

*Consumption Intensified: The Politics of Middle-Class Daily Life in Brazil.* By *Maureen O'Dougherty*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. xv + 262 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, figures, photographs, maps. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-8223-2879-8; paper 0-8223-2894-1.

Reviewed by Anne Hanley

From roughly 1980 to 1994, a time of transition from dictatorship to democracy, the Brazilian middle class lived under an economic state of siege. When overnight price hikes of 25 percent were common and annual inflation rates exceeded 1000 percent, the purchasing power of middle-class salaries was severely strained and the possibility of sliding downward was very real. How did the Brazilian middle class experience this chaos and uncertainty? How did survival condition middle-class identity? Maureen O'Dougherty, an anthropologist, proposed to address these questions by studying the attitudes, values, and concerns of the Brazilian middle class. Her aim was to allow the middle class to identify itself through discourse and actions and to focus on shared elements of the middle-class experience. Interviews with twenty-four families in the city of São Paulo over eighteen months in 1993 and 1994 provided the basis for chapters on consumption values and practices, employment, travel, views on the media, and attitudes toward the rest of the nation.

The book's title comes from two trends identified by O'Dougherty. First, the middle class defined itself in terms of its ability to "consume" certain elements basic to maintaining its social status: a home; a car; "culture," including trips to Disney World; and private education. Second, the rampant inflation intensified their sense of urgency to consume before earnings devalued and consumption became both more difficult and therefore more imperative. Both trends were steeped in the great anxiety suffered by the middle class as it sought to define and redefine acceptable employment, essential consumption practices, and fundamental morality in a world that threatened all three.

Against a background of constant, unremitting, but fluctuating economic crisis, O'Dougherty vividly captures the unease of middle-class professionals seeking to justify jobs that in a stable world would be considered beneath them. She highlights their determination to provide their children a private education no matter the cost or sacrifice. She evaluates the social benefit they derive from luxury consumption, such as trips to Disney World. And she reveals coping strategies, legal and illegal, they used to adjust to each government plan to slay inflation, which invariably introduced a new currency, new hope, new disillusionment, and ultimately far

worse problems. A direct effect of the disillusionment was a harsh but resigned assessment that the Brazilian government is incapable of restoring security and stability to this class under siege. An ugly side effect was prejudice against poor migrants from the Northeast, who were perceived as exacerbating the problems faced by São Paulo residents.

O'Dougherty's biggest challenge in making her case is whether her audience accepts her subject pool as representative of the Brazilian middle class. Her sample is small, just 50 people out of a middle class estimated to number 25 million in a nation of over 170 million inhabitants; it was drawn from families attending just two private schools in a relatively affluent part of São Paulo, Brazil's largest and most modern city; and it contained a disproportionate number of immigrant origin. Can this group speak for the Brazilian middle class as a whole? O'Dougherty says up front that she is studying one segment of the middle class, but she argues that many studies of this social sector are stymied by the problem of heterogeneity, when in reality the various middle-class groups share much in common. In this way, she implies that her sample can represent the broader middle-class identity. In fact, during the course of her book, she shifts from identifying her sample as a subset to calling it the Brazilian middle class.

The reader is left with a host of questions: does this sample of modern middle-class families in São Paulo hold the same views as the "traditional middle class" in São Paulo? Do the attitudes and actions of modern middle-class residents of Brazil's wealthiest region correspond to those of the modern middle class in poorer regions, such as the Northeast? Does immigrant origin have a particular effect on mobility and identity? These questions are compounded by O'Dougherty's dismissal of her informants' values when they fail to reveal a viewpoint that she has identified as middle class. She says, for example, that they did not express the regional prejudice against people from the Northeast that she terms as pervasive. In this instance, her sample clearly was not representative.

These methodological and interpretive problems exist alongside some bright and engaging work. Chapters 4 and 5, on Disney and debutantes, are wonderful voyages into the often ostentatious world of Brazilian middle-class consumption. Chapter 7, which examines how the São Paulo modern middle class perceives the nation, is also quite strong. O'Dougherty's many citations indicate the effort and creativity that went into her discovery of grounds for interpreting observed attitudes and behavior. I added several intriguing-looking books to my reading list based on her references to them.

*Consumption Intensified* will engage scholars who are knowledgeable about Brazil and familiar with the distinctions both between traditional and modern groups and between geographic regions and thus are capable of weighing for themselves the strengths of

O'Dougherty's arguments. Readers who are not specialists may find the problem of representation more difficult to resolve. Comparisons with the traditional middle class in São Paulo or with the modern middle class in a very different region, such as the Northeast, would have been valuable. What the book does do, and well, is deliver a compassionate analysis of the creativity, idealism, and frustrations of O'Dougherty's upwardly mobile informants in an era of crisis.

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