to the fatalistic-structural perception of poverty since, in the eyes of Brazilian elites, it is the condition of poverty that leads to bad choices and not the other way around. In other words, the poor were not led to poverty because of wrong choices, but rather the situation of poverty is what makes them unable to make good and conscious decisions, thus generating a vicious cycle of poverty. This perception is illustrated by the quotation below, from a north-eastern businessman:

"Extreme poverty [...] turns man into trash, extreme poverty is degrading, [...] Extreme poverty makes one not see anything, it is a black cloth over peoples' heads, it blinds them." (Businessman - northeast)

This description of poverty is not only based on economic grounds but, first and foremost, on moral and subjective grounds: their incapacity of making rational choices and acting (i.e., lack of agency). In contrast to the poor,

usually presented as lacking individual agency, Brazilian elites are always described in our interviews as endowed with agency: either as an "illuminated minority" or, alternatively, as the cause of the country's ills:

"[Brazilian] society... is poor, de-politicized, de-structured, with no channels of expression – it has no awareness. Certainly it cannot seek principles on its own unless there are very strong promoting forces in place. So in this society, curiously, the role of the elites is a very fundamental one. Because they represent . . . like a sector of excellence." (Public official - northeast)

"Now, if you compare this group [the elite] to the size of the Brazilian population, you will notice it is very small, because this . . . the generation of those with brains is tiny, the production of people in this *thinking elites*, in this ruling elite, it is still small." (Federal Deputy - northeast)

"[...] the thinking and owning classes [...] are not ashamed to keep in place this unjust system, which on one hand generated a popular base of very ignorant workers." (Businessman - southeast)

It is clear that elites qualify Brazilian people as "others," through symbolic boundaries between agency/rationality versus passivity/irrationality. These symbolic boundaries are likely to have an impact in the strategic behavior of elites, especially in their decision-making in key state and market institutions, as discussed in the next section.

## POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES

There is a considerable, albeit recent, literature on the consequences of inequality for the elites (see De Swaan et al., 2000; Clark & Sisson, 2005; López, 2013b; Reis, 2000, 2011a; Reis & Moore, 2005). This literature points to phenomena such as urban violence and even epidemic outbreaks as possible negative externalities of poverty that directly impact elites.

According to the model introduced by the De Swaan (1988, 2005), the perception of the negative externalities of poverty was often key to the implementation of redistributive policies – insofar as the elite could relate the well-being of the poor to their own security problems. This mechanism, according to De Swaan, is behind the construction of welfare states in Europe and the United States. Thus, De Swaan's argument emphasizes important and long enduring political consequences of elites' reactions to poverty.

So far we have presented the cultural repertoires mobilized by Brazilian elites to describe Brazilian people, especially the drawing of symbolic boundaries between members of a "cultured elite," on one hand, and the "ignorant" and "irrational" poor, on the other one. The survey showed that the poor were perceived by and large as uninformed and irrational voters (see Figure 2). But this finding also seems to have political consequences,

when directly questioned about the obstacles to democracy, the elites pointed to the lack of education of Brazilian people, and “poverty and inequality” as the main threats (see Figure 3).

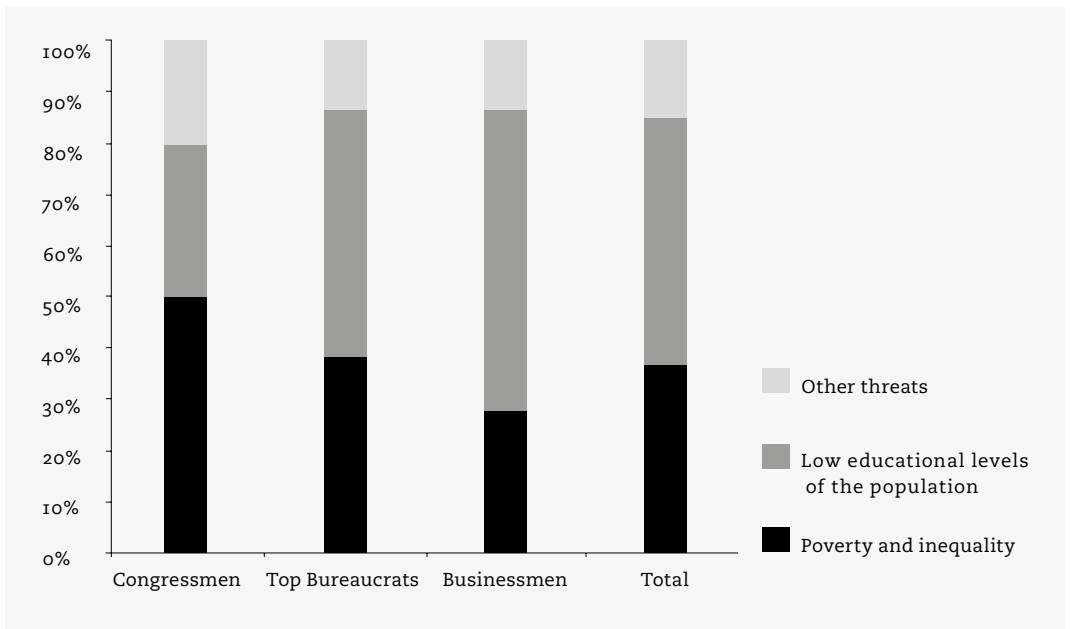


Figure 3.

Perceptions of Threats to Democracy

Source: IUPERJ, 1995 (n=199).

The frequencies show the sum of the first and second responses given by interviewed subjects.

The association between threats to democracy and negative traits of the people (especially ignorance and irrationality) can be partially attributed to the period during which the survey was conducted (1993-1994), in which free elections were still a recent feature of Brazilian politics. Both the state and market elites feared a system based on the votes of what they considered to be ignorant and incapable voters. However, the interviews in the 2000s show that, even after the democratic stability witnessed since the 1990s, elites still express their concern about the shape of a democracy relying on votes from a vast "ignorant" majority who cannot be trusted. The following quotes illustrate this distrust:

"[the underdevelopment of the people] destabilizes the whole political system through the vote, an anarchical vote." (Public official - northeast)

"Who are the ones who vote for the most backward candidates? It's the people in the ghettos who elect these folk. That's the thing [...] I shall be frank [...], the democratic system is threatened because of an ignorant social base, a neglected, evilly manipulated mass." (Top businessman - southeast)

In the more recent interviews (2012-2013), criticisms to the expansion of redistribution policies are based on the same premise of manipulation of the ignorant masses. The discourse of a CEO of a large company in the southeast illustrates this accusation of patronage politics.<sup>9</sup>

"There's obviously a political agenda behind it [the *Bolsa Família* cash transfer program], unfortunately. The project is to garner votes to remain in power." (Businessman - southeast)

Perhaps curiously, although elites blame people's ignorance for undesirable electoral results, this perception has not been translated, nor seems to motivate, an intention to suppress political rights. However, this perception seems to stimulate internal clashes among and within elite sectors. They criticize each other for benefitting from the institutions of the state, and taking advantage of the lack of political awareness attributed to the poor. Therefore, the accusations of political debasement do not incriminate the people, but rather how the elites use "the people" (*o povo*).

In other words, in the in-depth interviews, the fear of political consequences of inequality is related to the action of elites themselves, not to people's reaction or capacity to strike back. In the words of a former top bureaucrat: "the poor will never do the revolution" because "they are disorganized."

Ironically, this fact can be interpreted as a positive consequence of the symbolic boundaries drawn by elites. Due to the assumed political incapacity of the poor, the elites do not find themselves tempted to adopt measures that would restrict electoral participation (as the non-democratic measures implemented in Egypt after the Arab Spring, for example).



On the other hand, Brazilian elites tend to consolidate a situation of accentuated political inequality by disregarding, neglecting, and thus indirectly sabotaging, the capacity of articulation and the self-interest of a large portion of the population. As a consequence they help to widen (or at least maintaining) the social gap between the elites and non-elites.

We assume political inequality as the asymmetry in the influence of individuals over political decisions (Verba et al., 1987). According to Verba et al. (1995), the political participation of citizens in democracies confers them an opportunity to inform the state about their preferences, pressuring it to act accordingly. The boundaries that Brazilian elites draw between them and the poor (or “the people”) disregard their political participation and preferences, given that voters are not seen as capable of voicing their own interests. In short, the non-acknowledgment of citizens as legitimate political actors reinforces political inequality and thus may hinder the development of Brazilian democracy.

#### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The existence of causal links between culture and inequality has long been an issue in the theoretical debates in sociology and political science (Small, Harding & Lamont 2011). It has also been empirically explored through several research tools (examples are Katz, 1986; Verba & Orren, 1985; Verba et al., 1987). In this article we sought to approach this question building on two relatively new concepts of cultural and political sociology: social distance (Blofield, 2011a) and symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002).

Empirically, we relied on data from a survey with political, bureaucratic and business elites implemented in 1993 and 1994 and in-depth interviews with elites from the same sectors conducted between 1999 and 2013. Despite such timespan, we were able to find strong consistency between survey and interview data. The convergence of the quantitative and qualitative data denote what Small (2009) termed logical significance. In other words, the consistency between the results of the survey and the interviews is a strong indicator of the strength of cultural repertoires of the elites in relation to the poor, despite shifts in the political and economic scenarios.

We have shown that comparative research on values, such as the World Values Survey, indicate that Brazilians express a structural and fatalistic conception of poverty. Based on the analysis of the survey and in-depth interviews data, we argued that state and market elites share to a great extent this conception. We contended that the structural conception of poverty is accompanied by fatalism in relation to the condition of the poor. This fatalism is illustrated by the perception that the poor will likely remain poor and relates to great and nearly insurmountable social distance between poor and elite.

Elite's fatalism is associated to the perception of "Brazilian people" as a generically passive, irrational and disorganized mass. Therefore, the poor (who in the eyes of the elite constitute "the people") would hardly be able to overcome their condition on their own. This is the main symbolic boundary identified in this study: agency versus passiveness. This boundary distinguished the elites from the poor or, generically speaking, the Brazilian people, "o povo."

Finally, we argued that the elites perceive inequality as a source of political threats but not due to a potential conflict between themselves and the poor. They are more resentful of how other elites may "use" the poor, specifically through populist means to remain in office. Drawing strong symbolic boundaries, elites ignore people's capacity of political articulation. Ironically these boundaries might help keep democratic institutions in place. Because elites do not fear the poor, they have little incentives to limit political participation. On the other hand, strong boundaries may help consolidating a situation of high political inequality in Brazil.

The persistence of high political inequality not only jeopardizes democratic development in Brazil, but can also bear a significant impact on the reproduction of economic inequality. As argued by Verba et al. (1987), political influence can be converted into economic resources, accentuating inequalities in other spheres. Therefore, symbolic boundaries can reduce or even stop the current pace of inequality reduction in Brazil, compromising the development of democracy.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 According to 2012 PNAD Household Survey, the Brazilian Gini index is currently 0.498. The Gini Index ranges between 0 and 1, and the greater the inequality the closer to 1. For a quick comparison, the Gini of Sweden and Norway is approximately 0.25, while in Argentina it is 0.445, in Mexico, 0.472 and India 0.339, according to the World Bank (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>)
- 2 A series of similar studies about inequality and politics was published in the book *The great gap: inequality and the politics of redistribution in Latin America*, organized by Blofield (2011b). For an overview, see the book review by López (2014).
- 3 Reis (1998) relates this phenomenon to the concept of "amoral familism" coined by Banfield. It describes the atrophy of the bonds of solidarity in the public sphere, replaced by solidarity limited to the realm of private relationships.
- 4 Some critics have emphasized the difficulty of empirically assessing the concept of elite (chiefly Cammack, 1990), arguing that there are no measures satisfying the premises of elitist theory. In part, this is a true problem in elite studies, which hinders the creation of shared standards for sample validity. However, we agree with Higley, Burton & Field (1990), in that this is no larger a problem for the study of elites as for many other sociological concepts, such as "class" or even the "state."
- 5 The interviews were coded with Atlas.Ti software. For further information on coding, the data and methodology, please contact the authors.
- 6 In addition to the sources mentioned, we eventually used data from the 1993-1995 wave of the World Values Survey in order to compare the perceptions on poverty and social mobility in Brazil and other countries. The World Values Survey measures values in more than eighty countries and has been explored for the analysis of the impact of political culture in political and social development and vice-versa. Micro-data and tabulations are available at <<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>>.
- 7 It is important to remember that objective measures of inequality cannot explain perceptions of inequality. While

countries with relatively low inequality scores in the region have perceptions similar to those of Brazil (e.g. Uruguay and Costa Rica), other more unequal countries tend to ascribe much weight to the issue (as Bolivia and Ecuador).

- 8 Variations between the elite sectors were not statistically significant.
- 9 The rejection of populist politics, as a critique of state action can also be found among a number of civil society organizations, according to the study by López, Leão & Grangeia (2011).

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**O "POVO BRASILEIRO" VISTO PELAS ELITES:  
REPERTÓRIOS E FRONTEIRAS SIMBÓLICAS  
DA DESIGUALDADE BRASILEIRA**

**Resumo**

Analisamos os repertórios culturais mobilizados pelas elites brasileiras para definirem o "povo". Utilizamos dados de um *survey* e de entrevistas em profundidade para captar como elites políticas, burocráticas e empresariais no Brasil veem temas relacionados à pobreza e à desigualdade. Nossos dados indicam que as elites reconhecem a pobreza como um problema estrutural que deve ser resolvido pelo Estado, mas ao mesmo tempo se mostram descrentes quanto à sua solução, demonstrando uma visão fatalista sobre o assunto. Argumentamos que esse fatalismo está relacionado à maneira como essas elites definem os pobres, frequentemente generalizados como o "povo brasileiro", visto como pouco organizado, passivo, ignorante e irracional. Argumentamos também que, ao definir os pobres, as elites traçam uma fronteira simbólica entre um setor ativo, que as inclui, e outro passivo, composto pelo povo. O estudo aborda também os efeitos dessas fronteiras simbólicas na desigualdade brasileira.

**Palavras-chave**

Desigualdade;  
Distância social;  
Elites;  
Fronteiras simbólicas;  
Pobres.

**"BRAZILIAN PEOPLE" IN THE EYES OF ELITES:  
REPERTOIRES AND SYMBOLIC  
BOUNDARIES OF INEQUALITY**

**Abstract**

We analyze the cultural repertoires mobilized by elites to describe "Brazilian people." We rely on survey and in-depth interview data to capture how political, bureaucratic and business elites in Brazil frame poverty and inequality. Our data suggest that elites acknowledge poverty as a structural problem for the State to solve, but remain skeptical on the odds of actual solutions, indicating fatalistic perceptions that categorize the Brazilian poor as unorganized, passive, ignorant, and irrational. Moreover, in their definition of the poor, elites draw a symbolic boundary, separating an active sector (which includes the elites) and a passive one (the "people"). The paper also addresses the effects of such symbolic boundaries on the overall picture of Brazilian inequality.

**Keywords**

Inequality;  
Social distance;  
Elites;  
Symbolic boundaries;  
Poverty.