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Naming Brazil's previously poor: "New middle class" as an economic, political, and experiential category

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The early years of the twenty-first century were historic for socioeconomic relations in Brazil. While long known for stark socioeconomic inequality, the nation became internationally celebrated for its economic growth and successful poverty-reduction initiatives, which together propelled some 35 million "previously poor" Brazilians into what became called a "new middle class." The apparent rise of this "new" class has generated contentious debate and a range of social science studies in Brazil; yet this literature is little known in the Anglophone academic world. While some have interpreted this demographic transformation as an expansion of the existing middle class, others have questioned the utility of income- or consumption-based criteria for the category "middle class." Drawing from ongoing research in working-class neighborhoods in three Brazilian cities (Recife, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo), this article reviews and engages these important debates, examines the extent to which Brazil's class structure has changed, and presents a conceptual framework for understanding experiences of socioeconomic mobility and class subjectivities among Brazil's "previously poor."

Keywords Middle Class; Class Structure; Socioeconomic Mobility; Brazil

> The middle class is necessarily an ill-defined entity. This does not reflect a lack of theoretical penetration but rather the character of reality.
>
> —Wacquant (1991, 57)

In 2008, as Brazilians were becoming aware of their country's rising international profile and decreasing poverty, economist Marcelo Neri (2008, 43) announced the arrival of a "new middle class," with millions of once-poor people joining its ranks each year. Neri argued that with these shifts, Brazil had become a middle-class nation. Brazil is, of course, renowned for brutal inequality—so much so that "Brazilification" is often used as shorthand for widening inequality elsewhere. So the idea of a middle-class nation arrived as both a revelation and a controversy. Politicians and marketers took up the catchphrase "new middle class" even as critics assailed its validity. This debate continues today, even in the changed context of a severe economic downturn that began in 2013, the impeachment of Workers' Party (PT) president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, and the subsequent rollback of many of the PT social policies that supported poverty reduction during the party's years in office (2003–16). The current crisis stands in contrast to the optimistic years preceding it, when Brazil's economic rise and the "new middle class"–dominated headlines. Our historical distance from those brighter times gives us, perhaps, enough remove to consider the implications of Brazilian debates on the "new middle class" and to evaluate their significance for anthropological theory and ethnography.

We begin with an account of the profound socioeconomic transformations that took place in Brazil during the first decade of the twenty-first century. We then review how Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu have influenced the

study of class by social scientists in Brazil. We next analyze the history and debates surrounding the popularization of the category "new middle class" and review recent ethnographic studies of economically ascendant Brazilians. In conclusion, we offer some suggestions on how ethnographic approaches can contribute to understanding the contradiction-laden terrain of class stratification and subjectivity.

Throughout, we present preliminary findings from our in-progress, three-year anthropological study of social, economic, and geographic mobility among the so-called new middle class in Recife, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo. In each city, we identified neighborhood areas[1] where 2010 mean per capita household income fell within the range generally associated with the Brazilian census categories "upper poor" and "lower middle class" — locations in which we would today expect to find high numbers of adult Brazilians who experienced upward socioeconomic mobility during this period of poverty reduction and rising wages. In twelve of these areas (four per city), we conducted a structured household survey in mid-2016 focused on socioeconomic mobility and subjectivities and continued with community ethnography using a range of qualitative methods. Our project focuses particular attention on the extent to which shifting patterns of consumption, work, and distinction among the "previously poor"[2] may destabilize common class categories and reshape political subjectivities and forms of political action. Moreover, our discussion here does not intend to stabilize the inherently fuzzy category "middle class." Rather, by elucidating how the category "new middle class" has been used and contested, we hope to shed light on a period of significant social and economic change in Brazil. In doing so, we aim to sketch an analytic framework for anthropological research on the lived experiences of the millions of Brazilians classified as "poor" in 2000 and then "middle class" just over a decade later, a model that may also prove useful for other societies.

Economic transformations

During the two-term, 2003–10 presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (popularly known as "Lula"), Brazil's GNP saw steady growth as millions of poor Brazilians experienced unprecedented upward economic mobility (Loureiro 2012; Pochmann 2012; Souza 2012). Neri (2014) estimated that poverty fell by more than 55% during the Lula years, with nearly nine million households (more than thirty million people) rising out of poverty, and poverty reductions continued in the first term (2010–14) of Lula's PT successor, Dilma Rousseff. Neri (2014, 109) also reported significant decreases in inequality during this period, as the per capita income of the poorest 10% of households increased by 80.8% while the income of the wealthiest 10% of households increased by 26.9%. Some economists have argued that Neri's methodology overestimates the reduction of economic inequality (Medeiros, Souza, and Castro 2015), but significant poverty reduction during this period is not disputed.

Economists have explained these poverty reductions as the combined result of commodity and consumer debt–driven economic growth, labor market expansion, new social welfare and education programs,[3] and increased minimum wages.[4] During the first twelve years of PT governance, the overall unemployment rate decreased from 13.0% to 5.0%, informal employment decreased from 22.5% to 13.0%, and unemployment insurance coverage increased by 99.0% (Weisbrot, Johnston, and Lefebvre 2014). Growth in formal-sector employment allowed millions of Brazilian workers to receive mandated labor-law protections and benefits for the first time (e.g., pensions, paid sick leave, disability benefits, and regulated work hours and conditions). Additionally, through various educational reforms, average school years completed rose from 4.98 in 1992 to 7.46 in 2011, and the number of enrolled university students increased from 3.04 million to 7.04 million (Weisbrot, Johnston, and Lefebvre 2014).

While lower-income Brazilians experienced significant increases in household income and consumption from 2003 to 2014, the question remains as to whether these changes signaled a concomitant reorganization of class structure, class relations, and class-linked subjectivity. To examine these possible structural transformations, in June–August 2016 we conducted a survey of twelve hundred households in Recife, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo. We selected twelve neighborhood areas (four in each city) based on an analysis of the 2010 Brazilian census data

that identified tracts where we would expect to find high numbers of previously poor. For each area, we used cluster sampling to select ten census tracts that met our inclusion criteria and then conducted ten interviews in each tract.[5] Paralleling the national trends discussed earlier, preliminary results from our survey indicate sizable numbers of households reporting improved financial situations (38.7%) and quality of life (44.9%) from 2003 to 2011. Far fewer (16.7%), however, believed that they had achieved an improvement in their relative position on the socioeconomic pyramid.

What is a middle class?

Before considering the contentious discussions in Brazilian academic circles and policy arenas, we provide a sketch of some theoretical perspectives that have shaped Brazilian debates. Most neoclassical economists measure class — including the middle class — using quantitative metrics, as Neri (2008) did when he coined the term *new middle class*. Economic definitions of middle class commonly include measures of consumption (Hassett and Mathur 2012), income (D'Agostino 2012; Elwell 2014), wealth holdings (Piketty 2014), and/or the ratio of household disposable income to median income in a particular population (Pressman 2015). Calculations of this sort have been foundational for many analysts who have defended Neri's thesis. However, as our preliminary findings suggest, noting material gains is not sufficient to explain whether and how class relations and class subjectivity have shifted. Seeking to better understand these processes, Brazilian critics of Neri — and some of his defenders — have relied on perspectives outside of neoclassical economics, in particular, those of Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu.

For Marx and Engels ([1848] 2012), classes emerge out of structural relations between groups involved in productive relations. In capitalist societies, the bourgeoisie own the means of production and purchase, at exploitative rates, the labor time of the proletariat to extract surplus value (i.e., profits). There would not seem much room in such a dichotomized schema for a "middle class," but the term appears frequently in Marx's writing. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels ([1848] 2012, 44) predict the disappearance of much of the middle class in a brutally transforming bourgeoisie order, and some interpreters of Marx have treated the middle class or petit bourgeoisie category as a kind of false consciousness (e.g., Klingender 1935). But in his later work, Marx notes the "continual increase in numbers of the middle classes, of those who are situated midway between the workers on one side and the capitalists and the landowners on the other" (cited in Wacquant 1991, 40–41; see also Urry 1973). With the rise of middle-class dominant societies in the Euro-Atlantic world in the years after World War II, Marxist analysts have continued to develop more complex conceptualizations of the "middle" class, including Barbara and John Ehrenreich (1979, 12), who influentially designated the "professional-managerial class" as the distinct class of educated laborers who work toward the "reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations."

Marxist perspectives have been influential in Brazilian debates, particularly among critics who question the category's validity. For example, André Singer (2015, 9), a well-known political scientist who was press secretary in PT president Lula's first term, argued that because about half of the Brazilian population is a subproletariat living on the margins of the formal economy, "the proletariat, properly speaking, occupies an intermediate position in Brazil, which can lead to the mistaken perception that they are a middle class."[6] Most Brazilian Marxist analyses of the "new middle class" similarly position the recently economically ascendant within the proletariat (Ruy Braga 2015; Kerstenetzky et al. 2015; Pochmann 2014). However, whether and how Brazil's early-twenty-first-century previously poor might constitute a new and distinct stratum, with shared consciousness of interests, has been little explored.

This question of class consciousness — whether the previously poor are becoming a class "for itself" — is central to Marxist analyses of the Brazilian "new middle class," and some critics have suggested that Brazil's poor and previously poor in the PT era were duped into interests not their own (Anderson 2011). Our data are still too preliminary to definitively answer this question about class consciousness among Brazil's previously poor. Our research does, however, suggest that the ascendant are not some kind of "managerial-professional" buffer between

labor and capital. For example, in São Paulo, the center of Brazil's dynamic financial and technology sectors, only 4.6% of respondents reported holding managerial or professional positions, and half of these were teachers.[7] The most commonly reported occupations were nonsupervisorial office work (15.9%), skilled manual labor (14.8%), unskilled manual labor (14.0%), and self-employed small businesspeople (13.5%), with another 12.7% reporting having no occupation.[8]

That social hierarchies are shaped by both economic and noneconomic structures is, of course, central to the work of Max Weber. For Weber ([1922] 1978), there are multiple axes of power in capitalist societies, with people differentiated by degrees and types of honor (status) and political affiliations (party), beyond ownership of economic capital. Combining economistic and Weberian perspectives, sociologist Amaury de Souza and political scientist Bolívar Lamounier (2010) affirm the existence of Neri's new middle class but highlight the persistent status distance between new and traditional middle classes.[9] For these authors, "new" middle classes seek to emulate more elite traditional middle classes but have low social capital, rely on credit for consumption, and worry little about democratic institutions (Souza and Lamounier 2010). Their conclusions echo a long-standing characterization of middle classes as seeking both status and to emulate higher classes (Fussell 1992; Mills [1951] 2002). This apparent chasm between traditional and new middle-class individuals is supported by our survey data, as respondents agreed that "the rich think they are better than the poor" ($M = 4.13$ on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 [*strongly disagree*] to 5 [*strongly agree*]) and "rich people are bothered by the rise of the poor" ($M = 3.67$). However, our preliminary data do not support the emulating-higher-classes hypothesis. For example, 24.7% of our sample chose *funk*, which is generally associated with the urban poor, as their preferred style of music—by far the most popular style in our survey—while no respondents chose *música popular Brasileira* (MPB), the style of music most associated with Brazil's educated urban middle class.[10]

Seeking to understand how such interclass distinctions between the new and traditional middle classes are maintained and subverted, many Brazilian scholars have applied Bourdieu's (1984, 228) concepts of *cultural capital* and *habitus*—the embodiment of cultural capital as a series of class-inflected dispositions. For example, anthropologists Hilaine Yaccoub (2011) and Eliana Vicente (2013) have used Bourdieu to ethnographically examine how taste and consumption shape the lives and class positions of the previously poor in Rio de Janeiro, while sociologist Jessé de Souza (2013) utilizes Bourdieu to critique the economistic character of the new-middle-class thesis. Our own data affirm the importance of consumption as a marker of ascension. Many households, for example, have items once the near-exclusive provenance of traditional middle-class families, such as cell phones (75%), expensive fixed telephone lines (46%), Internet access (68%), computers (55%), cars (37%), and freezers (34%). Thirty percent of the households had someone who traveled domestically by plane since 2013, and 7% of the surveyed households had someone who traveled internationally. How these consumption practices shape class subjectivities—including in the highly charged terrain of interactions with traditional middle-class Brazilians—is a key theme in our current qualitative research.

The Neri debates

We now consider the debate on the "new middle class" that followed Neri's 2008 pronouncement. Neri's argument builds on a descending five-letter, A-to-E class taxonomy (with A the richest and E the poorest) commonly used by Brazilian demographers, economists, and market researchers. This letter-based class categorization has two forms—one based on household income (calculated as the number of monthly minimum salaries earned) and widely used to analyze data collected by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) and a second, the Critério Brasil,[11] emphasizing consumption over income and commonly used by market researchers.

In their 2008 publication, Neri and colleagues showed that during the period 2003–8, approximately thirty million Brazilians rose into the C class (defined then as having monthly household income between R$1,126 and

R$4,854, or US$470–2,022).[12] With this influx, the C class increased to approximately ninety-five million Brazilians, representing more than half (approximately 50.5%) of the population, leading Neri to propose that Brazil had become a middle-class nation. While initially underscoring the statistical character of the "new middle class"—C is the statistical middle of an A-to-E scale—Neri's subsequent reports (Neri 2010, 2012) increasingly treated this group as having internal coherence and shared meaning for its members, reflected, for example, in his public statements that the "new middle class . . . [could] decide an election campaign" (Neri 2010, 26).

The proclaimed ascendance of the "new middle class" catapulted Neri into the national spotlight and elicited celebration among PT-allied politicians as well as marketers and businesses that perceived, alternately, a vindication of PT social policies and a massive, emerging electoral and consumer force. Indeed, the "new middle class" rapidly emerged as a key symbol of a "New Brazil," a postauthoritarian, postneoliberal "country of the future" that had finally found its present (Kopper 2016, 402). Near this enthusiasm's crest, in 2011, the federal government established a commission to reflect on the hopes, dreams, and prospects of this population. Popularly known as the Voices of the Middle Class project, the commission created a website and several publications to give a public face to the supposed new class.

Yet Neri's thesis has faced many challenges. Several Weberian-influenced studies have argued that income-based definitions oversimplify class experience and have, instead, emphasized occupation and market insertion, factors that receive only secondary attention in Neri's analyses (Pochmann 2012; Salata and Scalon 2015; Sobrinho 2011). These analysts further stress how Neri's framework obscures—and depoliticizes—long-standing categories such as "working class" and the colloquial *classe popular*. A second line of critique builds on Bourdieu and argues that the supposed new middle class has neither the habitus of the traditional middle class nor its cultural capital (Souza 2010; Yaccoub 2011). A third line of critique has highlighted how Neri's economic definition of the "new middle class" masks the fact that increases in income and consumption have *not* translated into a reduction of structural inequality and cannot therefore be said to have ushered in a new class order (Esteves 2015; Figueiredo Sobrinho 2014; Vicente 2012). Or, even if a new class has been created, it may be a new working class resulting from the expansion of the proletarian base whose household living conditions may be closer to "poor" than to "middle class" (Pochmann 2012; Singer 2015; Sobrinho 2011; Souza and Lamounier 2010). In response to these debates, the federal government in 2014 went so far as to establish a Commission for the Definition of the Middle Class in Brazil (Sathler 2014).

Our household data offer support for all three critiques of the new-middle-class hypothesis and suggest that the previously poor might best be categorized as "working class" or "new C Class," the latter a characterization we regularly hear residents of our study communities invoke. As Table 1 highlights, socioeconomic mobility notwithstanding, only 4.7% self-identify as "new middle class." Most common identifications were with "working class" (41.9%), "C class" (41.2%), and "D class" (29.7%). Few respondents (9.6%) placed themselves within the "B class," the categorical home of the upper reaches of Brazil's traditional middle class. These preliminary findings suggest that class-linked subjectivities are highly plural among Brazil's "previously poor"—a heterogeneous group who see themselves as middle class, lower middle class, new middle class, working class, and/or lower class.

Qualitative research

The nature of the "new middle class" and of possible changes to class relations and subjectivity calls for ethnographic examination—even amid the current economic crisis that has reversed gains for many of the previously poor. We, along with many Brazilian scholars, have begun to investigate the importance of sociocultural factors in shaping class in this context, including, but not limited to, gender, race/color/ethnicity, religion, neighborhood and regional identity, leisure activities, food consumption, and mobility within historically class-segregated urban spaces. In our sample, 71.5% of respondents categorized themselves as black (*preto/a*) or brown (*pardo/a*), compared to only

Table 1 Self-Ascribed Class Labels

Class label identification	Total	%
Middle class		
No	1,028	85.4
Yes	176	14.6
Lower middle class		
No	960	79.7
Yes	244	21.3
New middle class		
No	1,148	95.3
Yes	56	4.7
Working class		
No	700	58.1
Yes	504	41.9
Lower class		
No	904	75.1
Yes	300	24.9
Poor		
No	995	82.6
Yes	209	17.4
A–E scale	**Total**	**%**
A class		
No	1,172	97.3
Yes	32	2.7
B class		
No	1,089	90.4
Yes	115	9.6
C class		
No	708	58.8
Yes	496	41.2
D class		
No	846	70.3
Yes	358	29.7
E class		
No	1,001	83.1
Yes	203	16.9

50.7% in Brazil's 2010 census.[13] Given the close—and rapidly changing—links between color and class in Brazil, we suspect that people's experience of racism, race, and color are highly significant in the formation of class subjectivity among the previously poor. We are exploring these interconnections in our qualitative research. Class experiences are further shaped by the spatial and political contexts in which individuals live. In our household survey sample, Rio de Janeiro respondents either live in favelas, where residents face a lack of public services, significant discrimination outside the neighborhood, and violent conflicts between drug gangs, paramilitary groups, and the police, or in the city's vast north and west zones, where they additionally face brutally long commutes to work in the city's center and affluent south zone. In São Paulo, our sample comes from periphery neighborhoods in the city's sprawling southern zone. Like the Rio de Janeiro respondents, the São Paulo sample faces difficult commutes but has relatively high infrastructure levels in its largely self-built but now solidified neighborhoods (see Holston 2008). Violence is also high, with police killings of Afro-Brazilian youth being commonplace, but these neighborhoods do not possess the systematized conflict of Rio de Janeiro. In Recife, one of the four survey districts sits behind an affluent beach-front neighborhood fairly close to the downtown Centro, with the previously poor concentrated in apartment complexes

(many obtained through the PT-era federal Minha Casa, Minha Vida program) and favelas next to a large mall. Another district is nearly an hour's bus ride from the Centro, with a combination of conventional houses and favelas; and the remaining two districts are about a half-hour from downtown, each characterized by conventional houses. Across the three cities, 52.9% of respondents reported that they would leave their neighborhoods if they could, and people's experiences of ascension, solidarity, and constraint are shaped by these urban geographies in ways we are currently examining through ongoing qualitative research and analysis of our household survey data.

In recent years, Brazilian social scientists have conducted several ethnographic studies on these lived experiences and subjectivities. In these politically and theoretically diverse works, four interconnected themes emerge: (a) the importance of consumption in asserting social and class distinction; (b) the relational nature of class positions and subjectivities, including the role of habitus and cultural capital in (re)producing hierarchies; (c) heterogeneity among economically ascendant individuals; and (d) the extent to which many previously poor individuals rely on an individualized, neoliberal meritocratic discursive framework — rather than social and political frameworks — for explaining socioeconomic mobility.

Reflecting the strong influence of Bourdieu among Brazilian anthropologists, many scholars highlight the importance of consumption as a marker of socioeconomic ascension (Chiosini et al. 2014; Rocha and Rocha 2015; Vicente 2012; Yaccoub 2011). In Rio de Janeiro, anthropologists Yaccoub (2011) and Vicente (2012) both show how consumer items, including remodeled kitchens with stainless steel appliances, serve as a means of asserting status. The display of socioeconomic ascension through consumption is perhaps most dramatically demonstrated when emergent consumers purchase goods and services once limited to traditional middle-class and elite consumers, such as whiskey (Robson da Silva Braga 2015), expensive clothing and accessory brands (Scalco and Pinheiro-Machado 2010), cars (Robson da Silva Braga 2015; Rodrigues and Casotti 2015), airplane travel (Chiosini et al. 2014), and cruises (Rocha and Rocha 2015). In these studies, members of a new consumer class present the consumption of such (previously) high-status items as markers of their new position and inclusion in Brazilian society, a transformation captured in the title of Robson da Silva Braga's (2015) dissertation: "I was ugly, but now I have a car." In our survey results, the strongest correlate of reported upward economic mobility since 2003 was the presence of a freezer in the household, another consumption item previously largely limited to traditional middle-class households. Consumption is clearly a key aspect of how people understand and assert their class position.

Several studies highlight the polysemic symbolic processes involved in social consumption mitigating against assertions of a changed class structure (Robson da Silva Braga 2015; Rocha and Rocha 2015; Scalco and Pinheiro-Machado 2010). For example, Robson da Silva Braga's (2015) ethnographic study of traditional and new-middle-class youth who frequent *forró electrônico*[14] clubs in Fortaleza analyses how owning a foreign car and publicly drinking whiskey and vodka are markers of elevated class status. Braga contrasts how new middle-class and traditional middle-class individuals use these same symbols differently — even as new middle-class individuals consume high-status items to project modernity and sophistication, their ostentatious consumption demonstrates, for many in the traditional middle class, that they do not possess a traditional middle-class "refined" habitus. And with cost no longer controlling entry to dance halls, club organizers in Fortaleza instituted an "invitation only" policy to maintain traditional middle-class homogeneity (Robson da Silva Braga 2015). This pattern of binary habitus differentiation between traditional and new middle-class/lower-income individuals with similar consumption is strikingly present in Rocha et al.'s (2015) ethnographic study of middle-class cruise goers. Here traditional middle-class passengers describe "new middle-class" patrons as having bad taste in clothing, acting out of place, and speaking in nonstandard diction. At the same time, new middle-class cruise-goers classify, in positive terms, the traditional middle class as having exactly the opposite traits (Rocha et al. 2015; see also Caldeira 2000; O'Dougherty 2002 on the habitus of the São Paulo traditional middle class). And, for high-end fashion items subject to falsification and pirating, Scalco and Pinheiro-Machado (2010) observe how the traditional middle class may deny that

a lower-income individual is using high-end clothing or accessory brands—even when they are—thus denying assertions of ascension.

These uncertain and contradictory classification processes also shape interactions and relationships between the "new middle class" and those who remain poor. On one hand, many economically ascendant individuals still living in their neighborhoods of origin contrast their realities to prototypic middle-class communities and lifestyles. As Yaccoub (2011) describes,

> not feeling valorized in their jobs and living in "poor conditions," with few transportation options, precarious public lighting, unpaved roads, and poor quality hospitals, restaurants—not to mention the question of violence—[one informant asked Yaccoub] "this is being middle class?" (218)

On the other hand, many economically ascendant individuals distinguish themselves from the poor through higher consumption levels (Scalco and Pinheiro-Machado 2010), relatively safer neighborhoods (Oliveira 2013), and adaptation of lifestyles crafted against dominant practices in their communities—for example, landscaped yards and not hanging clothes outside to dry or listening to *funk* music (Vicente 2013, 118). Our data demonstrate similar dynamics. For example, one of the authors talked to a fitness instructor from Rio de Janeiro's working-class north zone who works giving fitness classes in gyms across the city. In spinning classes, she likes to play *funk*, but in well-to-do neighborhoods, she chooses other genres, because many of her customers object to *funk*, underscoring the importance of forms of class-linked consumption in asserting class position.

Ethnographers have also highlighted how the previously poor may rely on a meritocracy discourse that explains socioeconomic ascension as the payoff for hard work (Oliveira 2013; Rodrigues and Casotti 2015; Scalco and Pinheiro-Machado 2010; Vicente 2012; Yaccoub 2011). A centerpiece of this meritocratic worldview is a commitment to education, even when financial rewards are not forthcoming. For example, in Trindade's (2013) focus groups with recent new-middle-class university graduates in São Paulo, nearly all participants described their current jobs as unfulfilling means to meet basic needs yet still believed education might provide greater financial independence and self-realization. At the community level, Vicente (2013) described how one Rio resident, in response to poor public education and a desire to challenge inequality, opened a successful Montessori-inspired private school in her lower-income neighborhood. Few students ultimately enroll in Brazil's prestigious public university system—the preferred traditional-middle-class path—but many obtain degrees from technical and online courses through private institutions. As with Trindade's recent university graduates, Vicente reported that these degrees typically provide few financial rewards.

We have observed similar patterns in our quantitative data—very few of the college-educated respondents in our sample (5.2% have college degrees and 6% completed some college) report professional-level jobs or salaries, and we rarely encountered public university attendees in our study communities. Nonetheless, our data suggest that the "previously poor" do not share a unified framework to explain their socioeconomic ascension and class position. For example, on a 5-point Likert scale, respondents were close to neutral (3.0) on the statements "If you work a lot, you will be successful" ($M = 3.14$), "The most important thing to be successful is to know well-placed people" ($M = 3.28$), and "To be successful, it is fundamental to be born into a rich family" ($M = 2.91$). Only the statement "To be successful, it is fundamental to have faith in God" received a notably high level of agreement (4.0). Yet, in everyday conversations in our study neighborhoods, few speak of broader socioeconomic and political conditions to explain individual economic position or mobility. Furthermore, respondents were close to neutral on whether they think their socioeconomic mobility is linked to PT policies, as evidenced by a 3.24 average on the statement "The PT improved the lives of people like me" and only a 2.66 average on the statement "You feel represented by the Dilma government."

Our anecdotal conversations demonstrate that most of our college-educated respondents are aware that education has not won them middle-class cultural or economic capital.[15] Nonetheless, for these first-generation college students, a degree not only marks social ascension (Vicente 2013; see also Oliveira 2013) but also plays a critical role in shaping life aspirations, identities, and habitus. Unlike their parents, many of whom migrated to the city in search of a better life and worked extremely hard in manual labor jobs to construct their lives—and, indeed, their actual houses and neighborhoods—, these younger adults grew up in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of large cities in a time of dramatic socioeconomic change. Most say that they will not work as domestics, bricklayers, and hair stylists. In the words of one São Paulo respondent, "I would rather be poor than do that kind of work" (personal communication, July 17, 2016). At the same time, many of the younger college-educated respondents in our study neighborhoods stay in their communities upon completion of their degrees, often working as teachers or social service providers. How education and the dissemination of cultural capital in everyday life shape aspirations, economic decision making, and urban periphery space are themes we will explore more deeply in our qualitative research.

Inequality, subjectivity, and ethnographic research

As this article's epigraph suggests, the category "middle class" is inherently imprecise. Debates over whether Brazil's early-twenty-first-century economically ascendant were a "middle class" will not find resolution soon, owing to the current economic crisis and austerity policies effectively halting or reversing socioeconomic ascension, the flexibility of the category, and the as yet unknown future that will shape how we see the past. However, these Brazilian debates and our research suggest (a) that the class position of the previously poor is laden with contradictions and (b) that there were massive changes to the symbolic and material relations structuring this most unequal society at the start of this century. By presenting these disputes and scholarship to an Anglophone readership, we hope to make better known the complexity of shifting relations of inequality in a nation too often glossed by oversimplified tropes such as "Brazilification" or Brazil's rise as one of the emergent BRICS nations. But what these changes might yield for class relations and politics in Brazil, and how new forms of class consciousness may develop, remains to be examined.

Our ethnographic and quantitative research in neighborhoods where one would expect to find sizable numbers of "previously poor" Brazilians has shown that almost no one speaks of the "new middle class" in 2016 or 2017. Amid economic decline and a conservative political turn, many previously poor are again poor or afraid of sliding back into poverty. But even as "new middle class" has faded from the Brazilian headlines and from everyday conversation, the last decade marked an unprecedented period of economic and social change. Whatever happens to the previously poor after having tasted something of middle-class life, social relations and class subjectivity in Brazil are unlikely to return to anything like their late-twentieth-century patterns.

The "new middle class" debate is an artifact of a unique moment in Brazilian history. Yet the significance of changes to Brazil's inequality at the start of the twenty-first century—and their effects on political and social life—seem to persist. Gilberto Freyre (1933, 415) once argued that Brazilian society was characterized by "antagonisms in equilibrium." The ferocity of traditional middle-class backlash (Boito 2016) in the years following Brazil's upheaval of 2013 (Dent and Pinheiro-Machado 2014), a backlash that culminated in the impeachment of PT president Dilma Rousseff, suggests to us that this equilibrium has weakened, unsettling long-standing patterns of class deference. Yet, other than Oliveira's (2013) dissertation on class, ideology, and voting patterns of new-middle-class and lower-income residents in São Paulo, there is surprisingly little ethnographic research on political subjectivities among the "new middle class" and those classes with whom they interact.

A second theme largely absent from the ethnographic literature is the interconnection between race/color/ethnicity and class. Since disproportionate numbers of the economically ascendant are nonwhite, Nordestino,[16] or both, and disproportionate numbers of the traditional middle class are white, many of the

changing relations of inequality debated in Brazil undoubtedly involve an ethnoracial dimension that await ethnography and analysis. Given that ethnographic literatures on race and class in Brazil are both booming fields of scholarly inquiry, and given the pigmentocratic character of Brazil's economic hierarchies (Telles 2014), it is surprising that the two literatures have so seldom met.

A third unstudied theme that may play a role in emergent class subjectivities is the impact of the Internet and social media. These new forms of communication and connectivity are undoubtedly changing how cultural capital is acquired and made use of in everyday life (see, e.g., Raposo's 2015 study of the cosmopolitan break-dancers from the Maré favela in Rio de Janeiro). Such processes are likely transforming existing patterns of social distinction and may reconfigure the poor/popular-class versus middle-class/elite habitus binary that has long dominated scholarly accounts of Brazilian society.

Taken together, this review of extant research and theory—supported by our preliminary findings—points to the need for a highly flexible conceptual framework to understand experiences of mobility subjectivity among Brazil's previously poor. In conclusion, we offer several starting points for addressing the complexities of research on urban populations undergoing rapid periods of socioeconomic mobility:

1. The habitus of economically ascendant populations is not *merely* an emulation of that of existing middle classes in some "trickle-down" rendition of Bourdieu's practice theory. The desire for an iPhone, a flat-screen television, or a car has more to it than mimesis of an idealized elite—even when discourses of class emulation are prevalent, as they are in Brazilian cities.
2. Class is shaped within "shifting fields of gender, race, ethnicity, and geography" (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012, 14). In a Brazil characterized by race and gender relations forged in slavery and its long dissolution, class should be analyzed in relation to race and gender. Relatedly, the experience of urban geography is fundamental in the experience of class mobility, including spatial segregation (Caldeira 2000; Heiman 2012; Srivastava 2012), transportation infrastructure, and the connection of class subjectivity to the construction and contestation of public space.
3. Class position is not simply an "identity" but also a material and structural relation. Despite the importance of identity categories in understanding class, theories of class should not simply be assimilated to theories of identity. Research on the previously poor should include analysis of valued material and symbolic goods as well as tensions and changing relationships in places of work, consumption, and sociality, including interactions with the elite, traditional middle class, and the poor who have not experienced economic ascension.
4. Class mobility is interconnected with people's life projects, political desires, personal aspirations, regrets, and nostalgia over time. How people conceive of the past, present, and future—and how they imagine the desirable and the possible—are fundamental to understanding economic mobility.

Thomas Piketty (2014) marshaled extensive historical evidence to show that over the long term, middle classes do not fare well in most capitalist economies. Yet, over the last decade, even as the middle classes of the Global North have shrunk, some nations in the Global South (Brazil, China, and India, in particular) have undergone unprecedented economic growth and poverty reduction (Lakner and Milanovic 2015). This period may have ended—at least in Brazil—but it is only through detailed ethnographic research that we can uncover what these rare changes in so unequal a context might mean and bode for the present and future.

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Notes

1 Most of these areas were confined to single neighborhoods. But in a few cases, the areas were made up of geographically and socially contiguous areas that spanned more than one official neighborhood. For example, Madureira, Oswaldo Cruz, and Rocha Miranda are three contiguous Rio de Janeiro north zone neighborhoods that composed a single sampling area.

2 Because the term *new middle class* is so contentious and analytically fuzzy, we use *previously poor* as our own term to describe the 35–40 million Brazilians who rose above Brazil's official poverty line in the early twenty-first century.

3 The most well-known PT social welfare program is the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) conditional cash transfer program, which provides a small payment to extremely poor families on the condition that they have their children vaccinated and enrolled in school (Glewwe and Kassouf 2012; Kerstenetzky 2008; World Bank 2013).

4 Between 2003 and 2014, Brazil's minimum salary grew 76% after adjusting for inflation, while expanded social security benefits provided 18.3% of all income in Brazil (Weisbrot, Johnston, and Lefebvre 2014). In Brazil, retirement and other benefits, as well as many higher salaries, are pegged to the minimum salary. So an increase in the minimum salary has expansionary effects well beyond those stemming from the minimum salary itself.

5 In Recife and São Paulo, we used a systematic sampling methodology in which we randomly selected streets within these census tracts and then approached every fifth house for study participants. Owing to safety concerns in Rio de Janeiro neighborhoods undergoing armed conflict in the wake of the breakdown of Rio's system of Police Pacifying Units (Arias and Barnes 2017), it was not possible to carry out this randomized procedure. In Rio, the research team relied heavily on local informants to minimize danger and to achieve a representative sample of households distributed on streets of the census districts.

6 This and all other translations from the Portuguese are our own.

7 Other professional occupations in the São Paulo sample include general manager, financial director, financial analyst, network analyst, programmer, pharmacist, and physical therapist.

8 In addition to these reported occupations, 6.0% of the São Paulo sample reported their occupation as unemployed, 4.6% as retired, 4.6% as housewife, and 1.9% as student.

9 When we refer to the "traditional middle class," we use the term colloquially to refer to the mostly professional-class or inherited-money elite in Brazil whom many contemporary economists position in the upper C and B classes and whom urban Brazilians frequently refer to as "middle class." Although the C class concentrates around a statistical median, the expansion of which was central to Neri's thesis, in urban Brazil, the term *middle class* does not colloquially encompass the entire statistical C class category.

10 Funk is a style of dance music developed in Rio de Janeiro's favelas in the 1980s, quite distinct from the funk that was developed in the 1960s in the United States. Although increasingly popular throughout Brazil, it is often associated with the urban poor. MPB is a style of music developed in the 1960s and 1970s, drawing on Brazilian styles, such as bossa nova and samba, and on foreign styles, such as jazz and rock.

11 The Critério Brazil system, developed by the Brazilian Association of Research Firms (ABEP), uses a point system based on the household presence of consumer items, domestic workers, and education levels.

12 These parameters and exchange rate represent 2009 values.

13 The 2010 census used five census categories: *branco/a* (white), 47.73%; *pardo/a* (brown), 43.13%; *preto/a* (black), 7.61%; *amarelo/a* (Asian), 1.09%; *indígena* (indigenous), 0.43%.

14 Forró is a highly popular style of dance music from the Brazilian northeast, traditionally played with an accordion and varied percussion, but now with many electronic variants.

15 A few respondents have read Bourdieu and have used these very terms.

16 Nordestinos are individuals from Brazil's northeastern region, the poorest region in the country. During the middle half of the twentieth century, tens of millions migrated from the poorer northeast to richer southeastern cities, to enter the ranks of the poor and working class, and to be subject to stereotyping and discrimination.

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