

CLASS AS EVERYDAY IMAGINATION AND PRACTICE IN BRAZIL

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Introduction

Much has been made, in the Brazilian press and in academia as well, of the “new middle class,” and all debates center on who these people are, why they should be counted as “middle class,” and what this means for Brazil. In 2009 this group included some 95 million Brazilians, or 50.5% of the population; this percentage comprises all households with a monthly income between 355 and 1.520 pounds. Also important is that this is the average household income for Brazil; so, in a very literal sense this new class does lie “in the middle” (Neri et al., 2008:5). Sociologically, the term “new middle class” refers, in Brazil, to a large and rather amorphous group of people who would in other contexts be called a “lower middle class,” and who may have recently experienced processes of upward mobility that allowed them to leave behind a status as “poor.”

In this paper, I interrogate this notion of a new Brazilian middle class by showing how those persons assumed to belong to this assumed “new” “middle-class” see themselves, and what they do as new “members” of this so-called class. The paper will focus, then, neither on large-scale socio-economic processes, nor on sociological theorizations of class, but on how this “new middle class” is tentatively producing itself through some of the most quotidian practices of life-making. Important foci of this consumption have been technology, objects for the home, and purchases linked to mobility (cars and travel) but, in this paper, I focus only on the former two and how they relate to notions of what a “proper” middle-class home should be.

I therefore ask: what does this “new middle-class” actually do with itself, especially when it is in the coziness of its home, and how does it conceptualize this “new” home? And what is the material culture that makes up the everyday of this class? Finally, how – if at all – do these objects and practices constitute these people as a “new” middle-class? Further, I want to inquire what these practices and objects may be saying about (1) the notion of “class” itself, and how to think about it, (2) the concept of a “new middle-class,” and (3) its grounding in processes that are particular to Brazilian society, especially those processes having to do with cultural understandings of equality and difference.

This focus is important because the main novelty posed by this group is that, while their occupations and incomes are still subordinate enough as to identify them as “poor” or “working class,” their consumption of middle- and upper-scale items – such as high tech mobile phones and television sets – is skyrocketing as never before, so that they are now the main buyers of items such as domestic appliances and electronic goods. Of course, since these are people living under a great many constraints – in terms of housing, schooling, health care, and so on – families must make important choices over what to spend their money on: buying a flat screen television set may mean that no money is spent on travel, or vice versa. But, regardless of the peculiar economy of consumption that is constructed within each household, what they all have in common is that, for the first time ever, they are able to afford such coveted upper-scale items.

I eschew the question of how to theorize the middle-class to inquire, instead, about the deeper, cultural and symbolic meanings that lie behind it, thus asking what it means, from the point of view of those so labeled, to live under a label they do not

easily identify with; in fact, they prefer to call themselves “poor” or by using euphemisms connoting poverty and a lower status.¹ More specifically, I argue that the consumption of certain objects, and the practices associated with them, may enable people to “feel” and “appear” middle-class, even though they remain excluded from other goods and services. Still, the question that remains is this: to what extent is social difference being bridged, or not, through forms of consumption?

In trying to answer this question, the ultimate purpose of the paper is to discuss how images and practices related not only to class, but mostly to cultural understandings of difference and hierarchy, are being produced, reproduced, and resisted in everyday life. In doing so, I argue that what the processes described here allow one to see is the negotiation, through symbolic and material means, of equality and difference in a society that, though egalitarian in some levels, is still deeply hierarchical in others. Hence, I base my argument on the peculiar modes of negotiating equality and differentiation that prevail in Brazil, and I show that this new “middle class” is inserting itself in this logic and, at the same time, commenting on it, symbolically negotiating its own place in a contradictory and hierarchical society.

Data comes from different research projects on various forms of consumption in Rio de Janeiro, of which I have selected a sample of twenty households. Geographically, these homes are located in different areas of the city, both in central Rio and in more outlying suburbs. Socio-economically, those are poor areas where basic services (such as water and transport) may be lacking. Sociologically, participants belong to the lower ranks of the labor market: they are maids, cooks, construction workers, mechanics, or hold lower-level managerial jobs. They are mostly families with one or two children of various ages, and four are single-parent households.

Before proceeding with the argument, it is important to make three points. One is that people do think their lives have improved in important ways, and to “prove” it they will cite, for example, new eating habits (more yogurt, more processed foods, meat every day), or new appliances (29” television sets or larger, computers, various kitchen appliances, air conditioning). The other, that even so they feel they are lower-ranked than those whom they do consider middle class,” often making jokes about their own status: “we are just poor people who got lucky.” And the third, that most are well aware of this contradiction – they “appear” middle-class but are still poor – and develop their own ways of negotiating it in practice; the ultimate purpose of the paper is precisely to unpack the meanings behind such negotiations.

To develop the argument, I begin with a brief discussion of the public debate in Brazil and what it is saying about the new middle-class, and I show that those center on two opposing views: a more optimistic, indeed rather euphoric one, hailing the phenomenon as an unprecedented, universally positive development in Brazilian history, and another, both cautionary and moralistic, stressing the alienating aspects of this relabeling of the poor as “middle-class.” In the two subsequent sections, I present data, first, on how the participants in this research see and talk about themselves, and second, on their specific consumption practices. Then, I inquire into the nature of the presumed “superficiality” of this consumption, and I argue that it is the very fact that such consumption practices remain on the surface – that is, they only make people “appear” middle-class, and objects are used on the basis of appearance and superficiality – that matters here. Finally, I link this argument to the question of equality and difference in Brazilian society, showing that this logic of consumption emulates the logic whereby Brazilians “appear” egalitarian while, “deep down,” they remain

¹ A popular one, for example, is “remedied,” meaning that one is barely able to make ends meet.

hierarchical and segregated. In this vein, I end to paper by suggesting that, through its consumption practices and the ways they speak to the broader issues of equality and difference in Brazil, this “new middle-class” is both commenting upon and negotiating its own place in this unequal society.

Debating the new middle class: euphoria versus morality

Public discourses in Brazil have been rife with opinionated talk about this new middle class. This talk has been increasingly present in newspapers and most weekly news magazines, but also in certain academic texts (such as a 2010 book simply titled “The Brazilian Middle Class”), and as with most popular discourse, there are two sides to it. On the one hand, we have what I am tempted to call an optimistic euphoria. From their point of view, the Brazilian new middle class is a path-breaking phenomenon and, indeed, a remarkable achievement on the part of the Brazilian economy. This view, voiced by all mainstream newspapers and other media as well as some academics – such as the above-cited work – contends that Brazil is undergoing a transformation of epic proportions. The argument here is that, even with tremendous recession affecting most nations, including some of the world’s major powers, it is argued, Brazil has been able to not only avoid the harshest effects of such recession, but to actually lift tens of millions of people above the poverty line, thus significantly diminishing its appalling inequality rates (cf. Neri, 2008, 2010).

The bottom line of such optimism is twofold: one, that an unprecedented number of people has ascended to middle class status, and two, that this can be most straightforwardly seen in the tremendous spending power of this new class, and its sheer drive to consume cell phones, television sets, computers, cars, refrigerators and freezers, and other tokens of middle-class living, such as beauty products for women, private schools for children, and airplane travel for all. In fact, media stories abound on shopping sprees, numbers of computers and flat screen television sets purchased, families’ delight at buying their own car, and so on.

The whole process, then, is portrayed as a massive improvement in people’s lives, people who finally have gained access to that which the “other,” more traditional middle-class, had historically taken for granted. In itself, then, the very existence of this new middle class is hailed as a key sign that Brazil is finally reaching its hoped-for status as a major world power. A point not lost on economic journalists keen on highlighting such symbolic equivalence; a recent headline in Brazil’s most widely read newspaper said (Folha de São Paulo, 12 December 2010):

The income of [our] ‘C class’ will be worth one Belgium in 2020.
Purchasing power of the new Brazilian middle class will reach 757 billion *reais* [252.5 billion pounds] over the next ten years, equivalent to the European country’s GNP.²

From the opposite point of view, a cautionary and, indeed, moral discourse has also sprung up. It denies the significance of this presumed ascension based on consumption, and it pities the new middle class’ drive to consume, lamenting that not enough people are using their newly-acquired means to put in money towards, for example, cultural consumption or to further educate themselves. In short, this side of the debate takes on a moralizing view of consumption, implying that it is simply wrong to

² “Class C” is market-research parlance for the “new middle class.”

spend one's hard-earned money on superficial "stuff" – to borrow the extremely apt title of a recent book by Daniel Miller (2010) – such as television sets and kitchen appliances. It suggests instead that everyone experiencing such upward mobility should be spending their money in more important matters such as culture, education, or a privately-owned home.

True, this is a minority viewpoint in the broader landscape of Brazilian public opinion these days. Nonetheless, it is present; it has been voiced by important newspaper columnists and, of course, by left-oriented intellectuals. In fact, both groups are aware that their position is shared by only a few, and they use this very fact to further their own argument about the "dangers" embedded in this all-consuming frenzy. Most notably, they argue that, in privileging superficial consumption over more durable means of social ascension (such as education and a home), this new middle class is only contributing to its own permanence in the lower strata of society and, ultimately, also to its very demise (cf. Souza, 2010). Embedded in this kind of argument is also a sense that one should not even be terming this group a "middle class:" due to the lowly place they occupy in the relations of production, and their subordinate status as lower-level workers with even less guarantees than that other, more "traditional" working class comprised by the proletariat, they might best be termed a "new working class" (ibid.).

Though this latter point is of course well-taken and resonates with Marx's own thinking, it is interesting that no mention is made of what is perhaps the most problematic aspect of this rather shallow usage of the "new middle class" trope: its tendency to forego any discussion of what politics might be embedded in this presumed new class formation. After all, sociological conceptualizations of class in both the Marxian and the Weberian traditions have always insisted that by its very nature class is a politics- and power-embedded concept. Also absent in the discussion is E.P. Thompson's (Thompson, 1966) insight that class should be regarded not as a "thing", but a relation between different positions in society.³

Quite to the contrary, the discourses I have briefly described here – even the academic ones – work under the assumption that this new middle class – and, by extension, a notion of class – is not only a "thing," but an easily recognizable, easily valued (or devalued) one, assumed to be understandable on its own. All politics vanishes from the picture, as does the relational character of class: the fact that it only makes sense to discuss a particular class in relation to those other classes it is positioned against, in a broad spectrum of social and economic differentiation and power.

On the other hand, these discourses are not being constructed in a conceptual vacuum; they resonate with other attempts at defining the new middle classes; for example, with that put forth in not-so-academic studies such as Friedman's *The World is Flat* (2005), where the middle class is conceptualized through its aspirations to improve its own living conditions, as well as the existence of a social ascension plan for the future (ibid., also cf. Neri, 2008). Given its amorphous and heterogeneous character, and the impossibility of pinning down an exact position, say, in a scale of labor relations, the underlying assumption here seems to be that aspiration (and, by extension, the consumption that materializes such aspiration) is all one is left with in attempting to define this group.

The debate over how to think about class in a world where politics, power, and relations between class positions seem to increasingly vanish from the picture in order to give way to a notion of aspiration through consumption is besides the purpose of this paper, as is the scholarly debate, over the past twenty years, over the presumed inutility

³ I thank Terry Woronov for bringing this argument to my attention (see Woronov (n.d.) for a similar argument in relation to China).

of the concept in a postmodern, post-Fordist, increasingly neoliberal world?⁴ But it is important to stress, here, that not only is this double-sided debate under-theorized, it also completely ignores people's own perspectives and perceptions.⁵ From the point of view of those assumed to belong to this "new middle class, what exactly is going on? How do they see themselves and their status? And, most importantly, how do they understand their own class position and the role of consumption therein? It is to this that we now turn.

We, the new middle class...

From the point of view of the actual people thus termed "new middle class," things are both more complicated and more straightforward. Straightforward, because to those who have experienced some upward mobility over the past few years – say, through finally finding a job in the formal market (Neri, 2008) – it seems very obvious that their lives have improved in important ways. They will thus cite their new eating practices (more yogurt, more processed foods, meat every day), their new appliances (29" television sets or larger, computers, various kitchen appliances, air conditioning), perhaps a car and recent air travel, and so on, as signs of their improved living conditions. One participant put it very straightforwardly: "we had none of this before and now that my husband has this real job, we have all that stuff. Life is better and easier."⁶

But things are not that simple, I suggest, because many understand the limitations of their current situation and thus remain ambivalent about their own status. They may complain, for example, that "just because we can buy more stuff does not mean that everything is a sea of roses. We still need to go to a public hospital when we get sick, right? And my children are going to a private school alright, but it's only a cheap one here around the corner. It's not the same school that the rich kids go to, is it?"

This materializes itself, most painfully, in the marketplace, when they want to make a purchase and are looked down upon by salespersons or other customers because, they imagine, they "look poor." In this case, therefore, it is the very possibility of consuming more that brings about ambivalence and, often, a reproduction of stigma. One woman, for example, described her attempt to buy a new, double-door refrigerator with a freezer included:

I wanted it very badly, and I had finally saved money to buy it. I don't do credit, I always buy everything in cash, straight away. So, I came into *Ponto Frio* [a lower-end chain store specializing in easy credit for the lower classes] and started looking at the refrigerators. I already knew the brand I wanted, *Brastemp*, it's the best one, right? I knew how much money I had and just wanted to know what the best refrigerator would be that would fit into my money. But the saleswoman did not believe I had money. She kept forcing me to do one of those credit things. When I refused, she called the manager on me. She was suspicious, you know?

⁴ A recent Anthropology Newsletter article has suggested that many scholars have "[misunderstood] the transformation and decline of the Fordist working class (...) as the end of class itself" (Carbonella and Kasmir, 2006:8), thus confusing one specific historical formation – the Fordist working-class – with the sociological conceptualization of class.

⁵ See also Denning (2004) for an interesting discussion of cultural notions of class and how they intersect with theoretical concepts.

⁶ 46-year-old woman, a housewife living in a working-class suburb in Rio de Janeiro.

The manager came and started asking questions, even wanted to see my money. I felt so humiliated that I left. (...) You know, newspapers say we are middle class but in the stores we are all treated as poor.⁷

Another point to be made is that, contrary to what the afore-mentioned debate sometimes assumes, the “new middle class” is anything but a homogeneous group; hence, there is even more ambiguity in such class perceptions. For example, not everyone that can statistically be included in this label is in that position because he or she has experienced upward mobility. Sometimes it is the other way around, maybe after a divorce or the death of a family member who used to be the main provider in the household. And, having experienced downward mobility, they profoundly resent being placed in the same category as others whom they do not consider equal to themselves:

It’s a joke, isn’t it? I read the newspapers and they are all talking about this new middle class as if it were the most wonderful thing in the world. Well, let me tell you, I have an income of 3,000 *reais* (1,000 pounds) and this, the newspapers say, makes me new middle class. It makes me want to cry. I used to be upper class, I could buy everything I wanted, send my daughter to private schools, travel abroad every year. But my husband died and I didn’t have a job, so I have been struggling ever since. So if now I am middle class, there is nothing good about this. And those people they are calling middle class, they are just poor people who can buy some stuff they could not before. I’m not like them. I had a better life, a better upbringing.⁸

Even so, however, the growing centrality of consumption, and the homogeneity in the kinds of objects purchased, are blatant: 42” flat screen television sets, computers, state-of-the-art cell phones, kitchen appliances, air conditioning, decorative items, furniture, and videogame consoles (sometimes, of two or three different kinds). Often, it is the same brands, purchased at the same stores. But, after a couple of years researching consumption practices and social mobility, I have yet to find anyone willing to elaborate on why they think all this “stuff” is so important and necessary. Usually, they will give two main answers. One, that my question is just plain stupid: if one can afford to have the largest possible flat screen television set and three different videogame consoles, why shouldn’t they? And two, that all this should “go without saying” (to borrow the famous phrase Bourdieu used to explain *habitus* and *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977)): one has such objects because everyone else has them, too, for “this just how one lives today:”

I’m not a consumerist, I don’t buy just for the sake of buying. But these things, they are just part of life now, aren’t they? Everyone wants them, a good double-door refrigerator, the best possible oven, the best cell phone, a large tv for the living room and some others for the other rooms. This is life now, you know. And we are happy that we can afford this stuff, just like everybody else.⁹

⁷ 53-year-old woman, lives in a *favela* and works as a maid. *Brastemp* is a Brazilian middle- to upper-scale brand famous for its washing machines and refrigerators.

⁸ 58-year-old woman, lives in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. A former school teacher, she is retired and depends fully on her lawyer ex-husband’s alimony.

⁹ 32-year-old man, lives in a working-class suburb and works as a firefighter.

The lack of a sense of class consciousness is obvious here. Of course, this should come as no surprise, since the link between consumption and class in capitalist society has been concerning scholars for quite some time. One argument has been that, under neoliberalism and the ever-tightening grip of capital over every sphere of life, class consciousness has all but disappeared, making the concepts of “class” and “labor” appear less meaningful as consumption becomes more central (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001). Under a slightly different light, Hardt and Negri (2005) have argued that, rather than consider class in terms of labor, consumption and labor must be jointly brought into the analytical picture in order to understand the current moment. Others still have insisted on the centrality of consumption practices in the formation of class itself, stripped off its political salience (Woronov, n.d.).

But these arguments do not explain precisely why this taken-for-grantedness of consumption, nor its defining role in the making of ordinariness, that my informants think are so obvious. In the following sections, I describe some of this consumption and show why it is so significant in the imagination of class – though not of class consciousness: the consumption practices of this so-called “new middle class” are saying important things, I suggest, not only about this particular group, but also about the deeper role it is playing in contemporary Brazilian society. I suggest that, by looking at the taken-for-grantedness of these ideals of consumption and their accompanying practices, much can be learned about this new middle-class, especially given that other modes of class formation seem out of reach and a Marxian class consciousness seems entirely absent. More specifically, by looking at the very commonality (and, indeed, even “superficiality”) of these consumption practices and their underlying meanings, much can be learned about the intricacies of upward mobility in a society where hierarchy is so ingrained and notions of equality and difference, so ambiguous.

Ethnographic notes on the “new middle class”

An initial point that needs to be made regarding the households in this sample is the remarkable homogeneity found in their consumption practices, the dreams of ascension they speak to, and their underlying cultural and symbolic logics. Thus, most research participants consider themselves to be on a “path upwards,” as they put it, and regard their present condition as one of particular promise, a “lucky streak,” as it were, and they wish to make the most of it.

Further, the reasons they give for what they experience as upward mobility are also more or less the same: usually, one or two family members will have found a formal job – as opposed to the informal, precarious work they used to perform – or have received a promotion; in five of the twenty cases this is linked to their concluding some form of professionalization training, such as a computer skills course or some other course in different kinds of semi-skilled labor (such as a hairdressing course or a cooking one).

Finally, in all households this perception of ascension is couched in terms of consumption: when asked to describe how exactly they think their life has changed, none choose to name rising income levels; instead, all interviewees immediately proceed to numbering whatever new items of consumption they have been able to afford over the past few years. Again, homogeneity here is telling, for such items tend to focus on objects for the home: appliances of all kinds, high technology objects, furniture, decorative items, and so on.

“Homes” in this sample can be either apartments or single-family houses; mostly they are located in suburban neighborhoods.¹⁰ With respect to the larger spatial structuring of such homes, upon entering them through the main door, one steps directly into the living room, which can or cannot have a separate dining area; in some homes a smaller space may have been reserved as a home office or television room. This larger family area connects, on one side, to the private spaces of bedrooms and bathrooms and, on the other, to the so-called service areas (usually a kitchen and laundry facilities, perhaps a pantry). Single-family houses usually have a small backyard or porch, and there they may have built a separate facility for barbecuing or just for “eating out.”

Now, this broader spatial organization may not be signaling any major change in the ways Brazilians built their houses, for even many very poor, auto-constructed houses in *favelas* observe a similar logic of separation between living room and sleeping rooms, leisure and resting areas, and housework areas. But what is significant here is that, one, people are making amendments to pre-existing structures (for example, creating small nooks where a computer station can be placed, or dividing up an already small living room between a sitting and a dining area), and two, that they seem happy to clump up as many objects as they can possibly fit into sometimes already cramped spaces.

Thus, in one simple, from the outside rather downtrodden home that I visited in a poor suburb, the 7.5 square-meter living room was filled with two sofas (each big enough for three or four persons), one reclining chair, one other reading chair, a coffee table, a television rack complete with a 42” flat-screen television, a separate, smaller rack with two videogames and a sound system on it, and a square dining table with four chairs. The child’s room (less than 6 square meters big) had a bunk bed, a closet, a computer table with turned-on desktop computer, monitor, printer, sound boxes, a smaller, a turned-on 20” television set mounted on a wall, another DVD player, a videogame console (Sony Playstation), several videogames, and a ceiling fan. The mother’s bedroom was not very different: though it lacked a videogame, it also had its own DVD player and a rack filled with DVDs, plus a sound system and another rack for the (massive quantity) of CDs, plus the usual television set mounted on the wall, plus ceiling fan and air conditioning. Both of which, I might add, were turned on, even though no one was in the room.

Recall that this and the other homes in the sample belong to families who are still struggling with some of life’s most basic necessities. Yet, this was the general logic in most homes: piling up as much “stuff” as could possibly fit in cramped spaces, “duplicates” (more than one of each object) being increasingly common. Kitchens and service areas also tend to be filled to capacity with all sorts of appliances, from the much-coveted “double-door” refrigerators to another separate freezer (space and budget permitting), to microwave ovens, sandwich makers, different kinds of blenders and food processors, vacuum cleaners, often a smaller television set on the kitchen table – “to watch the *novelas* as I cook,” one woman explained.

Yet, even more interesting than this abundance of “stuff” is the use to which these objects are put. While all households in the sample had recently acquired such large refrigerators with a built-in freezer, only in one of them was the freezer actually being used to store frozen foods; all the others kept only ice cubes. Also, while the space available for storing food inside the refrigerator was massive, again in only two homes was that space entirely occupied; in most cases there was only a large pot of rice and one of beans, perhaps, a litter of milk, some juice or soda, and a few vegetables.

¹⁰ “Suburbs” in Brazil mainly refer to lower-middle-class or working class areas lying outside the more upper-scale neighborhoods and commercial-financial areas located in the center.

This was because they still bought their groceries piecemeal, going to the store every other day, and because they did not enjoy the taste of frozen foods, preferring to cook their meals every day.

A similar logic applies to how electronic appliances are used. In fact, some are not being used at all: some may not even have been installed, others are broken; still others are only turned on for very special occasions. Or, they may have been installed with illegal service providers (in the case of Internet services and cable television), some of which may not work properly. But, when appliances are being used, their logic is similar to that of the refrigerators. Thus, the ubiquitous expensive flat screen television set, intended to provide a movie-like experience, is mostly used to watch *telenovelas* on open channels. And, since *novela*-watching is a family activity in Brazil, family members will gather around the living room television all evening long, watching one soap after the other, oblivious to their own sets in their own rooms.

Of course, according to the growing literature on material culture, this is just what one would expect: that new objects are domesticated by users and incorporated into existing routines, rather than producing new routines from scratch (Shove, 2005, Shove et al., 2007). Consumers, especially after they have bought the items and have thus become “users,” always appropriate new objects and gradually assimilate them into existing practices (Shove et al., 2007). And this always happens in ways that could not have been anticipated, and that may not seem “logic” to outsiders’ eyes: imagine the environmental burden of so many two-door refrigerators being used to store only minimal quantities of food. Often, however, it is those very pre-existing practices that enable the domestication of such objects: for example, people could only leave so many appliances on at the same time because they did not pay for electricity; most were “pirating” it.

Being like everybody else: on the “superficiality” of consumption

It would be easy to argue here that those are superficial consumption practices. And that people are only interested in “showing off” their goods, thus enacting a Brazilian version of “keeping up with the Joneses” (Miller, 2010). A Baudrillard-inspired, “consumers-as-dupes” argument could also be made, on how this is all only reflecting the demands placed by consumer society on individuals, and how it fools them into buying stuff they do not need or want (Baudrillard, 1998).

But when one cares to pay attention to what these people are saying about their objects, one can better see what is at stake here. For what they do want to talk about is their immense satisfaction in being able to afford such items, which they see as part of a notion of middle-class normality that is new to them. Television sets have long been available in all kinds and sizes, but they were only able to afford the simplest, cheapest kind, while “people in better conditions” had always enjoyed the “benefits of technology.” Likewise with a well-equipped kitchen: against their old cheap, lesser-quality ovens and small, poorly-functioning refrigerators, it is a “treat” and a “pride” to now be able to walk into such a “well-served room,” equipped with “the same kinds of things other people have always had.” And the same goes for computers, home offices, home theaters, and so on: all are taken for granted as signs and symbols of quotidian middle class life. One simply “has to have these things,” because they are “part of a normal life nowadays,” and people are happy to partake in this normality.

As these new objects are allowed to become a part of one’s established life worlds, they become part of the taken-for-grantedness of this social world; they “go without saying,” as Bourdieu would put it (Bourdieu, 1977), due to the sheer normality

they represent. And, as Bourdieu argues (1977), it is through our orientation to everyday objects that we come to regard as natural and unchallenged the routines of everyday life and what we expect them to mean. His argument that people make themselves as specific kinds of persons, members of a specific group within their wider culture, through their relationships to the material world and its objects, is in this sense a powerful one (Bourdieu, 1977, Miller, 2010).

It is, I argue, through such a process that this “new-middle-classness” is being produced at the level of everyday imagination and practice: because the very space in which one lives has been peopled with certain key objects thought to represent middle-class normality, and because this is the space one’s body and mind are inhabiting, one comes to, rather “naturally,” embody – and enact – the meanings of imagined “middle-classness.” Such is, I suggest, the power of these objects in this imagination of class. Of course, again and lamentably, there is no sense whatsoever of a Marxian class consciousness going on here. But perhaps this is the very point: that, in this post-Fordist, consumer society, this is the only way certain groups of people can ever hope to imagine class.

On the other hand, there is much to be said about the presumed “triviality” of this hoarding of objects increasingly typical of these “new middle class” homes: as Miller (2005, 2010) has been aptly showing, the significance of material forms lies precisely in their potential for being regarded as trivial. This is exactly what makes them into such powerful mechanisms of social (re)production – because we take them for granted and unthinkingly reproduce those practices we associate with them (Miller, 2010).

But, besides “trivial,” these consumption forms are, also, apparently “superficial.” But what can superficiality mean here? When someone buys a huge refrigerator while sticking to piecemeal shopping, and buys the largest possible television set and cable service, only to watch soaps on open channels, what is this truly speaking to? From people’s point of view, none of this is superfluous; they couch it in terms of normalcy and the taken-for-granted. Yet the uses to which objects are put do seem to remain “on the surface:” middle-class objects are bought because “everyone has them,” but they are domesticated into existing working class routines.

I would like to suggest that “superficiality” and “appearance,” here, have meanings more profound than the anti-consumption literature might expect. It is not by coincidence that the trope “being like everybody else” appears continually; on one level people are very well aware that they are consuming for appearance. And I suggest that this is precisely the point; this is what these consumption practices are achieving: they are making people “appear” middle-class, in their own eyes, in those of their neighbors’, and in the eyes of those popular and academic discourses on the “new middle class” that stress its consumption practices (Lamounier and Souza, 2010, Neri et al., 2008, 2010a, 2010b).

Of course, seeking inclusion through consumption is not a recent invention (Barbosa, Portilho and Veloso, 2009), nor is it specific to the “new middle class,” as in Brazil many poor have historically regarded consumption as symbolically equivalent to social inclusion (Veloso, n.d.).¹¹ And this, of course, is nothing but the very logic of any consumer society. Even less surprising is that people should choose to consume precisely that which allows them to “look like everybody else,” whence their drive to buy objects that most explicitly make this status visible to themselves and others.

¹¹ I have shown in former work that, for the impoverished in Rio, it is common to use phrases like “being a citizen means having a house,” or “being able to buy what you want.”

Under this light, this is not “superficial” in a negative sense, because surfaces are truly important here. As Miller has shown, the idea that what matters are always the deeper meanings, while what remains on the surface is somehow less important, or even false, is a cultural (indeed, a Western) construction that does not fit into many cultures (Miller, 2010). Rather, in some contexts it is what stays on the surface that matters, and what people are able or willing to show is more important than what lies beneath, while the “hidden” is viewed with suspicion or distrust. Following up on this argument, I suggest that it is precisely because this consumption appears to be on the surface only that it is not (Miller, 2010); it is significant because it is superficial. In the next section, I explore why this is the case, and what is hidden under these surfaces.

The dynamics of equality and difference in Brazilian society

Recall the pain and stigma that is still associated with much of this new-middle-class shopping, where people feel humiliated simply by entering a store because no one believes, by looking at them, that they would have the necessary purchasing power. I would like to suggest that what is being signified here is one of the most deep-seated symbolic mechanisms in Brazilian society: a logic whereby, “on the surface,” things appear very egalitarian while, “deep down,” people are rigidly differentiated, separated, and categorized according to strict codes of symbolic valuation. And where, moreover, the prevailing notion is that of substantive equality, not equality of opportunity (cf. Barbosa, 1993, 1999) – in other words, it is a notion of equality “on the surface” that prevails.

Very briefly, the logic goes like this: Brazilians commonly imagine themselves as egalitarian and open, and seem always ready to demonstrate their egalitarian ideals. Examples are our “democratic” use of beaches, where rich and poor share the same space, or in the still-prevailing notion that this a “racial democracy” because blacks and whites are not as segregated as, say, in the United States.¹² Yet, this ideal of egalitarianism clashes with a deeply ingrained set of inegalitarian practices, such as a code of law that differentiates people according to class, sending upper-class felons to different prisons than those assigned to the poor (Holston, 1989, 2008, also cf. Veloso, n.d.). Or our apartment buildings, which have two separate entrances with separate elevators, often with gates and locks in between: the “social” area/entrance and the “service” area/entrance. On the “surface,” “service entrances” are said to be meant for cargo, garbage, pets, or sweaty people coming from the beach or gym (Barbosa, 2008), but in practice they are used by all maids and other (lower) service providers, while the “masters” always take the “social” elevators, often with their pets. Of course, the “deep” meaning here is the segregation of differently-valued persons; those in the lowest positions are kindly asked to stay put (Barbosa, 2008, Holston, 1989).

Scholars have been prolific in discussing this peculiar dynamic of (superficial) egalitarianism and (ingrained) difference (Barbosa, 1993, Da Matta, 1989, Freyre, 2006, 2010, Souza, 2001). In the early twentieth-century, Freyre (2006, 2010) opened up this argument by showing how, historically, though differences and hierarchies between “masters” and “servants” were obviously acknowledged, in practice boundaries could be bridged through interpersonal relationships (also cf. Barbosa, 2008).

¹² The contemporary version of this argument can be seen in the debates now being waged over affirmative action and quotas: many, including sociologists and anthropologists, are fiercely against their implementation because, they argue, in Brazil such ingrained differentiation does not exist in Brazil and such policies would only create difference where there is none (Maggie, 2005, Maggie and Fry, 2004).

A picture of a dualist society thus emerges, where both difference and approximation are negotiable on an everyday basis. This was taken up by another scholar, Roberto Da Matta (1981, 1989), who demonstrated how Brazilians quotidianly manipulate this dual logic in bridging such boundaries. On the one hand, he says, there is this continual attempt to bend rules and bridge boundaries (usually through interpersonal relationships); on the other, the reason such “informal” bridges are needed is that it is impossible for those in the lowest positions to ascend by any other means, given our strict codes of difference and hierarchy (cf. Barbosa, 1993). Also, that one is able to bridge boundaries occasion does not mean they will disappear; anyone who has ever been denied entry to a “social elevator” due to their occupation or skin color could attest to that.

Criticizing Da Matta’s arguments, Souza (2001) has remarked that more important than knowing that Brazilians are differently placed in this total social hierarchy is understanding what processes of social stratification this is speaking to. Souza thus asks the question eschewed by both Freyre and Da Matta: what does class have to do with this? Everything, of course: it is always the lower classes who bear the burden of living “on the wrong side” of social codes. Even race, for that matter, is strongly class-coded here: blacks with money may be treated with the respect accrued to any white, middle-class person, while all poor, black or white, are often treated like lesser-citizens (Veloso, n.d.).

From this point of view, the above-mentioned argument about surfaces and appearances being all that matters begins to make sense (cf. Miller, 2010), and such consumption practices begin to look like they are saying something very true and powerful about Brazil. In a society that differentiates and separates to such a degree, where class hierarchies are so ingrained, but where equality appears to lie on the surface, people instinctively know they will not easily move up on this rigid hierarchic scale; hence one has to make do with the kind of “superficial mobility” materialized in the consumption of certain objects.

Through consumption practices that allow it to appear like everybody else, then, the new middle class may be, at least to some extent (and perhaps unknowingly) attempting to disrupt this logic. And, because it is substantive equality that matters here, this makes having the same goods even more important in people’s sense of their own “middle-classness.”¹³ Further, because this disruption is operating along “superficial” lines, these are also moral commentaries on just how deep-seated these inegalitarian logics and codes really are. After all, one is only “appearing” to be like the other, more privileged middle classes, but one is still excluded from other markers of well-being, such as access to proper (private) schooling and health care, and even from jobs that could maintain one’s middle class status in the long run, rather than the precarious, lower service economy jobs they currently hold.

This, I suggest, is why so much emphasis is placed on surfaces and superficiality. Priding oneself in a huge refrigerator that has no food inside can be, in its own way, an attempt to negotiate one’s place in a world of ingrained, sustained hierarchy. For the “new middle classes” do know that, even though deep down they are not like the “real” middle classes and the rich, on a superficial level they can appear to be. They also know two other things: that in this world it is appearance that counts, and that this is all they have at hand to reach at least some sense of equality.

Concluding remarks

¹³ I thank Livia Barbosa for this commentary, and for helping this argument take shape (Barbosa, personal communication).

By looking closely at what people actually do with their money, and then with the objects they have bought, I suggest that what becomes visible is a changing mode of negotiating difference and hierarchy in Brazilian society, where both these notions have highly peculiar meanings. The new middle class, through its imaginations and practices, and through its consumption, upsets this logic of hiding the latter to express the former. Hence, on one level, it seems to at the very least be making a (symbolic) stand against such ingrained privilege and differentiation, by “stirring up” a very hierarchical and differentiated society. In this light, such practices are both expressing an underlying symbolic logic (of egalitarianism and difference), and trying to change it. At the very least, they are upsetting it, through these very consumption practices. From this point of view, these practices are moral commentaries on the ambivalent dynamics between egalitarianism and difference in Brazilian society.

There is a saying about race in Brazil that, half seriously, half jokingly, goes like this: “money whitens.” The bearing of the anecdote is that race is not a fixed category and not the only marker of difference operating in the symbolic classification of persons on a daily basis. Rather, if one is black but has money, one can potentially be treated as a white person and racial difference can be overlooked. Perhaps, in the case I have presented here, we are witnessing a process that is symbolically equivalent. Here, money is obviously not erasing racial difference. But it is, albeit to a limited extent, at least “appearing” to help erase class difference, though in its own, superficial manner. Though it does not produce a new class, it produces an imagination of belonging to a different class, an imagination shared by both those persons engaging in such practices and those academics and popular discourses commenting on them. Maybe what is left to be done, now, is to figure out how to turn appearance into reality.

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