

Middle class identities in a neoliberal age: tensions between contested authenticities

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Abstract

This paper explores in-depth interviews on aspects of middle class identity in a neoliberal age, taking the case of Chile's rapid and stark transition to a neoliberal economic model which was imposed by a dictatorship but later reproduced during democracy.¹ The paper reveals that there are no challenges to middle class identities (eg from the working class, or peasants). In this respect, these are neo-liberal middle class identities in that their way of thinking is preconditioned by market dominance. Informed by Bourdieu's views on class identities, this article emphasises the horizontal, non-hierarchical nature of contemporary class taste, and contributes to debates on stratification and culture, settling accounts with older class theory which perceives contests between the popular and middle classes. Notwithstanding this, however, I argue that processes of horizontal differentiation do involve tensions between cultural and moral boundaries. This article therefore also offers an alternative approach for exploring how middle class identities experience processes of individualization. It is argued that individualization processes should be placed in social and ethical registers as they could be in tension with various ways of understanding authenticity: being true to oneself or to one's origins.

Introduction

The last decades have witnessed a wide variety of debates regarding the future of class analysis. From a post-modern point of view, Pakulski and Walters (1996) argue that class as a concept has failed to account for the new ways in which inequalities are increasingly being articulated, for example, on the basis of consumption patterns. These and other authors assert that in a stage of advanced capitalism, class categories and identities lose their explanatory potential. Along a similar line, authors such as Bauman (1982), Giddens (1990), Beck (1992), Lash and Urry (1987, 1994) have emphasised that the decline of class identities is related to the transformation of the welfare state or what has been described as reflexive modernity. According to this perspective, if ascribed class biographies were characteristic of a period of welfare state, in periods of risk and uncertainty identities become reflexive and depend more on the decisions of individuals. Thus, identity and class solidarities become increasingly weaker (Beck, 1992).

Notwithstanding this, however, there are authors for whom class remains important, as individuals still need to situate themselves socially in order to define their identity, and class still works as a benchmark. These writers acknowledge that it is important to address class identities from a less traditional angle, focusing on its cultural and embodied dimensions, as well as to recognise and explore processes of disidentification of class (Skeggs, 1997) and the individualisation of class identities (Savage, 2000). As Savage (2000) indicates, analytical oppositions such as traditional class cultures versus new individualised ones (modernity and post-modernity, organised and disorganised capitalism, etc.) do not succeed in capturing the complex interweaving of class and individual identity, and in fact it is more significant to offer an understanding of class as an individualised practice which allows individuals to measure their own life stories instead of adhering to any strong claim of class membership.

To a great extent, most of these authors have been influenced by French theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, especially his work on stratification and culture (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1991, among others). Bourdieu's notion of social space is an attempt to break with a linear model of social class in favour of a relational approach that considers all the pertinent properties, such as the volume and composition of capital, sex, age, social origin, ethnic origin, income, educational level etc. In this sense, Bourdieu goes beyond an exclusively hierarchical differentiation and offers a three dimensional space defined by: the overall volume of capitals, the composition of capitals, and the change of these two properties over time – the trajectory. These trajectories are not random but depend on the volume of inherited capital which leads to certain trajectories and therefore particular positions. The different types of movements and the notion of trajectory have been widely celebrated because they introduce a dynamic perspective into social stratification and allow us to argue that agents are not only defined by the properties they have at a particular given time, but also by their trajectories.² In this sense, this approach allows more space for horizontal differentiation between various lifestyles that are not necessarily vertically organised.

Notwithstanding this, it is significant that while horizontal differentiation is considered a major contribution, most of the work carried out in relation to class identities still favours the emphasis on the tensions between working and middle class identities (for example, Lawler, 2005 or Skeggs, 2004, among others). More importantly, within these conflicting class identities, authenticity claims have been described as arising out of working class identities as a way of differentiating from middle class artificiality. For example, according to Savage (2005), the English working class in the 1960s placed themselves as different from upper class people by evoking a distinction between the natural and the social, in which authentic and ordinary people would act naturally and were not guided by the need for social distinction. Indeed, Savage argues that the rhetoric of authenticity or ordinariness is used to counter upper class taste or snobbery in an attempt to establish 'normalness'.

In other words, the ambivalent references to working class or middle class identities should be understood as rhetorical attempts to establish 'normalness'. Within the same debate, but from a rather different perspective, Payne (2005) asserts that 'references to "normalness" or "ordinariness" should be interpreted as rhetorical attempts to establish working or middle class identities' (Payne, 2005: 904).

Instead of looking at the well known antagonism between working and middle class identities, this paper investigates the tensions involved in the construction of various types of middle class identities. The main argument is along similar lines to those suggested by Savage *et al.* and Payne in that people try to stress their own identities as being linked to particular trajectories which allow them to claim uniqueness. In other words, people do not want to be seen as dissolving their identities in the 'mass' or in a 'class' in collective/traditional terms. This does not mean that they want to appear as completely individualised, or at least, not in Beck's and Giddens's terms. My interviewees demonstrate a desire to stress distinctiveness in complex ways. I will argue that class identities are not expressed in collective ways, but rather that they refer to different kinds of individualised and mobile identities (although not exactly as proposed by reflexive modernisation theory).

Indeed, in contrast to the traditional frameworks on class identities, which emphasize the tensions between working class identities versus middle class identities (elements of which can also be found implicitly and explicitly in current accounts, such as that of Skeggs), this article will be devoted to specifically addressing the question of how class identities work in a neoliberal age. I will precisely show how these do not necessarily work in the terms suggested by traditional frameworks. In fact, these middle class identities are differentiated from each other in the terms suggested by Bourdieu's ideas on the horizontal mechanisms of differentiation. Notwithstanding that, however, I argue that processes of horizontal differentiation are not neutral either, and do involve tensions between cultural and moral boundaries: contested notions of authenticity/artificiality or ordinariness. In this sense, I offer an alternative approach for exploring how middle class identities experience processes of individualisation. I argue that individualisation processes should be placed in social and ethical registers as they could be in tension with various ways of understanding authenticity: being true to oneself or to one's origins.

As argued previously, issues of authenticity/normalness versus artificiality/preentiousness have mostly been referred to in this tension between middle and working class identity. My research looks at the tensions between various middle class identities and mobile identities with different trajectories (in which we find a wider scope of tensions between what it actually means to be authentic), and confirms that class identity in a neoliberal age is in fact ambivalent.

In this sense, the case of Chile offers a number of interesting elements that could help to explore how class identities work in a neoliberal age. Chile shows a particularly stark and rapid transition to a neo-liberal economic

model, imposed by a dictatorship but later reproduced during democracy. Indeed, as Castells (2005) argues, over the past three decades in Chile two 'models' have been implemented: *the liberal authoritarian excluding model*, which excludes large parts of the population from the gains of economic growth through the exercise of authoritarian control over power, and in which the state desists from applying public policies that may correct the effects of inequalities, and *the liberal democratic including model* which, while maintaining the relevance of market mechanisms as the main source of resource allocation, is also concerned with the implementation of public policies directed towards the inclusion of the whole population in the benefits of economic growth. These are both liberal models because they stress the importance of the market and openness to the international economy in order to achieve economic growth.

Dictatorship or the *liberal authoritarian excluding model* not only attempted to wipe out democracy but also to destroy the relationship between the state, the citizens and their identity as such. During dictatorship, the State put forward market functioning as the central mechanism for social integration, leaving people to deal with the market individually. Thus, the question that many have raised is the extent to which it is possible to promote a collective identity as a shared project that goes beyond the individual wellbeing of each family through negotiating their chances with the market. Traditional sociological frameworks of stratification and social mobility in Latin America and Chile (Filgueira and Genelatti, 1981; CEPAL/ECLAC, 1989, 2000; Filgueira, 2001; Portes, 1985; Portes and Hoffman, 2003; Torche, 2005; Franco, León and Atria, 2007 among others) have attempted to describe the context in which these changes have occurred and their impact in terms of class formation. Nonetheless, these frameworks are less culturally sensitive. On the other hand, social commentary on cultural change in Chile (Tironi, 1999; Moulian, 1997; Halpern, 2002; Larraín, 2001; UNDP 2002) indicates the salience of this process of change. These diverse perspectives have only partially focused on matters such as the rise of consumerism, individualisation and malaise in an 'either/or' approach and therefore until now have not been sufficient to build a more critical perspective about the ways in which these 'cultural changes' are linked to the reproduction of inequalities.

Thus, the case of Chile is interesting for at least two reasons: on the one hand, it was the laboratory of the experiments of The Chicago School of Economics (The Chicago Boys)³ between the early seventies and late eighties. Their programme included the privatisation of welfare and social programmes (health, education and most notably, the pension system), the deregulation of the market and the liberalisation of trade, among other measures. This was carried out in the absence and repression of trade unions and social forces in general. On the other hand, more than 80% of the Chilean population⁴ prefer to see themselves as middle class. From an 'objective' point of view, although Chile has been economically stable, the middle classes have not grown as much over the past three decades as is suggested by subjective perceptions. Indeed,

there is agreement among the studies on stratification that – both in terms of income and occupation – the Chilean middle class constitutes no more than 45% of the population. In this sense, the extensive middle class identity currently found in Chile can be interpreted as another sign of the disidentification with class as this class identity allows the conflicting connotations of traditional class identities to be avoided.

This paper is structured around three broad sections. In the first I outline the debate regarding the salience of class, taking as an example the varying uses of class identities within my middle class interviewees. I then move on to illustrate how the horizontal differentiation described by Bourdieu is crossed not only by cultural but also by moral distinctions, and how individualisation processes should be placed in ethical registers if we want to understand more fully how people value individuality and distinctiveness. In the concluding section of the paper I stress how focusing on tensions between contested versions of authenticity (one that involves more self fashioning versus those that stress continuity with origins) provides a helpful way to address the question of how class identities work in a neoliberal age, as it sheds light on the various and conflicting ways of perceiving individualized and collective class identities.

Data and methodology

This paper is based on two research projects on the Chilean middle class. One of them is currently funded by the National Commission in Scientific and Technological Research (CONICYT-Chile) and looks at the changes of the Chilean social structure over the past decades with a particular focus on the middle classes, and the second research project is my doctoral thesis in which the overall research question addressed the ways in which class identities work in a neo-liberal age. In this paper I rely heavily on the data collected from the latter, particularly a series of interviews conducted with people living in the city of Santiago, all of them in their forties and fifties, who had been directly affected by processes of privatisation from the mid eighties onwards. In other words, my interviewees were all people who entered the labour market in the eighties and nineties.

I conducted 33 in depth interviews with people from different areas of the city, who could be broadly described as middle-middle class and upper-middle class⁵ on the basis of their income, educational level, occupation and area of residence among other characteristics, as the list overleaf shows. At the same time, my interest was to include people with upward, horizontal and downward mobility trajectories, both in social and spatial terms, in order to explore how middle class identity is shaped in one's own biography. This biographical approach proved to be a useful way of exploring individual experiences of structural processes.

List of the interviewees

	Men	Women
City Centre	UM. Social worker DM. Language Centre Director ST. Social worker ST. Engineer ST. Teacher	UM. Sales woman UM. Engineer ST. Psychologist ST. Artist ST. Bookshop owner and part time lecturer
	Men	Women
Nunoa-Providencia	ST. Writer UM. Finance manager ST. Academic UM. Academic UM. Civil Servant, director DM. Civil Servant, director DM. Civil Servant	ST. Teacher UM. Pharmaceutical researcher ST. Market researcher ST. Accountant UM. Accountant UM. Political scientist
	Men	Women
Barrio Alto	ST. Finance manager UM. Owner of a medium company UM. Directive post, private company	ST. Academic ST. Academic ST. Finance manager DM. Journalist ST. Psychologist UM. Public servant, directive SM. Directive post, private company

UM: Upwardly mobile, **ST:** stable trajectory **DM:** Downwardly mobile.

Regarding the three neighbourhoods that were included in this research, it should be noted that they represent three different types of middle class. They can broadly be described as a gentrified area (the city centre area), a more established upper middle class area called *Barrio Alto* and a traditionally middle-middle class area of professionals of medium range (Ñuñoa and Providencia). Indeed, the further east and north a person lives in Santiago, the more likely they are to have a more privileged situation, which is the case of the *Barrio Alto* where not only upper-middle class people live, but also the most well-off groups in Chilean society. The more west and south a person lives in Santiago, the more likely they are to live in a working-class area, which is more deprived and run down in places. The areas that I looked at in the city centre are quite close to the civic centre, and are typically gentrified areas where it is possible to find museums, art galleries, cafés, bookshops, etc.

These areas are different not only in economic terms but also, and sometimes more importantly, in social and cultural terms. For example, in the so called *Barrio Alto* right wing voters have been a majority for decades; Catholic schools and conservative groups are also more common than in other areas of the city, and the population is visibly white and of European origin. In Ñuñoa and Providencia – although local authorities are also dominated by representatives of right wings parties, alternative voices are also likely to be found as people in these areas are more progressive in their views on public and private life. On the other hand, the gentrified area of the city centre represents an interesting mixture of several groups, some of who choose to live and belong there as a rejection of the *Barrio Alto* values, some who are interested in preserving and regenerating tangible and intangible urban heritage, and some who are just trendy, alternative and bohemian.

Class is still important, but there are different uses of class identity

Skeggs's study of class and gender formation was a milestone in terms of re-addressing and re-directing issues of class identity. Indeed, in *Formations of Class and Gender* (2007) she focuses on a particular form of cultural *respectability*, and provides a prolific account of active processes of class disidentification and the ways in which working class women distance themselves from those stigmatised by the dominant culture.

In her more recent book on the subject, *Self, Culture, Class* (2004), Skeggs is more emphatic in stressing the ways in which middle class culture appropriates valuable resources in making other selves: 'the ability to propertize culture in the making of a self, therefore, becomes central to how class is made in the contemporary. The entitlement and access to the resources for making a self with value are central to how the middle class is formed: they have access to other's culture as a resource in their own self-making' (Skeggs, 2004: 177). In addition, Skeggs is critical of Giddens and Beck in that she finds their approach insufficient in accounting for classed, raced or gendered selves. Skeggs stresses that the notion of the self offered by these theorists is neutral, as if the possibilities for individualization are equally available to all, 'rather than an inscription, a position of personhood produced to retain the interests of a privileged few, requiring for its constitution the exclusion of others' (Skeggs, 2004: 53). Skeggs bases part of her critique on the argument developed by Savage (2000, 2005) in relation to the ways in which certain features of globalisation, such as individualisation or cosmopolitanism, could in fact be examples of a particular (embodied) habitus, which is able to be reflexive in the way suggested by Giddens and Beck. Thus, Skeggs draws attention to the ways in which class inequality could be reproduced and refigured by these individualisation prerogatives.

Along these lines, in a 2005 issue of the journal *Sociology*, a group of British academics discuss 'the salience of class'. This issue on *Culture, Identity and*

Class reflected on the ways in which the cultural turn has influenced new developments on class analysis and the problematisation of class identity *vis-à-vis* processes of individualisation. In broad terms, there is agreement between the authors about the importance of class and the need to address it from a cultural point of view that transcends the traditional ‘employment aggregate’ approach (see Crompton, 1998). It is also suggested by most of the perspectives in this issue that class should be seen in coded, implicit and relational terms. They also acknowledge processes of class disidentification and individualisation of class identities, in other words that class does not work as in the past as a fundamental part of people’s and group identities. As argued by Bottero, one of the main agreements is that hierarchical positioning ‘acts as a constraint on aspirations, tastes, networks and resources, and that hierarchy is therefore an important element shaping social identity – regardless of whether people are willing to talk about themselves and others in explicit “class” terms’ (Bottero, 2004: 993).

In my research, I found that people do not talk about their class identities in an overt and transparent way, but in complex ways. In other words, the variety of ‘uses’ of class reflects the fact that class identities work both in ways that are not obvious, and differently from those collective/traditional fashions in which they are stated more explicitly. Indeed, some people refuse or dismiss any kind of identity that is related to class. In fact, they are not too interested in using the category but show awareness of the power of classification. For example, the following quote reflects how the interviewee sees class as a label that forces her to be part of something that for her is experienced as inauthentic. In fact, this person prefers to define herself as ‘ordinary’ and ‘authentic’ with respect to it.

MLM: And do you see yourself in terms of class?

L: I don’t identify myself with any class, I am what I am, Lina. It is people that put you into categories and tend to give you names. People tend to weigh you up.

MLM: But do you think that class is a valid category or not?

L: It is people that make that classification . . . (Lina)

On the contrary, there are others that are quite explicit in stating that class origin and identity is a major point of reference from which they construct their identities. This issue is quite recurrent, especially among people that come from a lower middle class background, but not among those that come from a ‘poor’ background. Interestingly enough and despite being proud of their origins and even if class background is strongly emphasised, this does not entail a collective class identity.

I have never denied my origins . . . I have never had that problem, on the contrary, I have always been very proud of it . . . having done well in life . . . there is nothing that I should feel ashamed of. I feel proud of the fact

that my parents are not professionals but had the vision that their children would study . . . (Luis)

Just because you have a professional career doesn't mean that you have to forget where you come from (Cristian)

Finally, there are also a number of people for whom class identity is not an issue at all. They see themselves in terms of continuities with their parents, but are also able to mention the differences. These topics do not appear spontaneously as they do not see it as being central for them in terms of self identity. They neither refuse to use the 'class' terms, nor engage with them in terms of their self identity, they just do not seem to be meaningful. These cases show how these continuities with their parent's position also involve a claim about ordinariness. As argued by Savage *et al.* (2001) ordinariness means a distinction from the elite or upper class and a way of conveying a sense of naturalness or authenticity in which people do not necessarily act in ways which are guided by a need for social distinction. This need for distinction entails an attempt to be in a different position from that to which 'one belongs' or 'one's place', so it is therefore seen as worse in the case of those that are upwardly mobile or parvenu.

Summarising, my findings corroborate the obliqueness of class, in other words, that people do not address class identity in collective or traditional ways and although they consider class in order to reflect on their identities, they do not argue that they are part of a class culture. In this sense, middle class identity provides enough ambiguity in order to avoid addressing class in an overt way, and in doing so it allows for more mobile and less collective/traditional identities to be taken into account. In addition, these findings prove the importance of incorporating a more complex understanding of how authenticity claims (claims of ordinariness or naturalness) are involved in class identity.

Taste, authenticity and artificiality

As argued earlier, many authors, who are influenced by Bourdieu's views of the ways in which social space is defined, have stressed the importance of exploring the horizontal nature of contemporary class taste (Lamont, 1992, 2002; Petersen and Kern, 1996; Southerton, 2002, among many others). My argument is that in order to understand fully how this process of differentiation works, it becomes decisive to investigate how authenticity claims are involved. I contribute to this debate by arguing that to improve the way we understand the relation between class differentiation and taste making, we should incorporate parallel axes to those strictly cultural ones. In particular, in my research, issues of authenticity versus artificiality are ways of establishing difference but are expressed as boundaries of a moral nature (Lamont, 1992; 2002). My arguments therefore have parallels with those Lamont makes in her

book, *Money, Morals and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class* (1992). Lamont argues that cultural capital theory is helpful to clarify the relation between the operation of symbolic boundaries and the reproduction of inequalities, but underestimates the importance of moral boundaries, while exaggerating the importance of cultural and socio-economic boundaries. According to Lamont, people might orient themselves in social space to establish cultural boundaries (which appeal more to the cultivated dispositions), such as manners, or economic boundaries, such as money or wealth. In particular, Lamont shows how the upper-middle class in the US establishes differences from other groups in relation to money and manners rather than focusing on culture as the French upper middle class does.

Along a similar line, Southerton (2002) in the article, *Boundaries of 'Us' and 'Them': Class, Mobility and Identification in a New Town*, refers to the ways in which people from three different areas of the same town in the UK, establish differences that cannot be explained exclusively from the point of view of economic boundaries. Indeed, Southerton argues that 'the relationship between class and identification is not straightforward. In this case, the organization of the town's social relations, with its normative conventions and local reputations, coupled with respondents' different patterns of geographical mobility, acted to configure interpretations of who constituted 'us' and 'them' (Southerton, 2002: 171).

In the case of Southerton as well as in that of Lamont, there is an emphasis on 'moral frameworks', which shows how people focus on personal characteristics such as honesty, work ethic, personal integrity, reputation and competence. Interestingly enough, Southerton also refers to narratives of moral boundaries such as those of being 'down-to-earth', which will also be described in the next section of this paper. Both in the case of Lamont's work as well as that of Southerton and my own study, there is a strong emphasis within different middle class identities that alludes to senses of personal honesty and 'antiphonyism' (Southerton, 2002), which also comes across as being ordinary or authentic people.

Authentic versus artificial: against intellectualism, consumerism and 'arrivism'

Within the literature on authenticity there is agreement in assuming that one of the characteristics of late modernity is that individuals are less pressed by conventional morality and traditional categories in order to construct their self identities. In fact, most authors (Taylor, 1991; Sayers, 1999; Anton, 2001; Ferrara, 2002 and Förnas, 1995, among others) agree that individuals are currently *compelled to be themselves*. In other words, authenticity is a mandate in identity construction, and therefore should not be seen as a vain and trivial desire or as a degrading expression of loss, but as an actual moral ideal or

discourse. According to Taylor (1991), it is a common mistake in contemporary philosophy and social sciences to consider that the ideal of authenticity is vain, superfluous and individualistic. On the contrary he contends that modern selves, instead of choosing to be authentic, are actually *compelled* to be so. At the same time, he shows how authenticity, far from being self-centered, is intersubjective.

These are also authors who are critical of essentialist views on authenticity that assume a sort of nature to which the individual is obliged to go back to in order to be him or herself. There is agreement in acknowledging that identity construction is played out in a complex terrain between subjective, social and cultural elements, which relate to each other in particular ways. Thus, what might appear as an inner, pure essence of oneself is rather a complex interplay of a fluid biography and identity.

In addition to this, these authors consider authenticity as intersubjective instead of a narcissistic and self-centered practice. Indeed, these authors denounce a tendency, not only in academia but also in social commentary and everyday life, to see the quest for authenticity as individualist when it actually involves being immersed in social relations that act as referents, even in internal dialogues (Archer, 2003).

Among the varied ways in which (intersubjective) authenticity claims to work, the *authentic versus artificial* distinction is relatively frequent. Meyer (2000) argues that 'whenever an aesthetic practice threatens to veer off into artifice or worse, it can be deflated in the name of authenticity' (Meyer, 2000: 43). In his view, authenticity is not the opposite of refinement but a 'revolutionary way of changing the standards of evaluation of taste, now it can be labelled positively. The rhetoric of authenticity undermines the hegemonic nature of taste' (Meyer, 2000: 52).

In my opinion, the use of authenticity as a way of judging, instead of contesting, the hegemonic nature of taste, tends to reproduce a certain hierarchy without appealing to cultural boundaries. In relation to this, Lamont (1992) asserts that there are times in which cultural standards – which are at the core of the definition of taste – are questioned, not through the same lenses of that particular doxa, but by trying to subordinate them to moral ones. I found that the distinction between authentic and artificial could be considered as an example of this. In fact, there are different ways of understanding what authenticity is. For some of my interviewees, *being authentic* to the extent of denying their origins has to do with avoiding 'posing' and being *too* different to the extent of denying the 'origins' (ethnicity, class, national culture, etc). Examples of this are the critiques of intellectualism, 'trendy-ness' and arrivism. Interestingly enough, these notions of authenticity show some of the ways in which individualisation can be under social/collective scrutiny, as they represent different strategies of defining a project of the self.

In her study of the American and French upper middle class, Lamont (1992) finds that the Americans are much more reluctant than the French to establish class boundaries on the basis of cultural taste, or as she calls it, to establish

cultural boundaries. Rather, the Americans would be much more likely to establish *moral boundaries*. At the same time, Lamont shows that the American middle class is more likely to develop anti-intellectual and anti-cosmopolitan attitudes that 'can be interpreted as a questioning of cultural standards of hierarchisation and as an attempt to subordinate them to moral ones, cultural sophistication being seen as a superfluous quality in comparison with sincerity and honesty for instance . . . sovereignty of moral standards of status attribution' (Lamont, 1992: 125). Instead, values of friendliness, conflict avoidance, and cultural egalitarianism would reinforce the marginalisation of intellectual high culture in American society as they stress the cultural sovereignty of the individual and the primacy of moral criteria of evaluation over cultural criteria. Similarly, pragmatism sustains a certain anti-intellectualism and anti-cosmopolitanism which results in a weakening of cultural boundaries.

Thus, individualisation of taste is not without its tensions. In the case of Lamont's study as well as in mine, it is possible to see that cultural boundaries (mostly related to high culture) are sometimes subjected to moral ones. Among my interviewees, I found that the distinction between the authentic and the 'intellectual/trendy' is quite frequent. Some interviewees see themselves as 'normal' or average people, with more spontaneous and authentic tastes, compared to those that are described as 'intellectuals' (anti-intellectualism implies 'being down to earth and a regular person'). For example, the following interviewee's rejection of trendy/intellectual taste:

I don't go to those places in the barrio Lastarrea, because I basically feel that I don't fit in. It is too much about posing, café culture and cafés for reading (café lectura), when more than half of the Chileans don't have those habits of reading, it is like pretending to be Parisians or Bonaerenses (from Buenos Aires) . . . I prefer to have a bottle of wine with my friends and not spend \$2.00 on a coffee . . . besides, we never even look at the exhibitions and pictures that are being shown (Marcela).

I have noticed that among these intellectuals, if we can call them that way, one of the things that they use more as a form of discrimination is the way people dress and how they talk . . . taste in relation to clothing and also in relation to the kind of places where you go for a coffee or a drink, for example, the intellectuals can and actually do go to the most unknown and even decadent Peruvian restaurants as a way of saying 'here we are the intellectuals, but we interact with diversity, we open new spaces or make others more 'cultural' (Patricia).

Another perspective of the distinction between authentic and artificial refers to the critique of trendy taste. As a matter of fact, the area in the city centre where I carried out my interviews has become one of the most fashionable areas over the past years. The next interviewee, while stating that he is explor-

ing the new age world, also wants to make sure that his taste is not confused with a trendy one, as if the latter lacked authenticity and was about image:

I haven't left this world, in this new path that I'm discovering I'm also trying to recover things that I left in the past, but I don't do things because it could be seen as cool, I mean for example, the City Centre and all that tendency to rediscover the area, I know that there is a certain trendy tendency there, but it is not my taste, I wouldn't move there, I don't like it (Luis M.).

In other words, there are possible ways of exploring 'alternative' lifestyles, but this kind of taste is also under scrutiny in terms of not being too artificial.

European taste, American taste or Chilean taste?

A quite usual way of establishing differences in terms of taste among my interviewees is by referring to a kind of taste that is external to those available in the society. In this case, European and American (US) taste are the most frequent. The distinction here shows how people tend to associate the former with a more mature, older and sophisticated taste and the latter with a more modern but consumerist one.

Although some of my interviewees were ironic in saying that those that prefer a trendy/intellectual taste admire a European taste, it is also true that many of them felt very curious about it as well. European taste seems to be a 'safer' taste for people to refer to, as it is more established, mature and legitimated; in other words, for many people it is of good taste to prefer Europe rather than the US. A European taste seems more cosmopolitan. Lamont describes a certain cosmopolitan taste among the Americans: having travelled, learning languages, discovering culinary traditions and widening one's horizons in the quest for self actualization, and argues that 'refinement and cultural sophistication are often equated with European goods and habits' (Lamont, 1992: 107).

In my opinion, the problem is that we don't have a distinctive Chilean culture, everything is about going to McDonald's, 'the shopping centres' (in English in the original) and not the 'centros comerciales' (shopping centres)

MLM: And would you find it better if it was more 'European' instead?

I would find it superb! (laughs), what a nightmare, I'm such a snob! Well, anyway, Europe is a different thing, the Europeans do well and know how to live well, they not only work, but know when to stop, they have a coffee and chat, they have good taste . . . I guess that it is clear that we should be imitating Europe instead, they do have culture (Pamela).

While European taste is related to both 'material culture' (historic sites, architecture, etc), but also the more living culture in terms of sophisticated

lifestyles, US tastes seem to be associated with a ‘corruption’ of national culture, in the sense that it introduces a new and modern taste that is mostly related to consumption and consumerism as a form of emergent low culture:

I am critical of the gringo taste, I'm also a bit progressive, in fact I'm quite unusual for someone living here, I'm both traditional and progressive . . . the problem is that we imitate too much the gringo style, we are not really in favour of our traditions, our culture (Pamela)

In this sense, it is interesting how there is a clear distinction within the understanding of popular culture. On the one hand, popular culture is referred to as ‘our traditions’ or ‘our national culture’, and it is exemplified in terms of folkloric traditions (cuisine, music, etc). On the other hand, popular culture also involves referring to certain consumption practices, and it is in this sense, that US taste seems more ‘dangerous’ in its potential for pervading a supposedly distinctive Chilean culture.

Despite the fact that European taste is associated with a more mature and legitimate culture, it is also true that there is a tension between being ‘intellectual’ or ‘trendy’ and being ‘authentic’ or true to one’s origins. These findings confirm that the authenticity/artificiality distinction is not inherently hierarchical. Instead, it mainly works on Bourdieu’s second axis of horizontal differentiation. This distinction does not refer to high and low culture, but rather, for example, ‘intellectual’ versus ‘ordinary’.

My argument has been that in order to critically engage with debates about the scope for horizontal differentiation of taste, it is necessary to explore how tensions between cultural and moral boundaries work in defining how individualization strategies such as trendy-ness, intellectualism and arrivism are under enquiry. In other words, although I concur with the view that horizontal differentiation is increasingly more possible – and the ‘intellectual versus ordinary’ distinction is an example of that – I want to argue that the profundity and direction with which debates about individualization of taste have been heading are restrictive.

Indeed, these findings show that although people value individuality, individualisation can be under social/collective scrutiny. Those who are ‘individualised’ can be questioned in moral terms as being ‘artificial’ or fake. In other words, the authentic/artificial distinction helps to place individualisation processes in a social register, as in the case of intellectualism, trendy-ness and arrivism.

Conclusions

My argument in the conclusions of this paper regards the ways in which the tensions between different versions of authenticity (being true to oneself or one’s origins) allows us to understand more fully how people value individu-

ality and distinctiveness. Indeed, the importance of self direction and projects of the self should be placed in social and ethical registers. In this sense, I have attempted to offer a critique of theories of individualisation, but also a corrective to Bourdieu's ideas of mismatch vis-à-vis authenticity claims.

If we accept that the ideal of authenticity is similar to Bauman's understanding of individualisation, *as a fate not a choice*, we accept that contemporary selves might be compelled to be themselves. This is important for understanding the ways in which class identities work in a neoliberal age. It has been argued that identities in general are increasingly more individualized and reflexive, and in particular that class identities involve, paradoxically, claims of ordinariness but also distinctiveness. Notwithstanding that, however, not enough attention has been paid to the tensions between versions of authenticity that allow (or not) for increasing individualisation and more reflexivity. More importantly, tensions between versions of authenticity that involve more self fashioning and others that stress continuity with origins have not been considered.

In my study of the Chilean middle class I found that these two conflicting versions of authenticity operate as ways of establishing boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. The interest in focusing on authenticity claims reveals a tension which has been described as crucial for understanding how identity construction works in late capitalism, reflexive modernization or – why not – the neoliberal age. This is the tension between different ways of being authentic or being oneself: to be true to one's origins or to be true to oneself. This tension between a more essentialist version and a more self-fashioning one is at the heart of the conflicting but relational identities that I found in my research on the Chilean middle class. For example, questions of ordinariness versus distinctiveness or naturalness versus artificiality, pretentiousness (versus 'being real'), cosmopolitanism, and so on. In other words, these are all conflicting ways of perceiving individualized and collective class identities.

However authenticity claims do not stop there. Just as some versions of authenticity question self-fashioned projects through discourses of anti-intellectualism or anti-cosmopolitanism, there are others that stress the need to be oneself and to be true to oneself. For example, I have shown how authenticity is also a strong critique of acting out of false motives such as pretentiousness; it is part of a discourse of refinement versus authenticity. These notions of authenticity show some of the ways in which individualisation can be under social/collective scrutiny. Those 'individualised' can be questioned in moral terms as being 'artificial' or fake. And in this sense reflexivity is in fact about more 'social competence' or cultural capital and about the chances of being more individualised, but it is also about social scrutiny through the rhetoric of authenticity.

This article has called for more focus on placing individualization processes on ethical registers as they could be in tension with various ways of understanding authenticity: being true to oneself or being true to one's origins. In doing so, I have argued that an inclusive middle class identity may be hiding tensions between different trajectories, identities, projects of the self and ver-

sions of authenticity. Although the fact that 'everybody' is claiming a middle class identity in Chile may appear as paradoxical with claims about distinctiveness of personal trajectories. This is consistent with arguing that people do try to stress that they are not 'one of the herd'. In other words, that people actually value individuality, but not strictly as individualisation theorists such as Beck and Giddens suggest, which only allows them to offer a more superficial reading of the self. Class identities in a neoliberal age are in fact ambivalent. I have found in my research that people may appear to be contradictory because they emphasise their particular and distinctive trajectories, and at the same time claim authenticity and ordinariness.

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Received 22 August 2007
Finally accepted 29 January 2008

Notes

- 1 This paper is partly a result of the research project '¿Qué significa hoy ser de clase media? Estructuras, Identidades y Representación en la Estratificación Social Chilena' ('What is it to be Middle Class in Chile today? Structures, Identities and Representations in the Chilean Social Structure'), financed by the National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research, CONICYT (Award Number FONDECYT 1060225). I am very grateful to my research group for their generous discussions.
- 2 In the case of my interviewees, the notion of trajectory becomes of interest because it allows people to 'escape' from the traditional class categories in favour of more complex ways of giving account of their biographies. Indeed, from a traditional social mobility point of view, people would only be able to place themselves in relation to a vertical axis whereas in the case of trajectories they are able to stress their distinctive routes and this also helps to illuminate how other aspects of identity come into play.
- 3 The Chicago boys were a group of 30 Chileans who had studied economics at the University of Chicago between 1955 and 1963. During the course of their postgraduate studies they had become disciples of Milton Friedman, and had returned to Chile completely indoctrinated in free market theory. By the end of 1974, they had risen to positions of power in the Pinochet regime, controlling most of its offices for economic planning.
- 4 This is according to different studies carried out over the past years in Chile (Wormald and Torche, 2004; Espinoza, 2002)
- 5 My sampling was non-probabilistic as I was not interested in capturing the representativeness of all possible variations, but to gain a deeper understanding of this particular case in order to develop a more accurate conceptual framework to give account of socio-cultural change in Chile. At the same time, I cannot claim that my findings and reflections can be generalised to other contexts, not even for the whole of Chilean society. I chose to conduct interviews with people aged between 30 and 50 years old, 18 of them were women and 15 men. Most of the interviewees were professionals (with a university degree) except for two of them. In gross terms, they are all engaged in occupations related to the service economy and in that sense I tried to include people in middle range occupations of the service class as well as some that occupied high posts (mostly directors). I tried to keep a balance between professionals that had studied humanities and science careers.

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