

Designing Brazil's New Middle Class: Economic science and welfare policies in the making of a social category¹

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Brazil holds an increasingly strategic position in the geopolitical landscape of the globalized world, from its leading role amongst Latin-American politics to its efforts to become the sixth largest world economy by nominal GDP. Yet, the 2008 crisis consolidated an inward-oriented approach towards consumption that yielded effects in the political arena, redesigning citizenship. An emerging new middle class is now heralded as the outcome of several social and welfare programmes; of economic stability (through controlling inflation, expanding the formal labour market and increasing minimal wage); and of sprawling consumption-oriented policies. In this paper, I am interested in how intellectual economies — produced and deployed to make sense of local processes — are rooted into larger, global instances of legitimation. I examine the multiple experiments of trial and error that economists, sociologists, journalists, public policy makers and urban planners deploy to recast Brazil's recent shift to a 'middle class country'. I discuss the underlying political efforts towards internationalization arguing that those local arenas of debate feed into broader circuits of knowledge that redefine economic and social data, thus allowing the scientific flow of expertise and practices of classification that lead to convergent globalized arguments about emerging middle classes across the developing world. I look at the performativity of science as a political economy of the present, reconnecting econometrics, statistics and mathematical models to their embedded, on-the-ground, reality. This implies tracing the connections of scientists and scientific ideas to their globalized modes of production, institutions and inventiveness.

Keywords: new middle classes; economic science; welfare policies; Brazil.

Introduction

Over the past three years, I have conducted fieldwork among low-income and first-time homeowners in the southern city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, as they moved from peripheral urban illegal settlements to middle-class urban environments. Early in my fieldwork, I met Dona Hilda, a ninety-four years-old woman who was then yearning to become a beneficiary of the country's public housing system — the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* programme. She participated in the monthly meetings of a tenant's association and always sat on the front row, eagerly listening and observing her surroundings. One day I dared to approach her before the meeting began. After condensing her life story in a couple of sentences — as she was used to interactions with politicians, businessmen and local leaders — she shifted her look and said, staring deep into my eyes: 'But I still have that *letter*'.

Dona Hilda showed me an old piece of paper stamped with her name and a couple of loose words, reading: 'Compra de imóveis — preterido' (Purchase of a house — turned down). The document was more than 20 years old and dated from 1988 — the same year Brazil hailed its most recent constitution. Issued by the Municipal Housing Department, the piece of paper held an observation written in small, inconspicuous letters: 'Information will

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be given under the presentation of this card'. Stemming from outside the ordinary, that uncanny document linked Dona Hilda — and millions of other low-income people alike — to the times and spaces of Brazil's state bureaucracy. She was thereafter registered in a social database where the needy were supposed to appear both as a number in an endless waitlist for benefits that rarely find their way to people and as a citizen, if only to stand outside the limits of governance of a precarious state trying to retrieve welfare and redeem civil rights after the end of dictatorship in 1984.

More than 20 years later, new technologies were conceived which superseded Dona Hilda's old-fashioned handwritten card. Yet, she kept it safe and when *Minha Casa Minha Vida* was released, she turned it in to the authorities: 'I mean, this letter is almost 20 years old. I never threw it away, why would I do it now? And it was because of this letter that *my part was liberated (minha parte foi liberada)! I became enrolled!*' As a beneficiary of state welfare policies — such as *Bolsa Família* and *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* — Dona Hilda was required to obtain a document called Social Identification Number (NIS) and to have her socioeconomic profile included in a classification device known as *Cadastro Único* (Unified Registry).

In my ethnography, I look into the design and implementation of a state housing policy, exploring the intersecting domains that flourish from exchanges between experts, politicians, city planners, social collectives and public housing beneficiaries. I pay attention to people's efforts to connect to the policy, as they move across scales of time, power and space. As Pardo and Prato (2011) put it, there is a crisis of legitimacy arising from the disconnections between practices of governance and the expectations of citizens that transcends the scope of socially oriented policies and activist citizens. Nonetheless, looking into day-to-day practices, I see people trying to adjust to state expectations, fabricating their own paths for inclusion and citizenship and facing the harsh realities of scarce public resources and the ambivalences of public-private initiatives. Ultimately, it is this life plasticity that gives us a human and concrete sense of the design of policies, the reach of the state and the encroachment of novel markets.

Throughout the last decade, the outbreak of welfare programmes, along with economic stability and the sprawl of consumption-oriented policies, heralded a vibrant national debate on the emergence of a 'new middle class'. People such as Dona Hilda, yearning to be embraced by social policies, suddenly were recast as part of a growing segment of the population with access to Brazil's consumer society and comprehensive state services. By and large, economists across the country are deeply invested in the reconceptualization of poverty thresholds, laying bare the juncture of expert knowledge and practices of governance.

In this paper, I am interested in yet another dimension of what, when dealing with scale-making, Anna Tsing (2005) calls 'zones of awkward engagement'. I draw on two different moments in Brazil's intellectual and economic history to show how economists come to play an increasingly prominent role in the design of public policies and the assessment of the country's development. Looking into the struggle over numbers that accompanies Brazil's recent socioeconomic transformations, I delve into what renders them persuasive (Callon 1998) and legitimate as an account of middle-classness.

Processes of middle-class formation are at the core of an anthropological literature concerned with the merging effects of citizenship and consumption in the shaping of modern lifestyles. Historical accounts have focused on the establishment of a new Brazilian identity through the consolidation of a developmentalist national state ideology. Conversely, ethnographies carried out in the midst of economic instability have documented the assembling of a consumer society and the role of consumption as a marker of middle-class identities (O'Dougherty 2002). In a similar vein, Brazilian anthropologists have charted the formation of individualistic lifestyles rooted in middle-class claims and cosmopolitan consumption (Velho 1987).

While the study of class boundaries remains relevant to a broader understanding of identities and practices of social distinction through consumption, more recent analyses have shifted to the emergence of global middle classes as moral vectors articulating economic and political larger forces (Heiman, Freeman and Liechty 2012). Rather than assuming that middle-class is a given category of self-identification, my work examines the technologies — both political and scientific — that cast certain populations as such, as well as the aspirations that they unleash on the ground. As we unpack the shifting styles of consumption, motivations for citizen action, relations of labour and belong to the city fabric that crystalize in people's travails, class reveals itself as a category in the making that accounts for both state projects and personal longings.

Policymakers rely increasingly on a self-determined sense of entrepreneurship and thriving enshrined by an activist citizen disposition; in the process, middle-class becomes the hidden moral language that conveys the longings for such aspirations. As a consequence, disputes over poverty thresholds and competing definitions of inequality turn into figures of thought: performing precise statistical methodologies, they set sharp limits for inclusion and exclusion, and integration and dissidence in relation to an overarching national project of development and mobility. Therefore, fleshing out the globalized connections that traverse the economists' expertise allows for a better understanding of how contemporary boundaries between state and markets come to be envisioned and enacted over the lives of persons such as Dona Hilda.

Performing Brazil's 'New Middle Class'

Dona Hilda became the central piece of a political, economic and social machinery that far outreached the local configurations of housing programmes. Throughout the 2000s, Brazil has experience a decrease in the social inequality rates as the result of social policies, economic stability, minimum wage increase and expansion of internal markets. The strengthening of the country's economy, in high demand for manual labour deployed in infrastructural projects, concocted new flows of immigration and converted Brazil into a regional leading force (Da Silva 2013).

Marcelo Neri was the first leading economist to pioneer a number of innovative techniques and statistics to herald the emergence of a so called 'Classe C' — identified as the income band in the centre of the social pyramid. Neri divided Brazil's society in five different

classes (A, B, C, D and E), using the statistical notion of the ‘median’ to encompass calculations of labour income, education and ownership of specific goods.

Drawing from these variables, he suggests that in recent years the majority of the population entered the intermediate Classe C, which applies to some 53 per cent of the country earning from 500 to 2,000 dollars per month (Neri 2008, Pochmann 2012). Economists claim that this constitutes a group of income — that is, an economic class — for it has the greatest level of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Neri 2011: 14-15). Neri deployed the same mathematical model in retrospective, finding that during the 2000s some 40 million people were pulled out of misery and poverty (terms identified, respectively, with the lower groups). Making the case for an upward economic mobility, Neri gave this process a sense of novelty that could be conveyed by the expression, ‘new’ middle class.

‘The *Classe C* is the closest image of Brazil’s average society’, writes Neri (2008: 29). By suggesting this, he believes that a closer look into the diversity of the Classe C’s can lead to a better view of what the country has become in recent years. New statistical technologies aimed at assessing the bulging middle-classes in developing countries are a relatively common trend among self-nominated social economists (Ravallion 2009). Yet, what seems rather unique in Neri’s case is the way his ideas penetrated the federal government, who in 2012 developed new official criteria to measure Brazil’s social stratification. At that time, Brazil was adopting measures intended to expand inward consumption, stimulating cost and tax reductions in the production of certain goods, such as household appliances. Low-income market development proved to be a reliable shield against crisis insofar as it provided material evidence on how to gauge the outcomes of long-term economic stability, low unemployment and continuous minimum wage increases. In this scenario, Neri’s research bestowed a scientific endorsement upon the government’s heralding the end of endemic poverty. In 2012, during a celebration speech of Project ‘Brazil without Misery’,² President Dilma Rousseff vividly recommended Neri’s book to everyone ‘interested in understanding the country’s recent changes’. Adding on what seemed to be the beginning of a fruitful partnership, she said, ‘It is because of his studies and analyses that we improve our social policies. He is a great collaborator of the federal government’.

In the following years, Marcelo Neri was named Minister of the Secretary of Strategic Affairs.³ Under him, the government entertained a project called ‘Voices of the New Middle Class’ — a result of seminars gathering experts, social scientists, heads of market research

² ‘Brazil without Misery’ is a multi-billion dollar social assistance programme aimed at eradicate extreme poverty from Brazil by expanding the country’s aid programmes to reach the nation’s poorest. The programme expands a cash transfer benefit programme started in 2003 by the *Bolsa Família*, which provided families with cash benefits in exchange for keeping their children in school and following a simple health and vaccination programme.

³ The Secretary of Strategic Affairs (SAE) responds directly to the Presidency and its main role is to undertake the conception of projects and to structure public policies for various Ministries. It was created in 2008 and is intended to provide the government with ‘strategic’ information on policy implementation.

institutes and politicians aimed at designing public policies geared at securing the Classe C and its achievements. A new official system of social classification emerged from these seminars. Drawing on Neri's idea of *per capita* domestic income and combining it with a statistical calculation of vulnerability, a new hierarchy was created including the poor (ranging from US\$ 0 to US\$ 62); the vulnerable (ranging from US\$ 62 to 112); the low-middle class (ranging from US\$ 112 to 170); the middle-middle class (ranging from US\$ 170 to US\$ 247); the upper-middle class (ranging from US\$ 247 to US\$ 392); and the upper-class (from US\$ 392 upwards).

Marcelo Neri's project did not appeal to the majority of Brazilian sociologists, whose critique focuses on the misemployment of the concept of social class (Souza 2009, 2010; Scalon and Salata 2012; Xavier Sobrinho 2011). Likewise, scholars aligned to the leftist Worker's Party (PT) disagreed with the government's overall deflection from poverty to middle-class — arguing instead for a more political-inspired, leftist notion of 'worker class' (Pochmann 2012; 2014; Chauí 2013).

Moving from intellectual to political quandaries, a middle-class language as an image of Brazil's society lays bare the neoliberal arrangements of market, science and government, while speaking to internationalized debates on development and social inclusion. In this sense, the efforts of the intellectual elite to consolidate this language resemble Bourdieu's argument on taxonomic struggles and symbolic power (1991). According to Bourdieu, certain social groups reproduce themselves into power by seeking to establish their worldview as more legitimate than others. As middle-class turns into a hegemonic concept framing upward mobility, economic rationality becomes the suitable political narrative to tell the story of a modern country under construction.

Globalized Nodes of Science-making

Marcelo Neri does certainly not stand alone as an economist collaborating with state efforts and policies, nor was he the first to do so. In 1973, the economist Carlos Langoni published *Income Distribution and Economic Development of Brazil*. This was the first account using modern statistical technologies to assess the country's inequalities from an economic standpoint. Langoni argues that the nature of Brazil's economic development between 1960 and 1970 increased income distribution disparities, placing the country among the most unequal nations in the world. His conclusion is that education, crucial in determining individual income, is 'still' the foremost variable in the achievement of status and influence and their transmission across generations, (Langoni 1973: 209).

Langoni earned his PhD in 1970 from the University of Chicago. He was a student of Theodore Schultz, a Nobel Prize winner in 1979 who first deployed human capital theory to understand economic development. His idea was that education makes people productive and that good healthcare keeps the education investment productive. His contribution would inspire considerable work in international development in the 1980s, motivating investments in vocational and technical education by international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. 'I was so impressed by the classes of professor Schultz', Langoni revealed in an interview, several years later. 'When it was about

time to write the dissertation, I decided to use his ideas applied to Brazil. I calculated the country's rate of return on investments in education' (my translation, Cariello 2012: 7).

Langoni's claim for objectivity was deeply rooted in a geopolitics of knowledge that not only connected Brazil to broader theoretical disputes emerging at the core of North American academia, but also predicated on national struggles over data availability and state accountability. Economist Antonio Delfim Netto authored the foreword to Langoni's groundbreaking book and was a crucial figure in Brazil's military dictatorship governments during the 1960s and 1970s. One of his most known proverbs — 'The cake must first grow in order to be distributed' — encapsulated a state philosophy concerned with industrial and economic growth in spite of social equity and had a lingering impact over Langoni's theorizing. Treasury Minister Delfim Netto was the head of a scientific and political network gathering the country's most preeminent economists of the time around the scientific production of national statistics.

Under the military government, statistics turned into a strategic area for the control of the country's image and for the country's galvanizing move towards development, remaining essentially a veiled enterprise surrounded by rumours. In 1970, Langoni and a few other economists were summoned by minister Delfim Netto for a conversation about Brazil's income distribution. According to Langoni's recollection, the minister was concerned about a recently published article by the North American economist Albert Fishlow (1972). Besides recognizing that Brazil had turned into a more unequal country, Fishlow suggested this was due to state policies of wage crackdown enacted through repression of union mobilizations and skyrocketing inflation. Delfim Netto wanted to commission a young global economist to produce a competing account of Brazil's conjuncture. As a consequence, Langoni gained privileged access to the detailed database of 1970's population census. Delfim Netto made sure that a technician was specially assigned to assist Langoni in performing statistic measurements using punch cards at a central computer located inside the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro — where some of these economists graduated and found institutional support to teach and develop their research projects.

The political and economic context of Langoni's research had lingering consequences for the coming generations of Brazilian economists enrolled in governmental scientific institutions. On the one hand, it enshrined decades of socio-economic analyses that hinged upon the Gini Coefficient as a persuasive and internationalized technology of measurement mirroring the country's distributional health. On the other hand, it established a permanent state of uncertainty about the production of national statistics in political regimes that were trying to achieve democratic status. Slipping forth into contemporary quandaries of middle-classness, struggles over data and its production turn progressively into a debate about the meaning of reality itself. Dealing with reliable data became, therefore, a matter of grappling with available collections of statistics that speak to a political terrain safeguarded by state ideologies.

A World of Policies

As economic experts moved toward a more social and comprehensive approach in the design of welfare policies, the systems of knowledge they created had to rely on a conceptual collaboration with the targets of intervention. Technologies of governance reveal their effectiveness in relation to people's efforts to connect to the policy and to deploy new categories of identification. By looking into this daily work for citizenship, we are better prepared to grapple with the ambivalent realities of the policies, documenting how scientific devices come to bear alongside new forms of narration and upward mobility.

Housing policies in particular operate at the juncture of people's longings for a better life and the desire of planners and state representatives to model a better city. Under *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, housing projects are usually part of an overarching architectural scheme that can be easily transferred to different settings, eliciting a circulation of structural forms, facilities and overall space design. As anthropologist Teresa Caldeira (2001) illustrates, fortified closed condominiums are a model common among traditional upper-middle class citizens seeking safety and isolation in Brazil's big cities; now, they are being scaled-up and deployed as political projects to govern, secure and rescue people from poverty.

As I talked to various architects and public planners, I learned that the built environment was intended to trigger a purified and disciplined community life that purportedly could improve the moral condition of the poor as they were resettled to urbanized, middle-class spaces. Attempts to evaluate the kind of life made possible by such condominiums largely accounted for how these housing projects entered public debate, but they were also central to the way in which people engaged in those projects.

In one such condominium in Southern Brazil, I found Seu Ivo resting under a tree, near the common parking lot, watching kids play with stones and drinking mate tea. The problem, he told me, was that families were not thoroughly prepared to move to this environment. Campaigns were much needed to educate people (*trabalho de conscientização*), enabling them to appreciate the apartments they received. After interrupting a kid's attempts to climb on a car, he carried on saying, 'I often find myself in a position where I need to educate other people's children. There is a cultural clash (*choque cultural*) happening here. People come from places where everything was liberated, where there were no rules'. After a while, he concluded, 'It all happens as in drug dealing. *They attack by giving people stuff*. The government just gives; it gives subsidies, it gives money... But in reality, it doesn't fight the causes. Receiving is easy, but what comes next? This is the real question. The government's programmes don't work as expected. That is why Brazil is as it is.'

A couple of blocks away from where Seu Ivo was sitting, I stumbled upon a small group of residents who were arguing about the future of their new condominium. What was the place about to become? How would the lack of a broader infrastructural planning affect their attempts at building a new life? 'These units were supposed to address low-income families', reasoned a 45 year-old man, 'yet, we pay annual property taxes, monthly condominium fees, individualized water and electricity bills and apartment quota for the bank. I know people who don't even have to pay as much and live in a *bourgeois condominium* (condomínio de burguês)! Why do we even need to have surveillance cameras?' Another person followed up

saying, ‘There is no grocery store around here. Essentially, this project was poorly conceived. You know what? I think President Dilma Rousseff messed it up, wasn’t it Dilma who did this?’ A woman objected saying the federal government should not be hold accountable for the lack of infrastructure. Someone reminded us that most beneficiaries were also inscribed in *Bolsa Familia*. After a brief silence, the 45-year-old man wrapped up remarking, ‘But they give us *Bolsa Familia* just to make us pay our bills and instalments. The government is clever: it gives us money and at the same time takes it away’.

Policymakers, economic experts and public intellectuals usually see the residents of these newly constructed condominiums as too unprepared and uneducated to adapt to the broader concepts of sociability and conviviality underlying the planned architecture of the place. From this point of view, in a context where a limited number of housing benefits are unequally distributed among the urban poor, the absence of a desire leading to economic and social upward mobility is enough to render certain beneficiaries unworthy of being part of the country’s struggle for social inclusion via access to goods and services. Some people simply would not know how to use a house and how to spend wisely the government’s money to make a dignified life.

However, people’s grievances over the limits of the policy tell us another story. ‘The government gives and takes away’, was the expression I heard. In their ordinary wisdom, people were sensing a critique of how the government was operating on the ground, relying on a machinery that reached into hundreds of cities across the country, giving the poor conditional benefits mixed with market inclusion while encouraging economic growth, mass consumption and the civil construction industry. By constantly assessing their own life as beneficiaries of public housing, people enact new forms of political subjectivity and class identity. These practices serve to document the kind of life made possible by the construction of large-scale closed condominiums and neatly connect to the expectations nourished by politicians and marketers so deeply invested in proclaiming Brazil’s new middle class.

Conclusions

‘At the time we designed *Cadastro Único*, it was a highly secret enterprise’, chief economist Francisco Ferreira revealed during a conversation in his office at the World Bank in Washington D.C., in April 2015. The unified database assembling beneficiaries of welfare programmes such as *Dona Hilda* and *Seu Ivo* was carried out in 2003, during the first term of president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva. At that time, Ferreira carried on, economists had to grapple with the limited efficacy of available assistance programmes such as *Fome Zero*, which would soon be converted into *Bolsa Família*, currently the country’s largest conditional cash transfer programme. Their task was to align state budgeting with the best mathematical model in order to bring the poor into view through a unified database that would support the image of a social-oriented government. At the same time, as a prominent researcher of The World Bank Group, Ferreira’s participation could not become too obvious: ‘They paid my weekly trips to Brasília, but they wouldn’t have liked to have their image associated with the design of conditional cash transfer programmes. There was a certain neoliberal image they had to stick to’.

Concerned with issues regarding inequality and poverty, Ferreira is yet another node in a globalized arena of science making. His most recent agenda stretched toward economic mobility and its most immediate consequences: ‘We already know what poverty is and how it works. Now, what is the fundamental functioning to escape it? What comes after?’ While his conceptualization differs from Neri’s model of the five economic classes, it also bears important similarities regarding income thresholds and vulnerability calculations. Moreover, Ferreira told me that international figures on Brazil’s economic development are forged in collaboration with national statistic and research institutions, thus pointing to worldwide geopolitical and scientific collaborations that nonetheless feed very asymmetrical uses and appropriations.

The close entanglement of economic expertise and state projects should not come as a surprise (Foucault 1989). Yet, it is still relevant to tease out how, in specific contexts, economists in various positions of power, time and space came to play a major role in the planning of state interventions. From controversies on income distribution that prevailed during the 1970s to present day debates on middle-classness, these are nodes in a larger picture where processes intersect (Tsing 2005). Understanding this allows us to grasp how statistical technologies, cutting-edge social-humanistic economic theories and geopolitically divided social scientists intermingle to shape long-lasting discussions on the nature of Brazil’s poverty and inequality and on its relations, through the design of public policies, to a technocratic and welfare state-in-the-making.

For 1970s economists like Carlos Langoni, education paved the way to upward mobility. Development was attainable through personal effort and middle-class came to encapsulate the moral distinctions of a growing unequal society. For contemporary economists such as Marcelo Neri and Francisco Ferreira, development happens through the promotion of social equity and middle-class stands for a renewed notion of population; here, governing the middle-class means governing the entire society. In so doing, they crystallize a view of the post-dictatorship neoliberal state as the provider of comprehensive services through a particular kind of intervention — public policies — over a specific population, the new middle-classes intended both as a result of and as agents of the country’s economic transformations.

Meanwhile, beneficiaries such as Dona Hilda and Seu Ivo find their way into the architecture of public policies by connecting to the state through a laborious work of citizenship. Recent accounts portray this restructuring of the poor’s role in Latin-American urban society as a means to egalitarian citizenship, converting ‘their violence into law talk’, and thus transforming politics and traditional forms of ‘clientelistic relations of dependency’ (Holston 2009). In my ethnography, I draw from other authors such as Pardo and Prato (2011), who investigate the opening chasms in legibility between citizens’ demands and state governance, to suggest that even though public policies in Brazil acquired the language of socially informed statistics they fail in fully taking people’s desires into consideration. Instead, by deploying new scientific theories and indicators that stress people’s resilience in escaping poverty, these policies conceal the micro-political efforts in which people engage in order to adhere to public policies and to become deserving citizens.

Documents such as Dona Hilda's letter carry the potential to illuminate what has changed and what remains constant in the chronicle of a state longing for inclusiveness and enfranchisement. They are political evidence deeply shaped by personal stories, coalescing at once state ideology, economic globalized expertise and personal social mobility. Together, compounded by middle-class rhetoric and practices of intervention over targeted citizens, they become the suitable storytelling of a society in motion and of an erratic state simultaneously striving for minimalistic interventions and grappling with the limits, reach and quality of its own welfare policies.

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