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People like us, the ordinary people: culture-based approaches to middle class analysis

1. Introduction

This article aims to account for the «cultural turn» in the analysis of social classes in contemporary societies. For this purpose, it maps culture-based approaches as a result of the review of a literature that lies at the intersection between Pierre Bourdieu's critical sociology and the sociology of the middle classes.

The choice of focusing on the middle class, instead of social classes overall, finds justification in the fact that the debate on the decline of class, which arose in the 1990s (see Pakulski, Waters 1996), coincided with the emergence of new classes and the spread of consumer practices in the middle of the social structure. This made the middle class a privileged lens for studying social change. Furthermore, a question of the middle class as an emerging «malaise» of social groups supposed to be safe from risks (Bagnasco 2005) resurged worldwide at the turn of the century (see Zunz *et al.* 2002). A vast literature certifies the rupture of middle-class social contracts, whose most visible sign is the increase of inequality, which has taken the shape of income polarisation (see Piketty 2017; Milanovic 2016). In recent years, these phenomena have given rise to new

forms of authoritarianism (see Palier *et al.* 2018; Norris, Inglehart 2019).

What we attempt to do is not an easy task. In the sociological debate on classes, the middle class has been defined negatively as lying in the middle between the bourgeoisie and the working class. We intend to translate the terms of the problem positively by shifting the focus from determining «what is» or «who is in» the middle class to understanding the inherent meaning of «being» middle class, which implies investigating how cultural practices influence class identification (Levine-Rasky 2011).

Although the selected studies focus on culture, we deliberately avoid setting the discussion as an opposition between two poles: economy and culture. Prominent scholars, such as Fiona Devine and Mike Savage (1999) and Nancy Fraser (2005), rejected this dualism in favour of looking for a «third way», in which economy and culture *interact* to form a coherent model, following Bourdieu's example.

Notwithstanding this necessary caveat, there is a beneficial element that the mapped approaches have in common: specific attention to identity and how people – more or less consciously – resort to class identification to distinguish themselves as groups (and individuals). Several studies found that people are reluctant to claim class identities but, when they do, they tend to claim a *middle-class* identity, looking for «normality» (Bottero 2004; Byrne 2009). Therefore, most people recognise themselves as part of the middle class, regardless of their position in production relations (Curtis 2013). That said, how can class matter if most people recognise themselves as part of the same class? After all, is the middle class a class in sociological terms?

In this article, we assume that leaving class aside would expose us to the risk of blaming subjectivities for the disadvantaged position held by individuals (Lawler 2005) in the context of rising inequalities (Lopez-Calva, Ortiz Juarez 2011). Nevertheless, as

sociologists from Bourdieu onwards suggest, we must consider the mechanisms that lie behind class identification in such a way as to bring out the character of middle-class identities. This implies looking at class in the process that connects market position and cultural practices (Fraser 2005). Establishing a relationship between class and culture means focusing on the practices of domination and exclusion which rely on taste and consumption (Devine, Savage 1999). Indeed, taste is an individual matter, but it presupposes the incorporation of classed understandings (Lawler 2005). In general, consumption is «a fundamental mechanism for defining who we are in the social world», which is «even more valid for the middle classes» as «the primary vehicles of diffusion of consumer phenomena» (Sassatelli *et al.* 2015, 15, our translation).

In the following pages, we propose a mapping operation resulting from an analysis of the references extracted from 150 scientific articles published from 2001 to 2019 and included in the Web of Science (WoS) database¹. We isolated this group of articles based on the following criteria: having «middle class(es)» in the title and «sociology» as a research area. The aim was to identify a coherent body of literature formed of authors and publications that proved to influence the relatively recent developments in middle class analysis. For the sake of comparability, we kept the analysis to English-speaking articles, implying that most of them were authored by scholars residing in the US and the UK, with a significant number coming from emerging and developing countries. As such, this exercise is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather focused on the debate taking place in the most important sociological journals worldwide.

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2. Bourdieu's influence

The majority of the works framed into the cultural turn in class analysis have been inspired or influenced by Bourdieu's most famous and cited work, *Distinction* (1984). This book was the first to reconnect economic definitions of class to cultural practices (Oliver, O'Reilly 2010), arguing that class inequalities are reproduced through hierarchical systems of taste (Bottero 2004). The theory developed therein has the merit of linking together structural positions (determined by specific mixes of economic, cultural, and social capital), motivating dispositions (the habitus), and lifestyles (Atkinson 2017). In the author's view, lifestyle and identity are not the results of a reflexive process, an opinion sustained by individualisation scholars (e.g., Giddens 1991). Instead, they are produced by class through the mediation of the habitus: for him, social agents cannot make choices *ex nihilo*; their orientations are engendered by the habitus, which is determined by the material conditions of existence (Atkinson 2017).

The French sociologist had studied the middle classes in his works of sociology of education (Bourdieu 1966; 1978) and, as part of a broader reflection, in his research on lifestyles (Bourdieu 1984). In these pieces of research, he investigated the practices of class reproduction through education and class distinction through consumption. In both cases, he assumed a taken-for-granted definition of middle class, recovering the Marxian concept of petty bourgeoisie. In line with his thought, Loïc Wacquant (1991) argued that the problem of defining the middle class could not be solved by drawing class boundaries *a priori* but through the analysis of classed practices. Middle-class practices are constructed through both material and symbolic struggles. The latter are

important because the fuzziness of the relationship between positions and practices is the greatest in the «intermediate regions» of the social space (Bourdieu 1987).

Bourdieu's contribution to this theoretical turn can be summarised in three points.

First, he stressed the classed nature of cultural practices and the need to study such practices to understand how class relations work. In this sense, a class situation is not determined merely by the market position but also – and above all – by the exclusionary practices of distinction. Two processes are at the base of distinction, both related to taste: on the one hand, we recognise people similar to us by sharing cultural preferences; on the other hand, we distinguish ourselves from people in a lower position through dislike and social distancing (Cappellini *et al.* 2016).

Second, he underlined the relational nature of class divisions, meaning that the middle class emerges as a distinct social aggregate by distinguishing itself from the working class (Wacquant 1991; Bottero 2004). This point has been developed in the debate about class, gender, and race, focusing on what makes someone *not* «people like us» (Byrne 2009). In his works, Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 2001) offered insights on the social consequences of the sexual division of labour, the gendering of taste, and sexual differences, although he paid little attention to feminist theories and did not provide a systematic theory of interrelated systems of inequality.

Third, he showed that there is no need to create taxonomies of class (Byrne 2009). The flexibility of his class analysis model allows the complexity around the formation of hierarchies in society to be captured without falling into the traps associated with the reduction of class to a system of occupations – such as leaving out those who are unemployed, retired, or inactive (Bradley 2014).

Before proceeding, though, a preliminary remark is necessary. As a matter of fact,

the operational choices we made implied that the diversity in theoretical trends at the national level remains unexpressed. As a consequence, lively debates such as those developed in France and Italy are not considered. What is more, the controversies over Bourdieu's sociology do not emerge, which might lead to its factitious understanding as an uncontested approach.

The young Luc Boltanski planted the seeds of dissent. In *Les cadres* (Boltanski 1987), a Bourdieusian analysis for all intents and purposes, the concept of habitus is not used: «there is no intent», the author himself says, «to “essentialize” social class in a personality» (Boltanski, Vitale 2006, 99, our translation). Later, the seeds germinated into an attack on class as a category at the heart of Bourdieu's critique, based on the belief that the idea of a unifying principle relying on a shared habitus «“flattens” individual differences and singularities into one dimension and obscures other social relations and identities» (Atkinson 2020, 315). In turn, Boltanski's argument has been subjected to criticism, deemed to be based on a misreading of Bourdieu, with the latter being aware of the heterogeneity within classes (*ibidem*).

In the same period, alternative approaches have been developed. To be questioned was the cultural dependence of the petty bourgeoisie on the ruling class, with the former being able to create its social norms. Gérard Grunberg and Étienne Schweisguth (1983) spoke of the salaried middle classes as vectors of a new cultural liberalism. Similarly, Catherine Bidou (1984) talked about the rise of a cultural model linked to the creation of alternative associative networks and local communities. Then, Henri Mendras (1988) emphasised the role of the «galaxy» of public-sector workers as social innovators who contribute to rewriting the moral norms of everyday life.

In conclusion, Bourdieu can be legitimately considered a contemporary classic of

class analysis and, despite his detractors, has achieved a hegemonic position in *middle class* analysis. In the next section, we review the works that have proven to influence middle class analysis and have given essence to the cultural turn by being inspired by the seminal work of the French sociologist. Precisely, we identified five theoretical approaches: the symbolic boundaries approach; the lifestyle approach; the parenting approach; the feminist approach; and the intersectionality approach.

3. Profiling culture-based approaches

The symbolic boundaries approach

The symbolic values assigned in classed processes of distinction, which are at the heart of Bourdieusian class analysis, are the precursors of Lamont's conceptualisation of symbolic boundaries.

In the author's view, symbolic boundaries are «conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. [...] tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality» (Lamont, Molnar 2002, 168). These tools are functional to separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and belonging (Lamont 2017). When widely agreed upon, they translate into economic and social inequalities (Reeves 2015). On the one hand, they are necessary but not sufficient conditions for creating social boundaries. On the other hand, they are cultural markers in class distinction.

Lamont turned the relationship between class and taste upside down: symbolic boundaries precede the production of inequalities and create a system of moral justification for inequality (Boltanski, Thévenot 2006).

In the context of this review, Lamont's work is significant because of the role of

relationality in the definition of class identity: symbolic practices are understandable only in relation to other groups, dividing groups into a valuable «us» and a despicable «them» (Lamont 2002). The process by which the members of a group define ingroup identity is essential to analyse the interactions that class establishes with other systems of inequality, such as gender and race. The author problematised the Bourdieusian assumption by which different lifestyles lead to social hierarchisation. In her opinion, we need to refer to repertoires of evaluations that create the demarcation between us and them. Therefore, the focus is not on demarcations as outcomes of symbolic practices but on the moral judgements that create the very demarcations.

Actually, Lamont's major work was on the upper class in the United States and France (Lamont 1992). Her approach has been applied to the analysis of the Norwegian middle class by Vegard Jarness (2017). The latter aimed to understand how the concept of symbolic boundaries could be used to identify social boundaries between «fractions» of the middle class. His analysis revealed intraclass divisions emerging from symbolic conflicts between groups, based on the arguments used to define the people like us.

The lifestyle approach

Bourdieu's theory also inspired Savage and those who have cooperated with him since the 1990s. These authors put new emphasis on the classed nature of cultural practices. Unlike most Bourdieusian scholars, they have come to measure the volumes of capital possessed by individuals to redraw the class map in contemporary Britain.

In an early work, Savage *et al.* (1992) developed an «asset-based» approach, which enabled them to identify three groups within the middle class, distinguished by the

specific assets they possessed: property, bureaucracy, and culture. Each group was associated with a definite lifestyle: ascetic, undistinctive, and postmodern.

In recent years, Savage *et al.* (2013; 2015) have shifted the focus to the resources that social groups use to accumulate advantage. Starting a new path of analysis, they conducted a large-scale research project to map class divisions in Britain, based on the systematic measuring of Bourdieu's three forms of capital. The authors investigated cultural preferences and social networks to complement the information on economic assets. In detail, they considered: household income, household savings, and house price to measure economic capital; the preferences related to leisure, music, eating, and holidays as indicators of cultural capital; the persons known, classified on a scale of occupational prestige, to assess social capital.

In response to the criticisms received by their 2013 article (see Bradley 2014; Dorling 2014; Rollock 2014), the same authors stressed the need to redefine the boundary between middle and working class (Savage *et al.* 2015). Their analysis suggested that, in British society, there was no longer a cleavage between these two groups. This has occurred because the middle *class* has turned into middle *classes* in the plural, due to its increasing diversity in terms of gender and ethnicity and due to the diversifying effects of technological change.

A variation of this approach is that of gentrification studies. It is no coincidence that one of the leading authors in this field, Tim Butler, had worked with Savage. In an extensive study on six inner-London areas, the author investigated gentrification patterns and their cultural implications, drawing on the Bourdieusian theory of habitus and capital (Butler, Robson 2003). The research findings stressed the significance of «place» in the process of class identification: where the people live tells us a lot about

who they are. They also revealed that gentrifiers are attracted by the presence of people like us, whom they identify through patterns of consumption and lifestyles. Their prerogative is that, although they are a numerical minority, they can dominate the area where they live and define it «in their own image» (*ibidem*, 8).

Again, the French literature offers an alternative perspective – due to the policies implemented in the 1960s and 1970s, which led to the creation of mixed urban aggregates. Several authors described the demographic reorganisation of territories in France as an articulated phenomenon formed of different social processes. Among them, Jacques Donzelot (1999; 2004) and Éric Maurin (2004) theorised the socio-cultural «separatism» of the middle classes from the working class, identifying a relationship between class structure, social mobility, and spatial distribution of inequalities. In this sense, according to Donzelot, relegation, peri-urbanisation, and gentrification are coexistent processes, which reflect class cleavages. From another perspective, Edmond Préteceille (2003; 2006) rejected the idea of separatism since he measured the low segregation of «core» middle classes, the so-called «intermediate professions»; on the other hand, he observed that low segregation did not prevent them from growing uncertainty – a shared trend affecting both middle and working classes. In addition, other authors adopted a constructivist approach and viewed residential choices as results of complex decisions involving different dimensions of individuals' personal and social lives, not necessarily following clear plans (Authier *et al.* 2010).

The parenting approach

As Louise Archer (2011, 134) observed, «within the sociology of education, there is

a growing interest in the middle class and their educational practices». This interest has given rise to autonomous research streams, indeed focusing on education as a critical institution for shaping the middle classes in contemporary society. This shift of perspective has implied looking at education as a constitutive element in the definition of middle class and an active element in the process of building middle-class identities.

Among the influential authors that assumed this perspective is Annette Lareau. Her most cited book, *Unequal Childhood* (Lareau 2003), focusing on parenting styles, introduced the concept of «concerted cultivation» to describe how middle-class parents raise their children, different from what she calls «natural growth», which characterises working-class and low-income families. In Lareau's view, concerted cultivation implies fostering children's talents by incorporating organised activities in their lives. It is also a method of child rearing that aims to help children to gain advantages and develop «a robust sense of entitlement» (*ibidem*, 2).

While they demonstrate that class belonging and parenting styles affect educational and occupational outcomes, Lareau's works remain harnessed in structuralist determinism, as the author prioritises class instead of looking at the interrelation between class and education.

Inspired by Lareau's theorisation, and partly in contrast with it, Archer (2010, 465) asserted that *race* plays «an important and complicating role». The author argued «that minority ethnic, middle-class children face greater risks than white middle-class children [...] due to racisms, and that whilst their class resources may protect against failure *per se*, their racialised positionings qualify and curtail key aspects of class advantage» (*ibidem*, 465-466). For Archer (2011), this implies a different way of constructing what, in literature, is referred to as «middle-classness», which, in the

author's opinion, is associated with «whiteness». Thus, Archer's works relocated the relationship between class and education at the intersection of class and race.

Among others, two distinct groups of scholars are worth mentioning, led by Diane Reay and Carol Vincent, respectively. Both focused their analysis on classed behaviours in relation to education and care, putting a great deal of emphasis on the role and weight of parental choice.

The merit of Reay's works is that, in line with the sociological traditions in middle class analysis, they bring out the critical role of the «psychosocial» in the making of middle-class identities – particularly for white middle-class people. The latter, the author said, embody the ideal of «active choosers» (Reay 2008). On the other hand, she argued, education choice policies – that is, education policies promoting parental choice within a markedly competitive environment – play a fundamental role in generating middle-class anxiety, which contributes to shaping middle-class identities. In this context, exclusion remains a crucial strategy in ensuring the reproduction of middle-class children. Nevertheless, in the problematic relationship with classed and racialised others, middle-class parents tend to lend more importance to the class component, namely the «feared working-class other» (Reay *et al.* 2008, 244).

Vincent's valuable contribution was that she attempted to go beyond the dichotomy between middle and working class by focusing on the behaviours and values of specific class fractions (Vincent, Ball 2006). This focus shift implies looking at «small differences and nuances rather than significant rifts» (Ball *et al.* 2004, 480).

The two approaches have in common that they stress the role of choice in childcare and education, seen at the same time as a source of and a strategy to cope with the «fear of falling» (see Ehrenreich 1989).

The feminist approach

Bourdieu's influence can also be found in the theories of class and stratification built on feminist ideas, such as those developed by Rosemary Crompton, Diane Reay, and Beverley Skeggs. Feminist studies focus on the role of the family in reproducing inequalities through the means of cultural, symbolic, and emotional capital.

For Crompton (1998), classes are the outcomes of the interplay between economic, social, and cultural capital. According to the author, rigid economic definitions fail with women because women have more heterogeneous participation in the labour market: what class are women who are not working because of domestic work and childcare? Measuring class at the household level is not a solution as long as it creates heterogeneity when measuring working women (who hold an individual class position) and non-working women (Anthias 2001). However, the family remains an essential driver of class reproduction because it transmits social advantages and disadvantages – not only in economic terms. Crompton (1995) understood that the middle *class* was becoming middle *classes* in the plural because of women's increasing participation in the labour market.

The approaches of Reay and Skeggs are united by a dynamic and relational idea of class, which is culturally and symbolically produced but experienced differently by men and women. Their studies aimed to assess how class operates in everyday life and is reproduced within the family. Thus, they shifted the focus from class identification, in terms of «who we are», to subjective perception, in terms of «who I am» (Hebson 2009). In general, feminist scholars stressed the subjective aspects of market positions

(Lawler 2005), which Bourdieu had conceptualised in terms of habitus, emphasising its class character but neglecting its gender matrices and effects (Adkins, Skeggs 2004).

Subsequently, the cultural turn in class analysis has been reinterpreted into how classed emotions shape women's experiences of economic inequalities (Hebson 2009).

Reay is interested in the psychosocial and emotional aspects of classed identities. In her view, class operates at the economic, cultural, and psychological levels in everyday relationships with other people, marked by the feelings that they arouse in us, such as inferiority or superiority, aversion, or recognition (Reay 2005). The author synthesised these ideas in the concept of *emotional capital*, defined as «the emotional resources passed on from mother to child through processes of parental involvement» (Reay 2000, 569). For her, cultural capital is mainly transmitted through the family: since mothers are the parents who invest the most time in childcare, they are also directly involved in capital transmission. That said, childcare is made not only of educational work but also emotional work. Working-class and middle-class mothers differ in their capacity to provide their children with cultural and emotional capital: working-class mothers usually struggle with ensuring their children have sufficient material conditions; hence, they tend to reduce their emotional involvement. This difference gives rise to a system of inequality that goes beyond market positions, based on specific mixes of cultural and emotional capital (*ibidem*).

For Skeggs, instead, class is produced dynamically through conflicts occurring at a symbolic level. The idea that lies behind her approach to middle class analysis is based on a relational concept of class: the middle classes define themselves as «worthy selves» against «a working-class mass» (Gillies 2005, 842). As such, class is implicit in everyday social interactions, and the process of «othering» is essential to shape the

moral judgement implied in the definition of the borders between social groups (Lawler 2005). To quote Sumi Hollingworth and Katya Williams (2009, 468), «classed identities are not always fixed, but can be defined through practices and process». Still, economic inequalities are not the only mechanisms underlying identity formation. Identity is as much gendered and racialised as it is classed (Skeggs 1997; 2004).

The intersectionality approach

While Bourdieu turned the classic approaches based on economic definitions of class upside down in class analysis, in feminist studies there was another revolution. Political collectives in the United Kingdom (Anthias, Yuval-Davis 1983) and the United States (Crenshaw 1989) started to reflect on the poor conditions of black women, both as women and blacks, laying the foundations for the intersectionality theory. The latter were born within the social rights movements to frame the situation of black women, ignored by both feminists (because of their blackness) and black activists (because of their femininity). Thus, the theory distinguished itself by stressing the multiplying effect of the co-presence of several sources of disadvantage.

If class is conceptualised not only in terms of occupation or market position but also in terms of cultural, moral, and symbolic markers, other dimensions like gender and race acquire significance as intersecting dimensions that influence identity formation. Sooner or later, it was natural for the debate on the classed nature of cultural practices to meet that on the intersectional nature of multiple disadvantages. As Stephanie Lawler (2005) argued, class becomes one of the axes around which identities form, together with gender and race. Borrowing the words of Cynthia Levine-Rasky (2011, 241),

«gender is always racialised and race is always gendered. There are racialised differences within social class groups as there are social class differences within any racialised group». Moreover, people believe that being part of an ethnic minority makes them automatically part of the working class (Rollock 2014) and that, even when they hold a middle-class position, this does not guarantee them the same privileges as white middle-class people (Levine-Rasky 2011).

Among intersectional theorists, Floya Anthias is the one that has dealt more with class. This author conceptualised class, gender, and race as «crosscutting and mutually reinforcing systems of domination and subordination», which «may construct multiple, uneven and contradictory social patterns» (Anthias 2005, 36-37). That is, they are interrelated but different systems of inequality, in which people hold positions that are conflicting with each other – such as for black middle-class women, who are privileged for their belonging to the middle class but discriminated against for their being women and black. Anthias (2012, 128) helped clarify how people cope with this kind of conflict by distinguishing between *social position*, defined as a «concrete position vis-a-vis a range of social resources such as economic, cultural and political», and *social positioning*, namely «how we articulate, understand and interact with these positions, e.g. contesting, challenging, defining». In the intersectionality theory, identity is not the sum of discrete attributes, «class + gender + race», but the product of identity formation, triggered by the multiplication «class x gender x race» (Brewer 1993, 16).

4. *Topography of the theoretical field: a look at the whole picture*

In the previous section, we profiled the main approaches that can be traced back to

the cultural turn in class analysis, as developed around the theoretical problem of defining the middle class, with the renewed empirical purpose of understanding the social processes behind historical changes in contemporary societies. Such processes refer to the crisis, decline, or end of the middle class in developed countries and the formation of new middle classes in emerging countries. Figure 1 provides a synthetic representation of how the theoretical field is configured around the cultural dimension.

Fig. 1. A map of culture-based approaches

< FIGURE 1, ABOUT HERE >

Here, a few remarks must be made.

First of all, these approaches are not watertight compartments. On the contrary, they are marked by blurred boundaries, which identify some intersectional areas. Most of the reviewed studies have common theoretical roots, use the same heuristic concepts, and deal with contiguous topics. Therefore, the proposed categorisation exercise should be seen as an artifice to put things in order in a field characterised by theoretical pluralism.

The common roots in the Bourdieusian theory are manifest in the fundamental ideas of class as a relational concept, the classed nature of cultural practices, and the refusal to construct all-encompassing hierarchies of social groups.

With the notion of relationality, we stress the nature assumed by class identities, which can be created only in opposition to a significant «other». For middle-class people, the working class is the social group from which they try to distinguish themselves, essentially through cultural practices. Middle-class identities are, thus, negotiated through symbolic struggles. The focus on the people like us and the moral

judgement behind the related claim of domination have guided authors like Lamont, Reay, Skeggs, and Butler. Others concentrated on identity and symbolic struggles, although they saw class as a concurrent system of inequality, with gender and race. Among them, Anthias analysed the symbolic struggles in Anglo-Saxon countries, where an increased diversity, based on gender and race, has changed the composition of the previously white male-centred middle class.

There has been a great deal of emphasis placed on the classed nature of cultural practices by those who committed themselves to studying the relationship between class and education. As noticed, their focus is on the role of the family as a driver of class reproduction. Reay dealt with this problem from a gender perspective, highlighting women's critical position in the family and their role in childcare. Archer, instead, introduced race in the analysis as a complicating variable.

A case apart is the approach adopted by Savage *et al.*, who aimed to outline a taxonomy of classes. These authors introduced the fundamental elements of Bourdieu's theory of class into a structuralist analytical framework to launch a «new class analysis». They concentrated on the internal differences of the middle class, which moves the discourse to the middle *classes* in the plural. Instead of dismissing the analysis of economic inequalities, they maintained that a combined analysis of material conditions and cultural and social practices would have led to a better understanding of how the middle class appears in the present day. Among their innovations is the fact that they identified a new «proletariat» of people living in conditions of insecurity, theorising the rise of the *precariat* as an autonomous class. They borrow an idea of Guy Standing (2011), who had used job instability as a criterion to define classes. However, despite being a promising insight, it has not been applied in later studies.

5. Middle class analysis in one word: searching for the middle-classness

In the last two decades, middle class analysis has revitalised class analysis after a period of decline. With the cultural turn, though, it has diverged significantly from mainstream patterns. The «middleisation» of class analysis has been a consequence of that of the global society. Class analysis has been redirected to the dynamics of stratification, destratification, and restratification in the middle of the social structure. This process has gone hand in hand with individualisation and the decline of class belongings. This combination is at the base of the ambivalence of the middle classes in middle-class societies (Bellini 2014) and the difficulty of seeing them as classes in a proper sense. In this context, the cultural turn has drawn attention to the specificity of middle-class identities, which is synthesised in the term middle-classness.

Lawler (2008) clarified the meaning of what sounds like a cryptic concept. The author warned that middle-classness «can prove difficult to define, and can mean different things in different contexts» (*ibidem*, 246). Generally speaking, it can be seen as «the benchmark of “normality” against which other groups are measured» (*ibidem*, 247). In other words, it is «all that is normal, natural and desirable» (*ibidem*, 258).

The concepts of «normality» and «ordinariness» have been translated into the boundary work in which middle-class people engage to distinguish themselves from working-class people. This process of othering is functional to drawing a boundary between them and the working class, seen as dangerously proximal (Lawler 2005). The focus has shifted to the «dislikes» of working-class cultural practices (Wacquant 1991; Skeggs 1997; Reay *et al.* 2011; Cappellini *et al.* 2016) and the «disgust» at the supposed

violations of taste (Lawler 2005). As Jarness (2017, 12) argued, «“we” are the ordinary people, whereas “they” are pretentious social climbers shamelessly trying to stand out from the crowd». In this sense, the category of «others» allows middle-class people to build their class identity and assume a role of moral judgement (Lamont 2017).

There are three distinctive traits of middle-classness. First, it is a historically and spatially situated concept: as such, it is mutable and needs to be contextualised. Second, it is a relational concept: it implies identifying an ingroup and an outgroup. Moreover, it presupposes co-conditional practices of distinction and exclusion (Levine-Rasky 2011): domination occurs only when an oppressed group is established. Third, it is a normative concept: it presumes to impose standards of morality and taste, assumed as normality.

As Archer (2011, 135) put it, «those who have taken up the “cultural turn” in sociological class analysis have emphasized how middle-classness is a relational formation. That is, middle-class identities can be understood as produced in resistance or reaction to working-class identities [...]. These identities are produced and reproduced within relations of contestation, uncertainty and anxiety. That is, the meanings of middle-classness and middle-class identities are constantly being constituted and reconfigured through a range of material and symbolic struggles».

In brief, middle-classness is the essence of middle-class identity. However, the main consequence of focusing on culture is that class assumes different meanings in different contexts. Most of the reviewed studies, in effect, belong to Anglo-Saxon traditions, in which race is a helpful category to analyse domination relations. Would race be as significant in other contexts?

As intersectionality studies have pointed out, class is not a neutral term when combined with other systems of inequality. Most of those who dealt with the middle

class assumed that it was the *white* middle class (Byrne 2009; Levine-Rasky 2011). As Anthias (2001) argued, the introduction of gender and race has complicated the picture: it is not a matter of «high» or «low» because inequality is (at least) a three-dimensional space. On the other hand, gender and race crosscut classes, making it impossible to build a model based on universally valid scales (Walby *et al.* 2012).

6. *Concluding remarks: criticisms and prospects*

In the context of a marked theoretical pluralism, two main trends have emerged. Authors like Lamont, Reay, and Skeggs, developed relational approaches, in which middle-classness stands out as an outcome of a symbolic struggle against a significant other. Relational approaches focus on the psychosocial components of middle-class identities, with specific attention to the boundary and symbolic work necessary to define the people like us, the «ordinary people». Thus, moral judgements and likes and dislikes become argumentative rhetoric tools for domination, well expressed in the concept of «symbolic violence» (Bourdieu, Passeron 1977).

Secondly, a critical analysis of the studies that rely on a relational understanding of the middle class reveals that they suffer from severe theoretical and methodological problems. While they assume that middle-class identities are founded on the claims of status made by individuals, they are not convincing when they describe – if they do – how they identified the people included in the research. In particular, the examination of the WoS articles disclosed that they often avoid defining what the middle class is, relying on a common-sense idea of the middle class and concentrating on specific occupational segments. On closer inspection, this is a problematic choice, especially when dealing with the upper middle classes, which are not easy to distinguish from the

upper class in the strictest sense of the term. The cases of managers and professionals are paradigmatic: in fact, their class location is ambiguous by definition, depending on both *subjective* factors (i.e., the theoretical perspective we assume) and *objective* factors (e.g., their characteristics in terms of internal heterogeneity).

The promoters of the new class analysis developed an alternative approach. While most of the reviewed studies relied on a qualitative method research design, those conducted by Savage *et al.* proposed a model of class analysis based on the operationalisation and measuring of the class structure based on the three forms of capital, developing a taxonomy that covers the whole class spectrum. Nevertheless, this operation was undermined by theoretical inconsistencies and a methodological short circuit. Indeed, the definition of cultural capital deviated from the Bourdieusian formulation – which distinguished between embodied, institutional, and objective cultural capital – as it incorporated consumption behaviours. In general, all three forms of capital, which were antecedents in Bourdieu's idea, incorporate dependent variables.

In conclusion, the cultural turn did not imply abandoning occupation as a fundamental definitory dimension. On the other hand, it allowed the scholars that operate under its umbrella to expand the semantic area of class and plot new directions of research, which appear more consistent with the knowledge needs of middle-class societies. To quote Bagnasco (2016, 194, our translation), «the status dimension, in general, concerns aspects that should not be seen as secondary or derived from the class position but as constituents of social structuring».

That being said, to achieve significant advancement in knowledge, future research should solve the definitional problems mentioned above. That is, it should clarify what being middle-class means and, contextually, delve deeper into the concept of middle-

classness. Only after that could it further investigate how cultural practices influence class identification. Then, studying consumption behaviours – with consumption patterns being more stable and less susceptible to the role of the informal economy than income dynamics – would tell us more on how middle classes present themselves to others, establish their boundaries and define their habitus: in short, pushing the inheritance of the Bourdieusian approach up to its heuristic limits.

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the sociological debate on social classes, the middle class has been defined negatively for what it is not: lying in the middle between the bourgeoisie and the working class. This article aims to translate the terms of the problem positively, shifting the focus from determining «what is» or «who is in» the middle class to understanding the inherent meaning of «being» middle class. For this purpose, it draws a map of the main theoretical approaches and research works that, following Bourdieu's example, were designed to investigate the cultural practices that middle-class people engage in to identify as a group and distinguish themselves from others. The article reveals that, in the variety of culture-based approaches, the concept of class assumes a markedly relational character, which expresses itself in the symbolic struggles that are inherent to the everyday practices of distinction.

Keywords

Bourdieu, class identification, cultural practices, intersectionality, middle-classness

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