Discourses of “Development” in Brazil: Perspectives on the “New” Middle Class, Social Inequality, and the Emphasis on Consumerism

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Discourses of “Development” in Brazil: Perspectives on the “New” Middle Class, Social Inequality, and the Emphasis on Consumerism

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In Brazil, the discourse of the current administration, the Partido dos Trabalhadores has focused largely on the eradication of poverty and what is referred to as the rise of the new middle class. The discourse has become prominent not only within the government but also in academia, everyday life, and popular culture. According to the federal Secretary of Strategic Affairs, the “new” middle class refers to families that earn a total monthly income of between U.S. $524 and U.S. $2,248 a month. The inclusiveness of this category and the focus on consumer goods and material wealth in the new middle class discourse distract from larger structural issues that newly deemed members of the middle class face on a daily basis, such as a lack of access to adequate health care, transportation, and secure housing.

This focus also emphasizes capitalism and materialism as a solution to achieving “modernity” and “development” while delegitimizing other ways of life and perspectives that are not based on market economies and capitalism. The key questions that I seek to answer are: What do we mean by “development?” What is Brazil developing towards? Why has the “new” middle class been produced as a development discourse in Brazil? How has this discourse developed, what does it exclude, and what role does it play in the positioning of Brazil as an international figure? Based on ethnographic research I conducted in Brazil, I argue that the production of the new middle class discourse distracts from underlying structural problems and projects Brazil as a “developed” nation with a ‘modern’ populace and high consumer power in order to position the country as an important international player.