

A class that no one dares to call by its name: class conflicts and the “new middle class” in Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff’s Brazil (2003-2016)

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André L. M. Martins¹

In the age of center-leftist presidencies in contemporary Brazil (2003-2016), an alleged new developmentalist orientation of economic policy never ceased to be supplementary. The macroeconomic outcomes of some sort of hybridism highlighted the incompatibility between the bulk of still dominant, strict neoliberal policies, on one hand, and economic decisions inspired by new developmentalism, on the other. Still, societal shifts were intense during the same interregnum: redistributive and to some degree heterodox income policies strongly contributed to narrow the mass-elite gap during the 2000s, a fact that eventually led to a remarkable debate on the emergence of a ‘new’ middle class in contemporary Brazil.

Such outcome could not assure the continuity of the sort of *pax* between classes that was one of the hallmarks of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff’s offices. Signs of an economic recession that finally came in 2015, shortly after the beginning of Rousseff’s second term; a loose, unsustainable fiscal policy; and growing allegations of corruption schemes resulted in a *crescendo* of social distress that, starting with the 2013 ‘June Journeys’, ended up in a process of political impeachment of the President by September 2016. Nevertheless, the question remains: is it possible to speak of an emergent “new” middle class in 2000 and 2010s Brazil? Does such argument – indeed defended by many – bear a deeper theoretical scrutiny?

North-American academic sociology was responsible for introducing a pyramidal notion of social classes (social strata), that could be measured through criteria like income, private property, schooling, occupational status, and consumption patterns, thus allowing the possibility of social mobility and then intentionally avoiding social analysis inspired by either Weber or Marx’s works. Those works tended to point out the ideological connection between the bourgeoisie and the middle classes, even though the latter were (and still are) as apart from the central nucleus of capitalism as the working classes. Since they were not labor force that created value for capitalist production, their positions in the class structure were in the fields of self-employed, liberal professionals, private and public bureaucracy (and social, public services as whole), and also as non-salaried occupations such as small land *rentiers* and small-scale retailers.

The paper we are now proposing attempts to abandon this somewhat static description and instead adopt the point of view of the constitution of social classes in a capitalist society. Once adopted, it allows us to perceive that in contemporary Brazil, the democratic advance of social and economic policy could not cope with the conditions deeply imposed by neoliberal economics in the past two decades. There was an intense diffusion, throughout the Brazilian society, of the ideologies of competence and free-market rationality. Therefore, at the present stage of capitalism, “new workers” are bound to adhere to competitive aggressive individualism, which has characterized the Brazilian “old”, previously existent middle classes. In such context, a “new middle class” may exist only as either a technocratic mirage or an element of a broader political, strategic project.

¹ Economist. Phd in Economics (Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2004). Associate Professor, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco-UFPE (since 2006).