“MANY PEOPLE ARE JUST DREAMERS”: TELENOVELAS AND THE IDEOLOGY OF MERITOCRACY
Veneza Mayora Ronsini

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“Many people are just dreamers”: telenovelas and the ideology of meritocracy

Veneza Mayora Ronsini

Based on a multiyear inquiry into young people’s experiences with media, this article examines the contradictory ways that forty middle- and working-class youth decoded meanings encoded in Brazil’s national television genre, the telenovela. Telenovelas are the favorite television shows of popular and middle classes in Brazil. Those with the best ratings on the most lucrative of Brazilian broadcast networks, the “Rede Globo,” are the ones shown on prime time (Lopes and Palma 2010, 138, 156). In a country in which the majority of its inhabitants are poor, young telenovela viewers saw telenovelas as dramatizing the ideology of meritocracy in Brazilian society. While the middle-class viewers were more likely to accept these messages unproblematically, members of the working class were more likely to wrestle with their lack of realism in comparison with their own lives. However, given the strength of existing beliefs regarding merit, none of the viewers I spoke to could imagine social alternatives to the parables that television shows produced – that is, alternatives that could become a key factor in articulating political resistance to the status quo.

1. Veneza Mayora Ronsini holds a master’s degree in communication and a doctorate in sociology from the University of Sao Paulo. She is currently Professor of Communication Studies at the UFSM/RS/Brazil and a CNPq Research Fellow. Mercadores de Sentido: Consumo de Mídia e Identidades juvenis (Sulina, 2007), Entre a Capela e a Caixa de Abelhas (Edipucrs, 2004), and A Crença No Mérito e a Desigualdade (Sulina, 2012) are some of her contributions to her field.

2. The broader research that originated this text was published in Brazil (see Ronsini 2012).
Cross-class comparison here serves the purpose of demonstrating the pertinence of class in the way receivers interpret telenovela representations of poverty and inequality. As will be shown, although interpretations are segmented by class, I cannot make any simple assertions regarding receivers’ autonomy merely on the basis of acceptance or rejection of dominant ideology. While receivers are not inherently critical, they may manifest critical stances under particular circumstances. This seems to be the position taken within influential studies from the field of cultural studies (Kellner 2001; Lawler 2000; Morley 1992) that are cautious in their recognition of audiences’ critical capacities.

Whereas studies of young people’s use of the media have focused on the personal and individualistic forms of gratification provided by new media, our study focuses on the continuities in the most important collective media ritual in the lives of the majority of Brazilians. This ritual, while national in scope, takes on particular characteristics in the lives of a younger generation. Nonetheless, the ways members of this generation read telenovelas – in particular, interpretations of the telenovela’s messages about social class in Brazilian society – tend to be similar among viewers belonging to the same social class. Thus, I argue that reception studies may still provide interesting insights into the ways class ideology is socially reproduced through television discourse and interpretation.

This article presents first a social theory of class presented by the sociologist Jessé Souza for the Brazilian context. This is followed by an overview of reception studies in Brazil and the lacunae in studying young people, television, and social class. From there, I present my rationale for developing a reception study based on Jesús Martín – Barbero’s concept of mediations and Stuart Hall’s model for the encoding/decoding of media representations. In accordance with the model, the analysis of the young viewers’ interpretations is preceded by a summary of how class ideology is encoded in the various prime-time telenovelas over the course of the research.

This is the first text elaborated within the field of communication studies to apply the above-mentioned perspective to a study of the role of television in the reproduction of meritocratic ideology. In sociology, Souza (2010) and other researchers have attempted to understand survival and entrepreneurial strategies, aspirations, and moral and physical efforts made by members of the Brazilian popular classes today.
Social class, youth, and media consumption in Brazil

Despite improved conditions for the emergence of a Brazilian middle class, social class inequalities in the country are stubbornly persistent and persistently justified through ideology. While elites benefited during the crises of the 1990s (Pochmann et al., 2005), many at the bottom of the social hierarchy still struggle with conditions of absolute poverty (Demo, 2003). Sociologist Jessé Souza (2003, 2004, 2006a, 2006b) has rendered an articulate portrait of the vast gulf between a small elite and the majority of employed and underemployed Brazilians known as the popular classes (classes populares). There is no new middle class in Brazil in the 2000s, he argues, because there are no opportunities for most Brazilians to accrue social and cultural capital, a prerequisite for elite recognition of their political and social status. Yet the ideology of meritocracy blames working-class Brazilians for their own poor living conditions, lack of social status, and limited opportunities for the future. Souza argues that meritocratic ideology has become the dominant force behind Brazil’s imbalanced modernization strategies. For this author, Brazilian inequality cannot be explained through a theory of action based on differential access to certain social capital, that is, through personalism (Jessé Souza, 2006c, 13). Yet this research shows that personalism is a highly persistent ideology among Brazilians today, because they see their class identity not only as a result of their own efforts to work hard and make good choices but also as a result of personal relations established by family status (personalism) or determined by supernatural forces beyond their control (fatalism).

Eighteen percent of all Brazilians are between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. For these youth, the notion of the middle class has been a slippery subject. Located as it is between capital and labor, the middle class has been largely absent from Marxist analyses of new social movements in Brazil (Eder, 2002). At the same time, from a comparative standpoint, social class becomes self-evident. During my fieldwork, for example, the homes of families in the popular classes were notoriously more modest, with fewer private spaces in their interior, than middle-class family homes. Downwardly mobile middle-class families who were holding on from the margins had cheaper furniture, usually purchased at outlet stores, while upwardly mobile homes added more bathrooms to their dwellings.
Yet the most startling indicators of social class were found in the way chances for future mobility were stunted by young people’s habitus (family socialization and schooling). Forty-five percent of the youth from the popular classes whom I interviewed for this research had failed to complete their secondary education, as compared with 10 percent of middle-class youth. The largest body of work around social class and media consumption in Brazil has focused on the telenovela, specifically the nova das oito, or the prime-time telenovela. These programs are taken as texts that uniquely appeal to viewers across the social divide, insofar as they capture the dynamics of daily life in socially inclusive ways (Benavides, 2008; Hamburger, 2005). Comparative studies of reception of telenovelas among different classes have historically pointed to the ways Brazilians decode class-inflected messages from the vantage point of their own social positions (Junqueira, 2009). However, only four texts within a corpus of 143 reception studies conducted in Brazil during the 1990s and 2000s (presented in Jacks et al., 2011) examined youth as members of the telenovela audience. None of these studies distinguished youth on the basis of their social class membership. The question of how young people see their class position through the lens of the telenovela needs to be addressed more seriously by media scholars. Across all telenovela time slots, the youth audience equals 31 percent of the total audience (Borelli et al., 2009, 22), and teenagers (ages twelve to seventeen) and young adults (ages eighteen to twenty-four) are reported to watch some five hours of television per day. Furthermore, unlike other forms of youth media consumption, telenovela watching tends to be a family ritual. Hence, telenovela reception studies that include youth are also able to address generational shifts in textual interpretation, especially when other family members are included during an interview. For the purposes of this study, however, comparisons of young people from two different social class backgrounds offered us a site to look deeper into “the mediation of class structure and the subject” (Lopes et al., 2002, 46).
The study and method

This reception study is a piece in a three-year (2007-2010) multimethod study of young people’s relationships with media in Santa Maria, a small city located in the south of Brazil. Working with a research team3 I collected data through interviews, survey forms, and ethnographic work in which I observed the rituals of family telenovela reception. In the interviews, most were conducted individually with respondents while others occurred in the presence of family members. I let this process happen as naturally as possible so that respondents felt more comfortable during the interview.

The reception of telenovelas as a site to articulate social class ideology is part of a larger effort to see the mutually constitutive relations between communication, culture, and politics that encompass the logics of media production and consumption (Martín-Barbero, 2002, 2008). In television reception, meanings are configured and circumscribed, an insight emblematized in Stuart Hall’s (2003a) encoding/decoding model for media studies. According to Francesco Casetti (1999, 294-96), there are three basic propositions of this model. First, the text is an event which exists in and contributes to an historic, geographic, and cultural and social context. Second, the text includes a proposal for communication to a reader who then negotiates its meaning; but, third, all the interpretations already attributed to a text circulate within social space and may interfere with any individual negotiation of meanings in the text.

Like Hall (2003c, 368), I wanted to understand how media readers take uniform stances toward certain media texts that may not only seem polysemic to a degree but also are systematically presenting ruling-class ideology. These texts tend to reinforce hegemony by corralling the possible diversity of interpretations into a narrow spectrum of dominant and negotiated readings. In the process, oppositional readings, those that reflect engagements in a revolutionary political struggle (Hall 2003c, 371), would be quite rare due to the limited communicative competencies of media texts and media readers to produce counter ideology (Hall 2003b, 267).

3. The team has comprised many of my students, including Lírian Sifuentes, Laura Wotrich, Renata Córdova, Bianca Riet, Sara Quines, and Juliano Florczak Almeida.
At the same time, I wanted to reconfigure Hall’s model to understand what might be an oppositional reading in terms of young people in Brazil, who are rarely organized in revolutionary politics. Located outside of political agency, teens at best have limited “political” participation through religious, cultural, or student associations. To correct this, I return to Souza’s insight that ideology is the primary articulation of a class identity in Brazilian society. Thus, a rejection of ideology, either by declaring the falsity of meritocracy or personalism as legitimate rationales for the production of social class, could be seen as a first step toward an oppositional stance in political terms.

It also needs to be established how ideology is encoded in telenovelas, because this is not always so clear. A plot and character analysis was conducted in which I looked at the ways class ideology unfolded in five telenovelas that aired during the course of my study. For each of these, I watched four episodes during the beginning, middle, and end of the programs as well as kept daily tabs on plot development and character arcs to detect how class relations unfolded in the telenovelas. The longer results of this part of the study are available elsewhere (Ronsini, 2012), but the conclusions of my analysis were fundamental for developing questions that would address youths’ readings of particular characters and the situations they encountered.

Based on this analysis of encoding, I interviewed forty young people (ages fifteen to eighteen) using a ninety-eight-question interview that made dominant, negotiated, and oppositional stances evident in relation to the texts under study. Based on occupation and income classifications (Quadros and Antunes, 2001), twenty of the teens would belong to the popular classes and twenty of the teens would belong to the middle class. Beyond this, the subjects had levels of social capital that matched their economic position. The youth from the middle-class backgrounds, for example, had greater access to the social networks of elites, thus facilitating the likelihood for better job opportunities after the end of their schooling. None of the teens were in conditions of absolute poverty. The samples were balanced by gender but not race. The informants were recruited from their respective schools after they enthusiastically offered to volunteer upon our first meeting. All of the subjects said telenovelas were one of their top

4. All names are pseudonyms to protect subjects’ privacy.
three genres, along with sitcoms and movies. All of them consumed other forms of media as well. These uses and gratifications have been correlated elsewhere (Ronsini, 2012). In talking about the specific eight-o’clock telenovelas that I researched, interviewees also referenced other telenovelas they watched at other time periods. These comments were not excluded and tended to reinforce the patterns observed in the prime-time telenovelas.

**Encoding class ideology**

Class ideology in the five telenovelas I looked at was clearly encoded in characters’ dispositions (attitudes, tastes, behaviors) toward their social position and status as well as the ways social mobility was legitimated in the plotlines. Generally speaking, characters reflected the values of a fixed class status or habitus. In accordance with the measures of distinction wielded by the dominant class (Bourdieu and Lahire in Mattos, 2006, 170), economically well-off characters were associated with asceticism, rationality, forethought, assertiveness, hierarchical inclinations, individualism, political engagement, and cultural knowledge and aesthetic appreciation. In contrast, characters from the popular classes were more spontaneous, communitarian, utilitarian, emotive, unassuming, parochial, and coarse in the ways they deployed their bodies and sexuality within the telenovelas. With only one exception, social mobility within the plots was either attributed to love and coupling (as in “marrying up”) or signified as a reward doled out to a hardworking individual. Even in the exceptional case when a character living in the slums (Evilásio in *Duas Caras*) adopted the attitude of a rich character (within a single scene), the resolution of the drama hinges on his ability to parlay this quality into a political career and marriage to a rich woman. Hence, what seems like a reversal of class dispositions turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophesy regarding his future as someone who deserves to become wealthy and successful. This finding supports Junqueira’s (2009, 139) conclusions that “class relations and conflict (in the telenovela) take backstage to individuals’ personalities”.

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6. This concept can be found in Bourdieu (1984).
It is worth noting that the telenovela has always been a hybrid text (García Canclini, 1997), fusing the aesthetics and themes associated with high, mass, and popular cultures. Nevertheless, its narrative tends to hide or obscure class inequalities, through investment in the ideology of meritocracy. Thus, the telenovela also recruits the residual ideology of personalism to explain how a worthy individual succeeds by sustaining the social hierarchy in positive ways, such as providing protection or help to others, or how someone upholds it negatively, such as through corruption. In other words, the genre’s emphasis on personal relationships as a springboard for upward mobility never explicitly contests the message that the key to a character’s success lies in his or her ability to acquire or develop social capital, even if that capital is grounded in personalistic relations. Similarly, telenovelas tended to foreground mythical or mystical forces. As these forces were capable of promoting a thunderous change in the fate of a character, they served as strong endorsement of the notion that people have little control over their own destiny.

Decoding class ideology

Cultural studies scholars have cautioned against overemphasizing the critical capacities of viewers within reception studies (Kellner, 2001; Lawler, 2000; Morley, 1992). The present study is no exception in this regard, insofar as the young viewers who participated in it overwhelmingly identified with the meritocratic ideology encoded within the telenovelas they watched. Articulations of personalism and fatalism in Brazilian society were less important in explaining class status, but did contribute to the strategies used by “deserving” characters in telenovelas. Our findings support Souza’s assertions about the power of meritocratic ideology in explaining social class, although some critical comments made by working-class interviewees also suggest that they were more likely to question the structural determinants of Brazilian social inequality than were members of the middle classes.

Regardless of their own social class positions, interviewees talked about the merit of different telenovela characters in relation to class mobility. Upward mobility correlated with characters’ hard work and individual choices — whether morally good or bad — to overcome the limitations of class background. I think that we usually see that they [poor characters in telenovelas] do not have culture, not because they are poor, but because they don’t have
a reason to study or make an effort. Sometimes we see that poor people
don’t want to study, when really they should, and even more so because
they are poor. That is the only way to better themselves. The poor usually
have a ton of kids and no education. They should at least study to have
something to pass on to those kids. And if they study, they will also see they
don’t have the resources to have kids. (Fabianna, middle-class subject, age
fifteen) In the telenovela that I am watching now, the girl plays the role of the
poor person who studies hard in order to be something in her life. When she
finally gets to college, she finds a good [rich] boyfriend. Her parents help
her a lot, because they have the right morals [têm bom caráter]… There
are also good rich people who are deserving, for example, Olívia [from
Páginas da Vida] works to support her daughter. (Carla, working-class subject,
age eighteen) The character is poor in the telenovela, but he’s a fighter. I
know that if people don’t work, don’t exert themselves, they won’t achieve
anything in life. The rich can become poor that way… Having dreams is
important, but you have to work hard to be a deserving person, and many
people are just dreamers. (Paula, middle-class subject, age seventeen)

In articulating the ideology of meritocracy, interviewees framed merit in
terms of individual effort. Far from articulating a class position with a politi-
cal strategy, interviewees saw social mobility in terms of what a character
had to do to achieve success.

Within this vision of individual effort, definitions of success were usually
framed in terms of being part of an upper-class milieu. To be “good at
life” was to achieve wealth, as Carla’s quote above intimates. In addition,
this upper-class milieu was in part defined and sustained by entering per-
sonal networks and having good luck. Thus, our working-class informant
Werner (age eighteen) and his sister (Lia, age twenty-five) believed it was
possible to go from rags to riches, as shown in the telenovela:

**Veneza:** Do you think it’s possible to come from the bottom of soci-
ety and become rich and famous like Helena [in Páginas da Vida]?

**Werner:** Ah, it depends… I don’t know. See, if you pay attention,
you see she didn’t exactly come from the bottom. Her mother
had a bed and breakfast in Búzios. She wasn’t poor. She had
a little money to help her in the beginning. From there on, it
was her own talent and hardwork to get ahead [that counted].
Everything then was possible.
**Sister:** I don’t know if the money was what gave her the first push forward. Marrying is another strategy, but not everyone can. You have to already be rich to do that.

In this short dialogue, brother and sister cite the importance of hard work, but only if the character already has personal connections. Whether through a mother’s contribution or by marrying up, definitions of success were forged in terms of belonging and membership within a relatively closed social network. Getting there might even justify being a skilled trickster. As Flávio (age seventeen), a working-class adolescent explains,

**Flávio:** Everyone says a poor person has to use trickster skills [esperteza] to get ahead in life. And Foguinho [in *Cobras e Largatos*] shocked everyone by saying he was the real heir. So that’s how he got ahead.

**Veneza:** Do you believe poor people try to use tricks to get ahead in life?

**Flávio:** Most do, but today people are realizing the truth. People have to study and work hard to get ahead.

Flávio’s reading of the telenovela character assumes that the only way most people get ahead at life is to apply themselves to becoming part of the elite. Although he believes that the only way to really get ahead in life is to work hard, he also observes that the telenovela rewards a striving character with a stroke of good luck. This helps us to understand why our interviewees drew upon fatalistic and personalist ideologies. Supernatural and personal relations worked together with characters’ talents and efforts to make their own merits materialize.

Very few interviewees demonstrated clear recognition of the barriers to social mobility, and those that did were all part of the working-class

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7. In Brazil, the term “esperto” (clever, cunning) is related to two others: “jeitinho brasileiro” (a particularly Brazilian “way” of dealing with problems, difficulty, adversity, or challenges) and “malandragem” (double dealing, con artistry). Within common sense usages, the word may have either a positive or a negative connotation. In the first case, it alludes to creativity in handling problems, while in the latter case, it suggests the use of corrupt methods for purposes of personal gain. Here, our informant has provided a positive evaluation of the cunning displayed by the working-class character Foguinho.
contingent within our sample. Scattered comments made during our interviews indicated that personal efforts and hard work had little to do with overcoming one’s class background.

That young guy is a jeweler, but they don’t trust him because he is poor or because he is black. Like in real life, you know, people are capable but they don’t have opportunities… In the end, everything has to do with class. If it were only about effort, drive, and desire, then many more people would be rich. (Tatiana, age fifteen)

That just doesn’t happen: a rich girl falling in love with a poor dude… In the novelas everything ends well, but in real life, poor people keep on going until they die. (Janaína, age fifteen)

In these comments, race and class conspire to keep poor people in their place within society, despite what telenovelas show. The real lack of opportunities combines with class prejudice to reproduce social inequality. As Janaína’s mother interjected during her daughter’s interview,

The other thing that doesn’t exist is a good relationship between the bosses and their employees. My boss has never talked to me, never asked me anything, even where I live. It’s only on telenovelas that the boss is seen worrying about his staff.

Although none of these statements led young interviewees to articulate explicitly political agendas, I understood these comments as oppositional readings, because they are fundamental to formulating a future class strategy.

**Conclusion**

The goal of the present reception study was to examine how young people from two different class backgrounds read class ideology into the most popular television genre in Brazil. In carrying out our research, it became clear that youth not only legitimated the ideology of meritocracy but also read meritocracy in conjunction with other justifications for social inequalities and class division.

It is important to note that reception analysis and the methods of the encoding/decoding model are but elements in a larger toolbox that media scholars may adopt in understanding how young people’s media consumption is influenced by social class. The readings presented here need to be
contextualized in a longer ethnographic project that develops the range of ways adolescents and young adults come into contact with different media texts over the course of their daily lives and through their own class experiences. Indeed, some of the interviewees gave examples from their own lives in which they felt their personal performances could overcome the adversities they had faced as members of a particular class. Outside of the interview context, however, I can see how these adversities play themselves out regularly for working-class teens, in effect lowering their chances for real social mobility. Furthermore, the interview context was not able to capture the ways in which young people might articulate an oppositional stance toward media representations when in the presence of their or other social authorities, such as teachers. Some working-class interviewees’ opinions were reaffirmed in dialogue with family members but were contradicted by their teachers at school. This suggests a need for further study on what the habitus (Bourdieu 1984) is for a generation of working-class media consumers and future Brazilian citizens. Thus, I observe here, with Lahire (2004) and Bennett (2008), that habitus is not as coherent as Bourdieu construed it throughout his extensive work: the way it is incorporated into people’s behavior and thought is riddled with inconsistencies, even among people who possess similar amounts of cultural, economic, and social capital. The power of meritocratic ideology to justify inequality works across classes, yet members of the popular classes are more attuned to the structural determinants of social hierarchy: perhaps because they believe that while it is true that merit participates in constructing more or less privileged positions within the capitalist system, it works as a rule for those who have access to cultural, social, and economic resources and as an exception for those to whom the former resources have been denied.

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“Many people are just dreamers”: telenovelas and the ideology of meritocracy


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Résumé : Cet article revient sur les manières dont les jeunes de classes populaires et moyennes interprètent les rapports de classe contenus dans les scénarios des télénovelas. Ce travail, en conséquence, explore d’abord les différences de classe à la lumière de la modernisation périphérique au Brésil et plaide en faveur de l’étude des télénovelas et de ses audiences (différemment situées dans l’espace social) en tant qu’objet central pour comprendre la modernité. Ensuite, il développe une méthodologie systématique conçue pour les études de réception et traitant de la complexité des interactions socioculturelles quotidiennes sous l’angle du fonctionnement de l’homologie. La conclusion souligne que, si les telenovelas promeuvent la foi dans le mérite individuel et obscurcit les inégalités au Brésil, les enquêtés proposent des lectures « hégémoniques » et « négociées » des messages autour de la pauvreté.

Mots-clés : réception comparative, classe, telenovela, idéologie méritocratique, jeunesse
Abstract: This article presents comparative results about the ways Brazilian working-class and middle-class youth interpret class messages in telenovelas. This work thus explores class differences in light of the current context of Brazilian peripheral modernization and argues for the continuing centrality of telenovelas in communicating to cross-class audiences about modernity. It further develops a systematic methodology for reception studies to account for the complexity of everyday sociocultural interactions and how hegemony functions. The conclusion suggests preferred and negotiated readings of poverty may be associated with telenovela viewing, which, in turn, promotes faith in personal merit and obscures Brazilian inequalities.

Keywords: comparative reception, class, telenovela, meritocratic ideology, youth