Closeness and critique among Brazilian philanthropists

Navigating a critical ethnography of wealth elites

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Abstract: Drawing on ethnographic research on philanthropy within a Brazilian family business, this article proposes a “critical ethnography” of wealth elites. This family’s narrative of historical commitment to social responsibility is crucial to the success of delicate succession processes within the family firm. By insuring the reproduction of the wealth and status of elite families, such business succession processes serve in turn to maintain the structural inequalities shaping Brazilian society. In this family’s account of its past, however, a series of very different activities—rooted in philanthropy, corporate social responsibility (CSR), labor legislation, and commerce—are collapsed within a single, coherent narrative of historical commitment to social responsibility, which sits at odds with alternative versions of this history presented by sources outside the family.

Keywords: Brazil, corporate social responsibility, critical ethnography, family business, philanthropy, wealth elites

The social achievements of 14 years of Workers’ Party (PT) governance in Brazil (2003–2016) have been widely reported in the international arena, with much praise being given for the work of presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) and Dilma Rousseff in the areas of poverty reduction, state welfare, and labor legislation (*Economist* 2009; Smith 2016). Rather less attention, however, has been paid to the spectacular accumulation of wealth among the country’s corporate and financial elites during this period resulting in large part from the PT’s decision to maintain (and expand) a neoliberal economic agenda alongside its innovations in social policy. From 2003 to 2010, the performance of the

Brazilian stock exchange grew by 523 percent, while rentier incomes from payments on the public debt during the same period accounted for 6 to 7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), or \$120 billion annually, which was received mostly by an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 Brazilian families (Anderson 2011). While taking the edge off Brazil’s poverty levels, PT rule has thus done little to shake the country’s historically embedded structures of social and economic inequality, or the financial hegemony of its traditional elites. Marcio Pochmann and colleagues (2005: 29), in a rare attempt to calculate the true level of wealth inequality in Brazil, estimated in 2005 that the combined patrimony of

a group of five thousand families (0.001 percent of all Brazilian families) represented around 40 percent of the country's GDP, and there is little reason to think that this figure would have diminished over the past decade.

Reflecting the current structure of Brazilian capitalism—in which the corporate sector is still dominated by large, privately owned family firms—business families take center stage among this national “wealth elite” (see Savage 2014).¹ The subject of this article is one such family and the ways in which its members seek to manage business succession processes, in order to ensure the continuing success of the firm and the associated preservation of the family's capital. I consider these processes central to the maintenance of the structural inequalities shaping Brazil's social and economic landscape. Specifically, this article focuses on the role played in elite succession processes by philanthropy and corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, and on family and corporate narratives on (historical and contemporary) commitment to these practices.²

Large Brazilian family businesses, such as the one I will discuss below, are typically engaged in a range of philanthropic and CSR activities. Their owners are participants in global networks of corporate and noncorporate philanthropists,³ as well as in intersecting networks of CSR practitioners (Agüero 2005: 123–124). Since the 1990s, Brazilian advocates of CSR (in a range of local corporations, business associations, and NGOs) have enthusiastically adopted what Christina Garsten and Kerstin Jacobsson (2011: 381) have identified as a discourse on CSR's globality or “worldism” reflected in the common pursuit of a homogenization of standards and norms for its practice. As Brazilian business families move between such globally envisioned planes of discourse and their own historical family and corporate narratives, the assertion of commitment to social responsibility serves different purposes. Among these, as I explore below, is the nurturing of smooth succession processes as control of the family business passes to younger generations.

The theme of succession has been central to elite studies in anthropology. João de Pina-Cabral and Antónia Pedroso de Lima (2000: 2–3) have pointed to the ways in which elite families choose successors, and the processes by which the mantle of the family dynasty is passed down to them, as central questions for ethnographers of elites. They have also highlighted the role played in these processes by the creation of “family legends” (3–4) and the writing of family histories. George Marcus (1992, 2000) has discussed these processes in relation to what he terms the dynastic uncanny, the uneasy experience by which American heirs find themselves assuming the familial identities of their ancestors.

This ethnographic literature, however, has tended to focus on elite succession processes without reference to the broader social structures of economic inequality that they—by ensuring the continuation of elite dynasties and the capital on which they depend—serve to uphold. In contrast, this article proposes a “critical ethnography,” in which the practice of “critique” refers to the paying of attention to precisely these social and economic structures. In such a project, ethnographic attention to the concerns and experiences of elite subjects is not in any way diminished. It is, however, placed alongside an attempt to bring into focus the role played by specific elite behaviors and activities in reproducing social and economic inequalities in the particular ethnographic context under study.⁴ While anthropologists such as Marcus (1998: 27) have explicitly rejected the idea that such inquiry should form part of the ethnographic study of elites, I (alongside the other contributors to this theme section) seek to problematize the idea that ethnographic attention to the lived experience of elites is incompatible with critical analysis of those elites' social and economic influence, within and beyond the boundaries of the field sites in which they are encountered.

Guided by the concerns outlined above, this article presents a critical ethnography of philanthropic and CSR practices within one Brazilian business family, drawing attention to the ways in which these practices are intertwined with

the reproduction of structures of social and economic inequality at both local and national levels. The key to this analysis is the aforementioned issue of business succession, the process by which ownership and control of family businesses is passed from older to younger generations. As discussed above, issues of succession are commonly experienced as both uneasy and challenging within dynastic families. Succession processes within elite *business* families are often particularly fraught with anxieties, and fears concerning both the ability of younger generations to ensure the future survival and prosperity of the business—and their commitment to doing so—are well documented in literature on family firms (see, e.g., Yanagisako 2002: 35, on families in Italy's silk industry).

Among the families with whom I carried out my research in Brazil, such concerns manifest themselves in whispered confidences about so-and-so's lack of business skills or the right personality to make a success of the firm going forward, or in the pressure felt by certain members of families' younger generations to live up to expectations for corporate success, not to mention the feuds between siblings that threatened to tear whole enterprises apart. Such fears lead to creative attempts among families to manage and influence succession processes, which are supported by a global industry of family business consultants that is steadily gaining a foothold in the Brazilian financial advising market. These consultants help organize and facilitate tailor-made succession programs designed around weekend retreats and workshops attended by multiple generations of the business family in question, with the objective of persuading younger generations of the importance and value of the family business. In this process, the family firm—and by extension, the family—must be rendered unique, a particular, exclusive realm that younger generations are compelled to associate with their own identity and purpose.

It is here that philanthropy and CSR play an important role. Narratives of business families' benevolence, which already serve corporate purposes in the public realm, are turned inward

to the private realm of the family as evidence of the family's and firm's unique moral value system. Such attempts to facilitate processes of family business succession through the articulation of family values of philanthropy and social responsibility have been documented elsewhere (see, e.g., Dobkin Hall 1992: 327, on the Rockefeller family). What I seek to add to this discussion is a critical dimension (as outlined above) that demonstrates how these processes are connected to the maintenance of elite wealth and status.

Below, I draw out these connections from two perspectives. First, I discuss the absence, in the family narrative of social responsibility with which I am concerned, of the historical reproduction of inequalities by the family's firm at a local level (and I explore the necessity of this absence if the family's narrative is to serve its purpose in relation to its succession objectives). And second, I draw attention to how strategies for the appropriation of CSR as an enabler of successful family business succession will, if effective, serve the reproduction of social and economic inequalities at a broader societal level by ensuring the future maintenance of power and wealth in the hands of Brazil's tiny corporate elite. Before I explore these interconnected themes, however, I will look briefly at the implications of this kind of "critical ethnographic" analysis for the practice of ethnography in the field.

Mutuality in ethnographic encounters with wealth elites

One of the concerns that arises in consideration of a critical ethnographic project among elites is that of how such a project might influence the ways in which the ethnographer engages with the participants of their research in the field. Recent work on the theme of mutuality in the fieldwork encounter (see, e.g., Sanjek 2015) stresses experiences of common discovery and shared goals between anthropologists and their research participants. These goals are potentially

problematic for critical research among wealth elites, not least because theorists of mutuality appear to assume a shared moral project between researcher and research participant. But is such a shared project a necessary requirement for the experience of mutuality in the field?

Fábio,⁵ a member of the business family profiled below, might shed some light on this issue. During my fieldwork, my research relationship with Fábio developed into a friendship, and we shared many doubts and questions about the themes we discussed. In his reply to an e-mail I had sent thanking him for taking me to see the sugarcane plantation owned by his family's business, Fábio wrote that it was he who should thank me for inspiring him to revisit his family history and to think about the relationship between political decisions taken by his grandparents during the first generation of the family business, and

our conversation about individual or family decisions, made within a private universe, but which have a big economic impact on the surrounding society. This made me think about the connections between these two universes, and what took place in my family within this private universe, at a time when the relations upholding the surrounding social structure were becoming more complex, and how this is a story determined by details.⁶

In an article on different interpretations of the concept of mutuality, Pina-Cabral (2013: 258) discusses the work of Johannes Fabian (1995), noting that, for this author, "an unavoidable aspect of all fieldwork interaction would be the occurrence of a feeling of *shared revelation*." In my ethnographic encounter with Fábio, "shared revelation" did indeed feel like a mutual experience, despite the fact that we did not always share the same political views and interpretations of the subjects and events we discussed in the field. From my own experience, I would therefore argue that a shared moral project is *not* a prerequisite for the experience of mutu-

ality in the ethnographic encounter or for the task of respectfully putting forward a different interpretation of events from that presented by the participants in one's fieldwork. In this sense, I draw on Eduardo Dullo's (2016: 145–146) formulation, in which the anthropologist's perspective becomes one among many different perspectives to be observed and analyzed—critically and in relation to one another—in the field.

If, however, the experience of mutuality is still possible for the critical ethnographer of elites, how is critique in the political economic tradition to be squared with the intimate insights into elite experience gleaned in moments of mutuality in the field? In Brazil, I carried out research with three generations of Fábio's family, the Figueiras. They welcomed me warmly into their homes, and spent many hours discussing their experiences, motivations, and difficulties in relation to attempts to develop philanthropic practice through family and corporate structures. We also discussed the experience of being part of a business family, and related (and complex) issues around money, identity, family relationships, inheritance, and succession. Alongside my ethnographic research with Fábio and his family, however, I also consulted historical material relating to the family's firm, which originated from sources outside the family. This material revealed the very different ways in which much of what the family had told me about its "socially responsible" past had been experienced by its employees at the time and particularly how activities remembered as acts of philanthropy by the family had been interpreted differently by workers and union leaders during labor disputes in the past.

The harmonious version of historical events presented to me by the Figueiras was by no means unique among corporate narratives. Dinah Rajak (2014: 260) has documented similar processes for the "refashioning [of] corporate history" in the case of South African mining giant Anglo American, in which carefully constructed narratives of the company's political relationships during the last years of the apartheid regime are intermingled with "the construction

of a collective corporate nostalgia that twinned dynastic ambition with philanthropic tradition” (265) in memories of the company’s founder and his successors. As Rajak has demonstrated, these are the processes by which corporations “work to endow their economic power with moral authority” (260), thus helping to ensure their own reproduction.

Cognizant of the strategic role played by corporate family narratives of their own histories, what then to make of the story told to me in the field? Rajak’s work shows how deeply such narratives are embedded in—and crucial to—the workings of corporations, and to dismiss them as mere smokescreens designed to distract attention from exploitative capitalist endeavor (see, e.g., Zizek 2006: 10) would seem too simple. The narrative of my research participants clearly served corporate objectives for the bestowing of moral authority on their firm’s economic activity, but it also held clues to the intimate experience of elite lives spent in the pursuit of these aims. In order to take account of these different objectives and concerns, the critical ethnography of elites developed below seeks to move back and forth between ethnographic field site(s) and the broader anthropological imagination.

The Figueira family and their philanthropy

The Figueira family business, Campo Doce, was founded by Paulo Figueira in the 1940s. Its historical development was broadly typical of other businesses founded in Brazil’s sugar and ethanol sector over the past half-century. The company began as a sugarcane plantation and processing plant located on the outskirts of a small rural town in the state of São Paulo, and later expanded into other areas of agriculture and production of the biofuel ethanol. Campo Doce remained an influential but relatively small player within Brazil’s sugar sector until its acquisition of a popular brand of sugar in the mid-2000s, which transformed the company into the

market leader in the domestic sale of refined sugar in Brazil. By 2008, Campo Doce was cultivating and processing sugar and ethanol for international export to 18 countries alongside its national activities. In 2009, the company ranked among the five hundred richest companies in Brazil, with a net revenue of more than one billion reais (about three hundred million pounds sterling). This status, however, was short-lived, as the business suffered badly during the global economic recession and was partly taken over during the same year by Brazil’s largest sugarcane producer.

The concepts of “family business” and “business family” are tightly intertwined in the experience of corporate wealth elites (see Yanagisako 2002: 179–180). One consequence of this is a (real and conceptual) intermingling of family capital and family business capital, which often leads to a blurring of the boundaries between what constitutes “family” and “corporate” philanthropy, and what constitutes the associated category of CSR. The Figueiras carried out their contemporary philanthropic and CSR activities through three institutional structures: Campo Doce’s human resources department, its corporate philanthropic foundation (which offered a series of performing arts and kitchen gardening programs to young people in the region), and a family “memorial” or archive. While the latter was principally concerned with archiving the life history of Paulo Figueira, it also hosted public art exhibitions and educational workshops.

The company also prided itself on its model record of adherence to global CSR directives, and monitored its annual performance against the social responsibility indicators developed by Brazilian CSR organization Ethos.⁷ Moreover, the company’s 2007 Annual Sustainability Report claimed that social responsibility had always been in “the company’s DNA,” an idea that was also expressed by Camila Figueira (Fábio’s mother) when she told me that Figueira family members held the “seeds of social responsibility in their souls.” Below, I explore how this assertion of naturalized commitment to social

responsibility was developed in contemporary family narratives of Campo Doce's history.

“Social responsibility is in our DNA”

If the Figueiras had social responsibility in their DNA, everyone whom I spoke to about Campo Doce traced that DNA back to Fábio's grandmother, Lourdes, and her activities on the company's sugarcane plantation during the 1950s and 1960s. As was common among Brazilian agriculturalists at the time, Campo Doce employed mostly migrant workers from the northeast of Brazil and housed them and their families on the plantation. In interview, Lourdes told me that this working population of the plantation was called the *colônia* (colony) and that at its height it numbered at least three hundred families (well over one thousand people). While the local town did have a public hospital for emergencies, workers in the *colônia* had no access to other health care services or to schooling for their children. Lourdes and Camila told me that living conditions in the *colônia* were very difficult. The workers and their families had no running water or sanitation facilities, and the red earth of the plantation quickly turned to dirty mud during the rainy season. Standards of hygiene and cleanliness among the workers were low, and parasitic infections were rife.

Lourdes dedicated much of her time to the provision of health care, education, and leisure activities to the residents of the *colônia*. She gave presentations designed to educate and incentivize the workers' wives to improve their housekeeping and reduce conditions for the spread of disease on the plantation, and she sent one of the women to train as a midwife so that workers' wives could be assisted during childbirth on-site without making the lengthy (and costly) journey to the public hospital. Ignoring protests from the priest of the local Catholic church, she also provided women in the *colônia* with the contraceptive pill free of charge.

In addition, Lourdes organized adult literacy classes, opened an on-site primary school for

workers' children, and coordinated a series of leisure and social activities on the plantation. She founded both a theater group—in which she directed and acted in plays alongside the workers—and a Mothers' Club (*Clube de Mães*). Lourdes told me that every night she would go to bed with her head spinning with all the problems that needed to be resolved among the workers in the *colônia*. She said that Paulo would get fed up with her endlessly talking about it all. Listening to his grandmother speak, Fábio asked Lourdes why she had spent so much of her time on this work. She replied, “It's no good staying isolated in your magnificence; you need to recognize people's difficulties and get directly involved.”

Lourdes continued this work until the beginning of the 1970s, when she moved back to São Paulo. Her decision to leave was partly influenced by an earlier period of industrial action on the plantation, which closed down Campo Doce's processing plant for a week. This had left Lourdes deeply disillusioned with her social work in the *colônia*. “It's a horrible feeling when someone who you thought was your friend suddenly turns against you,” she told me, remembering these events. These personal memories suggest that actors in the “two universes” (to draw on the language used by Fábio in his e-mail to me, which is quoted above), inhabited by the Figueira family and their employees, may have experienced common historical events in very different ways. Appreciation of these different experiences and their relevance for shifting historical objectives on the part of different actors in the field may—as discussed above—require movement *between* these universes on the part of the ethnographer. I will return to this point below.

The arrival of CSR

The 1970s saw many changes at Campo Doce, including the movement of workers off the plantation, mostly into housing in a neighboring settlement. During this period, Fábio and his

mother, Camila, told me, the family also took steps to “professionalize” their philanthropic practices by placing them more clearly within the remit of the company under the management of paid employees. This process was formalized in 1985 with the creation of Campo Doce’s human resources department and by the subsequent creation of its philanthropic foundation in 1995. During a visit to the company’s headquarters, I met Lúcio, Campo Doce’s director of human resources, who told me that these changes were also a response to the growing global necessity of adhering to the tenets of CSR.⁸

Lúcio also emphasized, however, that when the company began to label certain practices as CSR, this was not to say that these practices had not previously been company policy. In fact, he told me the following in interview:

Campo Doce had already been doing all this for years. Employment of unregistered workers . . . I stopped that round here in ’86. Training . . . at one point we were offering thirty hours of training per person, no one else was doing that. [We were] years ahead, we’re talking about 10 or 12 years’ difference. . . . If we didn’t have the foundation, Campo Doce would be doing all the same things, the only difference would be that we wouldn’t have this structure. . . . When this wave of social responsibility began to grow around the world, we had to create an organized space for it.

In stressing the organizational structures created by Campo Doce for this purpose, Lúcio thus locates CSR as a preexisting practice at the company; it was not a practice that was *introduced* in response to shifts in global corporate governance, but one that was made explicitly visible as part of the company’s *response* to these shifts. The adoption of normative CSR practices is thus presented as further evidence of a naturalized commitment to social responsibility on the part of the Figueiras that can be traced back to Lourdes’s activities on the plantation in the

1960s. In foregrounding and seeking to naturalize this commitment, however, the historical narrative presented by family members and employees collapses distinctions between different kinds of initiatives that, in the historical discussion developed in the next section of this article, emerge as quite different categories of corporate and familial activity.

Blurred boundaries: Obligations, benevolence, and corporate interest

Within the family narrative recounted to me in the field and reproduced in summary form above, the broader context of local, national, and global histories is largely conspicuous by its absence. An important debate in anthropological theory over recent decades has been concerned with whether such contexts are the legitimate business of the ethnographer. A particular concern has been whether, in drawing on knowledge and information beyond that collected in the field, anthropologists have superimposed their own “explanations” onto their field observations. In response to this concern, Stuart Kirsch’s (2006: 3) “reverse anthropology” is designed “to avoid textual strategies that restrict indigenous understandings and interpretations to a subsidiary role in relation to information that is available to the anthropologist but not to the subjects of the ethnography.”

In the case of the Figueiras, however, the contextual information that I draw on below (which here takes the form of accounts from Brazilian historians) is available to the subjects of my ethnography. The discussion below is thus not intended to privilege these historical accounts over the Figueiras’ own narrative. Rather, it is an attempt to explore *why* the family’s narrative and these historical sources provide such different interpretations of events collectively experienced by the Figueiras and their employees. In attempting to answer this question, I return in the final part of this article to aspects of the contemporary experience of the family as observed in the field. Rather than introducing

“explanatory context,” therefore, what follows is intended as an attempt to move between—and explore the relationships between—the “different (historical) universes” inhabited by the Figueira family and their employees.

The historical accounts I refer to below are concerned with the complex history of labor relations on Brazil’s southern sugarcane plantations during the 1960s, when Lourdes and Paulo Figueira were living on the Campo Doce plantation. These accounts make clear that working conditions in the Brazilian sugar sector had always been precarious, especially for cane cutters. This made the sector the locus of much industrial dispute, and unions became particularly active on the plantations in the years preceding Brazil’s military coup in 1964.

According to the Brazilian historian Fernando Teixeira da Silva (2012: 130), the dispute at Campo Doce that Lourdes mentions in her narrative culminated in a strike that lasted for six days and saw the participation of three hundred workers. Workers carried out another strike some months later, and took two cases to an industrial tribunal in São Paulo (Barriguelli 1975: 864–865; Teixeira da Silva 2012: 131). The workers’ grievances included cases of unfair dismissal, the lack of provision of benefits to which they were legally entitled (including overtime pay and paid holidays), and the nonpayment of salaries (Barriguelli 1975: 864; Teixeira da Silva 2012: 127).

Central to labor disputes throughout Brazil during the 1960s was a broader movement to improve the rights of agricultural workers. The most important piece of labor legislation in force in Brazil at this time was the *Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho* (CLT) labor code. The CLT, however, only applied to “industrial” workers in factories and similar environments. No equivalent legislation existed for agricultural workers employed outside of these settings. Within Campo Doce’s workforce, therefore, cane cutters, who were classed as agricultural workers, did not hold the same labor rights as their colleagues in the company’s refinery, who were classed as industrial workers, even though the

refinery was located directly alongside the plantation and the two types of workers lived alongside each other in the *colônia* (Teixeira da Silva 2012: 131–135). The first strike at Campo Doce was motivated in part by the dismissal of one of the company’s workers, the president of a new workers’ association designed to unite the interests of refinery workers and cane cutters on the plantation and to campaign for the extension of the rights of the former to the latter, a process which the company’s owners were keen to hold back (130). Despite resistance from plantation owners, however, new legislation passed in 1963 under the *Estatuto do Trabalhador Rural* (ETR) did significantly extend the rights of rural workers in Brazil (149).

Also important for the present analysis, however, is the discussion by historians of the system of payment in use for workers on Campo Doce’s *colônia* at this time and that was common among plantations throughout the region. Termed the *barracão* (shed or shack), this system involved the sale of commodities such as food, medicines, and clothing by the company to the worker-residents of its *colônia* on site at the plantation and at prices similar to those found in private shops in the nearest town (suggesting that Campo Doce may have been making some profit on the sale of these goods to its employees). Part of the wages of Campo Doce’s workers was paid in kind as credit to be used for the purchase of these goods. Residents of the *colônia* were also charged a membership fee for their use of the leisure facilities provided on-site, a fee for access to allotments where they could grow food for their own consumption, and another fee for health care services, all of which were deducted directly from their salaries. Finally, rent for workers’ accommodation on the *colônia* was also discounted directly from their wages. Once all of these payments had been deducted, workers received only between 10 and 15 percent of their salaries in direct cash payments (Barriguelli 1975: 863–864; Teixeira da Silva 2012: 146–147).

The details of the lengthy labor dispute on the Campo Doce plantation are complex, but at

one point in the story Teixeira da Silva (2012: 131, 146) notes that a second union negotiated a deal on behalf of the company's workers for a substantial increase in their salaries, in exchange for the withdrawal of all the benefits and services provided by Campo Doce under the *barracão* system described above (with the exception of their access to housing on the *colônia*). This deal, however, was rejected by the union responsible for organizing the strikes. Teixeira da Silva (2012: 147–152) explains why, showing that workers were well aware that this kind of deal was actually advantageous for plantation owners at this time, many of whom, in response to the recent expansion of labor legislation, were now taking steps toward disbanding the *colônias*. Without housing workers on their plantations, company owners could avoid increasingly strict labor legislation and instead move to a system of *boia-frias* (casual workers) that brought with it few labor obligations (see also Barriguelli 1975: 870–872). This seems to have been the case for Campo Doce, which moved workers off its *colônia*—the locus of Lourdes' philanthropic activities on the plantation—in the years following the industrial action described above.

Emerging from this historical landscape is a patchwork of different structures for the provision and funding of benefits and services to Campo Doce employees in the company's *colônia* during the 1950s and 1960s. Via the *barracão* system, payment for many commodities and services was deducted directly from employees' salaries. In addition, further legislation introduced in 1965 relating specifically to the sugar and ethanol sector—termed the Plano de Assistência Social (Social Assistance Plan), or PAS—stipulated that companies must direct a percentage of revenue toward workers' benefits.

My objective in drawing attention to these historical accounts of labor relations on the Campo Doce plantation is not to challenge the veracity of the Figueira family narrative in its representation of the family and company's philanthropic history. What is important for the present discussion is the way in which *all*

of the different activities discussed above have been collectively reconfigured in this narrative as examples of the family's benevolence toward its workers, underlining the central role played by social responsibility in the history of family and firm.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this process of the collapsing of distinctions between different categories of activity in the name of social responsibility. First, while the drawing of moral distinctions between these different (commercial, philanthropic, and legally binding) activities is important from the political economic perspective taken by the historical accounts discussed above—which privileges attention to the labor rights of workers and the extent to which they have been adhered to or undermined in the history of relations between the Figueira family and their employees—it should not be assumed that the drawing of these distinctions is in any way compatible with the historical perspective taken by the family itself. On the contrary, for the Figueiras the distinctions drawn here are irrelevant to what they have experienced as the seamless and all-encompassing expression of their own social responsibility from the founding of their company up until the present day.

In a contemporary example of this point, the Figueiras and their employees were candid when I asked them about the connection between Campo Doce's CSR and philanthropic practices and its marketing strategies. Family members told me that these activities were good for the business's reputation and helped to attract talent to the company, maintain a loyal workforce, and encourage high levels of productivity. For the Figueiras, the concepts of profitability and social responsibility were not, therefore, in any way opposed but rather formed part of a single ideology on good business practice (for an elaboration of this point, see McGoey 2012). As Garsten (2012: 418) has argued, CSR is indeed posited on the idea that distinctions between potentially antagonistic concepts—such as welfare and profit—can be transcended.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the above, however, is that it was clearly

of great importance to the Figueira family to make and substantiate the claim that Campo Doce had “social responsibility in its DNA.” In the final part of this article, I explore why—at the particular moment in which my ethnographic encounter with the Figueira family took place—this was the case. Here, we return to the matter of elite succession processes, which anthropologists such as Marcus (1992, 2000) and Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima (2000) have placed at the heart of their ethnographic inquiry into dynastic families. Following these authors, I argue that historical family narratives such as that recounted to me by the Figueiras are central to delicate processes of business succession in which older generations actively seek to secure the future of the family firm. The placing of this discussion after that developed above, however, serves as an attempt not only to understand these succession processes as they are experienced *within* the family itself (following the lead of Marcus and Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima) but also to move *between* the “different universes”—and temporal planes—of family/firm, company employees, and (global and local) corporate landscapes. In doing so, I seek to connect my ethnographic inquiry into the succession processes of this Brazilian business family to the critical analysis of their corporate objectives, showing that both form part of the same elite project.

Maintaining family values (or: Keeping the family united and the business prosperous)

In conversations in the field, Camila Figueira described the scenario mentioned at the beginning of this article, in which families fear that their third generation will fail to ensure the continuation of the business founded by their grandparents and built up by their parents (see also Yanagisako 2002: 35). Indeed, while I was carrying out my fieldwork, only one member of the Figueiras’ third generation held an executive position at Campo Doce. As long as the com-

pany remained under family control, however, all members of the family would in the future become shareholders and so would be collectively responsible for ensuring its survival.

During the 1980s, Camila and her sisters-in-law had begun to study contemporary trends in corporate governance and family business succession and had initiated a series of weekend-long meetings throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the whole family and a series of consultants. Camila told me that she wanted to “bring out into the open” what it felt like for each of them to inherit the family firm, even if it “felt like a weight on their shoulders.” The meetings were designed to help members of the younger generation feel personally connected to the business and to help them learn how to “honor the past” while “cultivating cohesion” between the past and the future and between the ideas of “me, the family nucleus, and the business.”

Particularly important in this process, Camila explained, was making sure that the older members of the family communicated “the values, philosophy, and history of the family” to the third generation, encouraging them to feel “proud of being part of the family and the business.” Central to the family’s philosophy, said Camila, was its “social conscience,” a set of values embodied throughout the family’s history in its philanthropic practice. Alongside Campo Doce’s philanthropic foundation, the Figueira Family Memorial Archive (mentioned at the beginning of this article) thus provided both a medium through which the family’s socially responsible “values” could be placed formally within its historical narrative, and a forum through which the continuity of these values could be demonstrated through further philanthropic practice. Such attempts at instilling specific “family values” into the identities of the family’s third generation clearly reflect the process observed by Marcus (2000: 19) among American dynastic families, in which “descendants receive a cultural conditioning in their family’s discourse about its own special types of persons, distinctive through breeding . . . that is historically constructed exclusively for family members.”

The family narrative reproduced earlier in this article was recounted to me in 2009. As I was to learn in the field, this was a year of much uncertainty for the Figueiras. In 2005, the year in which the family lost their father/grandfather and the founder of the family firm, Campo Doce had acquired a lucrative brand of refined sugar, a move that not only doubled the company's revenue but significantly increased its visibility in the corporate sector. Just four years later, however, the company was reeling from the effects of the global economic recession and on the brink of a takeover from a prominent competitor. The future of the family's firm, its capital growth, and the unity of its members all hung in the balance. In the light of these uncertainties, the dissemination of a historical narrative defining the family and its business was surely of heightened importance, both in the public sphere and within the private sphere of the family itself.

As we have seen, putting social responsibility at the center of this narrative thus serves both external requirements in an age of quasi-obligatory corporate participation in the production and dissemination of CSR discourse, and internal (familial) requirements relating to the need to elect and elaborate a set of intrinsic "family values," collective adherence to which will ideally serve as the basis for harmonious family relations and a common project for smooth business succession. And as social responsibility becomes central to the Figueira family narrative, the family is duly tasked with the presentation of a coherent and connected history of the family's and the firm's naturalized benevolence, beginning with Lourdes's activities on the *colônia* and ending with the philanthropic projects of the company's foundation and the family's memorial archive.

In defense of the critical ethnography of elites

The critical ethnographic inquiry developed above has explored the role played by asser-

tions of a naturalized commitment to social responsibility on the part of one Brazilian business family. I have argued that the collapsing of conceptual boundaries between philanthropy, self-regulated CSR practice, and adherence to labor legislation in this family's and this firm's historical narrative serves both corporate objectives within the family business, and the family's attempts to ensure the survival of its firm via smooth business succession processes. Family business and business family emerge here as tightly interwoven realms of elite experience, working together to ensure the reproduction of capital and status.

Ethnographic accounts of elite experience also demonstrate, however, that these are highly personal, emotive, and volatile processes. We cannot assume that elite projects, simply by virtue of the economic and social power of their perpetuators, will always succeed. In conversations in the field, for example, Camila Figueira lamented that—despite her efforts—some members of the family's third generation seemed so "distant from the concept of philanthropy" and its importance for the family. In the face of the recent partial acquisition of Campo Doce by a leading competitor, it was unclear when I left the field whether Camila's efforts would indeed ensure the succession of what was left of the company to the family's next generation.

Marcus (2000: 10) has made similar observations on the fate of American dynastic families, leading him to argue that "the key issue in sustaining dynastic continuity is not so much the tangible strategies of keeping collective wealth, power, and organization together—these are bound to fail in predictable and programmed ways." The more important issue for ethnographies of dynastic families, he claims, "concerns the intimate psychocultural processes that shape subjectivities among descendants, and how these subjectivities remain vivid in relations among descendants as the hold of dynastic organizations lessens."

Marcus's observation is central to an ethnographic approach that privileges the concerns of dynastic families and considers such families as

bounded ethnographic examples of lived elite experience. Such an approach, however, overlooks the possibility that, for as long as elite families *are* still wealthy, they may show themselves to be intimately concerned with “tangible strategies” for the maintenance of their capital, power, and organizations, despite the knowledge that these are “ultimately bound to fail.” Surely, this concern is in fact one of the central reasons why succession processes are treated with such importance among dynastic families. In addition, Marcus’s approach does not seek to privilege the critical perspective in which broader mechanisms for the reproduction of elite wealth and status at a structural level depend not on the success or failure of any individual family strategy to keep its own wealth and power together. Rather, it is the tangible success of these strategies within *shifting configurations* of successful elite families that ensures the reproduction of wealth elites as a social category, which in turn ensures the maintenance of the broader economic inequalities ever more starkly in evidence around the globe.

I do not intend here to suggest that every ethnography of elites should strive to adopt a critical perspective as outlined above; it is, of course, the prerogative of each ethnographer to define the focus of their inquiry in the field. Rather, this article has attempted to show that the critical ethnography of elites (in both its critical and ethnographic ambitions) is not only legitimate as a contribution to the disciplinary inquiry into elite lives but also important as part of a broader project of critical anthropology in its many forms (see Nugent 2012). Furthermore, I have argued that the critical ethnography of elites does not imply rejection of inquiry into the lived experience, concerns, and priorities of elites (of the kind so masterfully developed by Marcus and others). Rather, the task of the critical ethnographer is to supplement this inquiry by moving between these elite universes and those of others on whom elite activity bears an influence, within and beyond the ethnographer’s field.

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Notes

1. Mike Savage’s (2014) term “wealth elite” delineates a global demographic defined by financial accumulation (as opposed to other possible measures of “elite” status, such as political or intellectual influence). My use of this term is similarly designed to draw attention to the financial wealth of the subjects of my ethnography, who in this case are also corporate elites.
2. The ethnographic material presented here forms part of a broader doctoral research project, the fieldwork for which was carried out in Brazil and the United Kingdom between 2008 and 2010 among philanthropists, philanthropic foundations, and philanthropy advisory organizations.
3. The hubristic claims for the potential of an emergent global philanthropic elite to provide

the panacea for the problems of poverty and underdevelopment have attracted growing attention over recent years (see Edwards 2010 and McGoe 2015 for a critical analysis; Bishop and Green 2008 for an enthusiastic analysis; Morvaridi 2015 for an overview of both positions).

4. The concept of “critique” employed here is drawn from a political economy perspective and thus differs from some of the “critical” perspectives defining other moments in anthropology’s history, particularly the discipline’s postmodernist era. Gilbert and Sklair (this issue) explore this distinction alongside a discussion of how critique has been framed more recently among “anticritical” or “postcritical” scholars, including those at the forefront of the discipline’s “ontological” turn.
5. All names used in this article (including that of the family and its business) are pseudonyms.
6. Personal e-mail communication. This and all extracts from interviews with members of the family, and company employees, appear in my own translations from Portuguese.
7. Self-regulatory performance-based indicator schemes are central to global, normative CSR practice (see, e.g., Kinderman 2011: 15, on the BITC CSR Index in the United Kingdom; Garsten and Jacobsson 2011 on the United Nations Global Compact).
8. Daniel Kinderman (2011) has argued that CSR and neoliberal marketization have evolved hand in hand in recent decades, with CSR being offered by corporations in exchange for lighter market regulation. Seen in this light, Campo Doce’s adoption of CSR represents a public demonstration of the company’s commitment to marketization in the context of Brazil’s neoliberal turn from the mid-1980s.

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