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## **Intimate Ironies: Modernity and the Making of Middle-Class Lives in Brazil (review)**

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Hispanic American Historical Review, 81:1, February 2001, pp. 198-200  
(Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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*Intimate Ironies: Modernity and the Making of Middle-Class Lives in Brazil.*

By BRIAN PHILIP OWENSBY. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. Tables.

Notes. Bibliography. Index. ix, 332 pp. Cloth, \$45.00.

*Intimate Ironies* offers creative meditations on the culture and experiences of “white or light-skinned white-collar salarymen and their families” (p. 45) within the modern market economy that was emerging in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo between 1925 and 1950. The author explores the efforts of urban employees and professionals to “get ahead,” or at least to stay afloat, in a world of threats to the distinctive markers of their status: treacherous competition for jobs, inadequate salaries (especially in government service), multiple part-time jobs (*bicos*), and a rising cost of living (*carestia*). These cross-cutting pressures were further intensified after the 1930s, Owensby argues, by political developments that marginalized them from a new populist political game, increasingly defined in terms of “class” and “class conflict” (that is, in terms of workers and industrialists).

The book’s most striking contributions stem from Owensby’s ability to combine penetrating intuition, subtle empathy, and critical distance, as he explores middle-class sensibilities in a period of economic transformation and political flux (the “modernity” that looms so large in the freighted symbolism attached to the middle class, whether in Brazil or the North Atlantic). *Intimate Ironies* is not, however, a tightly argued and highly structured monograph about the growth and transformation of white-collar labor markets, lifestyles, and politics. Indeed, the reader will find that statistics are used only in a strictly illustrative sense and there is no pretense of offering a sustained or systematic examination of any single subgroup in either city. Rather, the author displays an impressive mastery of its cultural politics: the Brazilian “middle class” as a lived dilemma, an existential “state of mind” (p. 8) that is to be explored through “close attention to the ‘nature, texture and structure’ of everyday life” (pp. 48, 11).

These “coat-and-tie men” (as he calls them) were loosely bound together by self-conscious distinctions between themselves and the world of manual working people below and around them and the “rich” and “well born” above them. Their “stubborn preoccupation with status led them to accept an unresolved tension between hierarchical imperatives and egalitarian impulses” (p. 243), he suggests, in a process through which hierarchy “became less a holdover from Brazil’s past than an instrument for negotiating a competitive social order” (p. 50). The insistence on being *culto*, for example, served as both a psychic defense and “collective will to status” (p. 60) for a group that combined life strategies appropriate to a more “meritocratic and market-oriented” social order with the use of the *pedido* (request for favors) and *pistolão* (connections) (p. 86). Through such sensitive readings, Owensby produces brilliant insights such as his discussion of the “reciprocity of an inertial paternalism” that characterized the relationship of “intellectual workers” and their bosses without merely reproducing simple patron/client ties (p. 67).

The middle-class struggle for self-realization was most often conducted, Owensby suggests, on an individual and family basis, only halfheartedly as organized groups, and almost never as a “class” (p. 221). Yet he finds much that can be learned from the activity of white-collar sindicatos after 1931 through which “hierarchy [was] affirmed, renewed, and challenged through collective institutional means rather than through patronage and personal relations” (p. 69). Although taking their associational life seriously, Owensby remains faithful to his primary goal, which leads to a home-centered account that highlights, in detail, the impact of a new consumerism. The book also has some subtle and interesting observations to make about the dynamics of color and race within middle-class life (pp. 63–64, 96–97, 125–26, 127).

In his effort to illuminate “issues of status and social hierarchy, market relations, and the taxonomy of class” (p. 10), Owensby makes use of a wide variety of written sources including a slew of largely forgotten novels on middle class life—some apparently quite popular—that are used to better understand “the gossamer threads linking personal life to the valuations, preferences, and ideals underlying political attitudes” (pp. 221–25). Given his interests, the use of oral history sources and a more active pursuit of personal diaries and family correspondence would have further enriched the study of this literate minority. Working with a “middle class” concept of foreign origin, Owensby offers a running dialogue in the footnotes—in which he not only identifies the distinctiveness of the Brazilian case but exposes some of the cherished illusions of the North Atlantic world (pp. 88, 91, 128, 234, 237–38, 249–50).

Owensby’s chapter on trade unions reminds us of another peculiarity of the Brazilian case: the precocious associationalism of the white-collar middle class going back to the second half of the First Republic. As in Peru, salaried employees in Brazil appear to have unionized earlier and easier than in much of the North Atlantic world and they did so without overturning status hierarchies in any immediate sense. Indeed, one of the largest white collar groups in Brazil—the bank workers—took to the forms of labor struggle with such striking alacrity that they quickly assumed the role of vanguard within the labor movement as a whole. Rather than exploring this phenomenon for what it reveals about the range of tendencies within the “middle class,” Owensby merely denies their representativeness because he judges indifference to unions to be a “constituent aspect of the collar-and-tie experience.” However, union statistics offered in a footnote suggest that this may be exaggerated (pp. 183, 174, 180, 287).

As this example suggests, the perceptiveness of Owensby’s observations about the private sphere find few counterparts in his treatment of the political realm, where his generalizations allow less room for ambiguity, tension, and flux. It is especially disappointing that Owensby fails to take a clear position in a central and long-standing debate in the Brazilian historiography of which he is aware (42–44,

133–34, 240, 244): Is the military a quintessentially middle-class institution? Or one infused by an anti-oligarchical “middle-class” ethos? Or is middle-class discontent expressed preferentially through the military or its dissidents? Beyond holding to a thesis that the 1930s was the crucial turning point that defined the trajectory of middle-class politics, *Intimate Ironies* advances an overall argument that emphasizes its predominantly conservative nature during the populist republic (1945–64). This reviewer believes that greater familiarity with and research on the cultural and electoral politics of the era would have altered this aspect of his argument (but that would be a different monograph).

Owensby’s study confirms my long-term conviction that the investigation of the non-manual “middle class” is a new frontier in our drive to deepen the “new labor history” of the last 30 years. Although briefly the focus of attention in the late 1950s and early 1960s (especially the seminal work of John J. Johnson (1958), the Latin American “middle class was [quickly] shrugged off the scholarly agenda” despite the fact that this unstudied “middle class” is central to all synthetic interpretations of the region’s twentieth century politics (pp. 6–7). (See Michael F. Jiménez, “The Elision of the Middle Classes and Beyond” in *Colonial Legacies*, ed. Jeremy Adelman [1999].) Given the unquestioned contributions of *Intimate Ironies*, any shortcomings are best seen as the price to be paid for a pioneering effort that will inspire many subsequent monographs.

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