Middle Class Identities in a Neoliberal age: 
tensions between contested authenticities

María-Luisa Méndez L.
Universidad Diego Portales

Abstract

The paper seeks to explore via in-depth interviews aspects of middle class identity in a neoliberal age, taking the case of Chile’s rapid and stark transition to a neo-liberal economic model, imposed by a dictatorship but later reproduced during democracy. The paper reveals that there are no challenges to middle class identities, (e.g. from the working class, or from peasants). In this respect, these are neo-liberal middle class identities in that the dominance of the market is the precondition of their way of thinking. Informed by Bourdieu’s views on class identities, this article emphasises on the horizontal, non-hierarchical nature of contemporary class taste, which makes a contribution to debates on stratification and culture and settles accounts with older class theory which sees contests between popular and the middle classes. Finally, this article 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 being to origins.

Introduction

The last decades have witnessed all sorts of different 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 in accounting 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 tend to lose their explanatory potential. On 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 transformations 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

1 This paper is partly a result of the research project ‘¿Qué significa hoy ser de clase media? Estructuras, Identidades y Representacion en la Estratificacion 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 greatful to my research group for their generous discussions.
uncertainty, identities become reflexive, in other words, depend more of the decision of the individuals. Thus, identity and class solidarities increasingly become weaker (Beck, 1992).

Indeed, these and other debates have questioned the extent to which the relation between class position and identity can be assumed straightforwardly considering changes such as the transition to a service economy, the decline of collective identities, etc. In the article *Ordinary, ambivalent and defensive: Class identities in the Northwest of England*, Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst (2001), acknowledge that the perspectives that regard the study of class as outdated may offer arguments that are worth to be considered, particularly in relation to the dissolution of collective class identities. However, they also stress, the debate should not be considered closed. It is argued that more emphasis should be put on the ambivalent nature of contemporary class identities in that people are ‘more hesitant in placing themselves in classes than they are about talking class as a social and political issue. Most people wish to see themselves as 'outside' classes. Even so, class is a marker by which people relate their life histories, and most people are aware of class terminology’ (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2001: 1).

In a recent issue of the journal *Sociology* a group of British academics discuss about ‘the salience of class’. This issue on *Culture, Identity and Class* (Volume 39, Number 5, December 2005) was thought to reflect on the ways in which the cultural turn has influenced new developments on class analysis and the problematization of class identity vis-à-vis processes of individualisation. In gross 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. It is also suggested by most of the perspectives in this issue that class should be seen in coded, implicit and relational terms. They acknowledge as well processes of dis-identification of class, in other words that class does not work as in the past as a fundamental part of people’s and groups identities. As argued by Bottero, these theories of dis-identification of class ‘argue that hierarchical position 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, 2005:993).

In this sense, the case of Chile seems interesting as it 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 is not involved in applying public policies that may correct the effects of inequalities, and the liberal democratic including model, which although 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 of the benefits of economic growth. These are both liberal models because they stress the importance of the market and openness to 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. The State under dictatorship put forward the functioning of the market as the central mechanism that provided 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 individual wellbeing of each family through negotiating their chances with the market? Traditional sociological frameworks on stratification and social mobility in Latin America and Chile (Filgueira and Genelatti, 1981; CEPAL/ECLAC, 1989, 2000, Portes, 1987, 2003, among others) have attempted to describe the context in which these changes have occurred and their impact in terms of class formations. Nonetheless, these frameworks are less culturally sensitive. On the other hand, social commentary on cultural change in Chile (UNDP, 1998, UNDP, 2002; Tironi, 2000; Moulian, 1997; Halpern, 2002; Larraín, 2001) indicates the salience of this process of change, but these diverse perspectives have only partially focused on matters such as the rise of consumerism, individualisation and malaise in an 'either or’ for which so far has not been enough to build a more critical perspective about the ways in which these ‘cultural changes’ are linked to the reproduction of inequalities.

I am particularly interested in middle class identities in Chile because they offer a paradox: more that 80% of people in Chile prefer to see themselves as middle class. From an ‘objective’ point of view -although Chile has been economically stable- the middle classes did not grow this much over the past three decades, as suggested by the subjective perceptions. Indeed, there is agreement among the studies on stratification that –both in terms of income and occupation- the Chilean middle class is no more that 45% of the population.

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) between the early seventies and late eighties. Their program included the privatisation of welfare and social programs (health, education and most notably, the pension system), the deregulation of the market, the liberalization 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, the extensive middle class identity currently found in Chile can be interpreted as another sign of the dis-identification of class as this class identity allows for avoiding the conflicting connotations of traditional class identities.

Differently from traditional frameworks on class identities, which emphasize the tensions between working class identities versus middle class identities, which is also implicitly and explicitly found in current accounts, this article will be devoted to specifically address the question about how class identities work in a neoliberal age and will precisely show how

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2 This is according to different studies carried out over the past years in Chile (Wormald and Torche, 2004; Espinoza, 2002)

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.
these neoliberal class identities do not necessarily work in the terms suggested by those frameworks. In fact, these middle class identities differentiate from each other in the terms suggested by Bourdieu’s ideas on the horizontal mechanisms of differentiation. Bourdieu’s notion of social space is an attempt to break with a linear model to social class in favour of a relational approach that considers all the pertinent properties, such as the volume and composition of capital, of sex, age, social origin, ethnic origin, income, educational level etc. In this sense, Bourdieu offers a three dimensional space defined by three elements: the overall volume of capitals, the composition of capitals, and the change of two properties over time: the trajectory. Those trajectories are not random, but according to the given 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 they also allow to argue that agents are not only defined by the properties they have at a particular given time, but also by their trajectories. Notwithstanding this, it is significant that while horizontal differentiation is considered a major contribution, most of the work done in relation to class identities still favours the emphasis on the tensions between working and middle class identities. 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.

This paper is concerned with exploring how class in identity construction is related to notions of authenticity/artificiality or ordinariness. According to Savage (2005), the 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 not guided by the need for social distinction: ‘To define groups in terms of cultural taste, or lifestyle would contaminate the human with the social, raising issues about whether there are morally better ways to live. Invoking money allows you to recognize social difference without overtly talking about different kinds of people’ and therefore ‘because class raises issues about individual authenticity rather that about classifying occupational divisions, snobbery becomes a major concern’ (Savage, 2005:920). Indeed, Savage argues that the rhetoric of authenticity or ordinariness is used to put distance from upper class taste or snobbery tastes 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’. On the contrary, Payne asserts that ‘references to ‘normalness’ or ‘ordinariness’ should be interpreted as rhetorical attempts to establish working or middle class identities’ (Payne, 2005: 904)

My impression is that this corrective only makes it clearer that there is a tension between authenticity and artificiality in identity construction, and particularly class identity, and my attempt in this paper is to extensively discuss these views. The main argument goes along similar lines to those suggested by Savage et al. and Payne in that people try to stress their

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4 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 put 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 illuminating how other aspects of identity come into play.
own identities as reflecting particular trajectories which allows them to claim certain 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. Nor they appear as completely individualised, not at least in Beck’s and Giddens’ terms. My interviewees show accounts of people that want to stress distinctiveness in complex ways. I will argue that class identities are not expressed in collective ways, but rather they talk about different kinds of individualised and mobile identities (although not exactly as proposed by reflexive modernisation theory).

Notwithstanding this, however, little attention has been put on issues of authenticity involved and the tensions around conflicting versions of what authenticity means for people in different positions. As argued previously, issues of authenticity/normalness versus artificiality/pretentiousness have been mostly referred to this tension between MC and WC identity. My research looks at the tensions between various MC identities, mobile identities with different trajectories in which we find a wider scope of tensions between what it actually means to be authentic, and it confirms that class identity in a neoliberal age is in fact ambivalent.

The findings: different ‘uses’ of class identity

This paper is based on a research on the Chilean middle class, in which I conducted 33 in depth interviews with people from different areas of Santiago, who could currently be described ‘objectively’ as middle-middle class and upper middle class. 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 frame 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 the 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, these are all 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 balance between professionals that had studied humanities and sciences careers. My interest was to include people with upward, horizontal and downward mobility trajectories in order to explore how middle class identity is shaped in one’s own biography. I was also interested in people’s residential trajectories in order to also explore issues of mobility and belonging. This biographical approach, and in particular life stories as a method have been used as a way of providing an account of the ways in which a person experiences the social. In that sense, it is thought to be an adequate way of exploring how an individual negotiates his or her social context and conditions of existence. Thus, this approach permits to give account of both the material/objective dimensions of social life as well as the symbolic dimensions of it, while allowing for a useful way of exploring individual experiences of structural processes.

I found in fact 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 that class
identities work in unobvious ways, and differently from those collective/traditional fashions in which they are stated more explicitly.

Among my interviewees, there are five people that 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?
I don’t identify myself with any class, I am what I am, Gina. It is people that put you into categories and tend to give you names. People tend to put you into scales
MLM: But do you think that class is a valid category or not?
It is people that make that classification... (Gina)

There is a second group of people that are –on the contrary- quite explicit in stating that class origins 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. People in this group also stress other differences such as being ‘worldlier’, having more cultural capital or getting to know more people, so therefore being reflexive about origins and embodying mobile trajectories work together.

‘I get along with everybody, and I think that it is due to the fact that I’ve never denied my origins’ (Claudia)

‘For me the habitat if you like hasn’t changed, I’m still the same person’ (Cristian)

‘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 Muñoz)

‘People love appearances, and I have colleagues at work that are like that, those that managed to study at the university are so arrogant and forget their roots... I can’t stand that, not because you have a professional career you have to forget where you come from, or the fact that some of them are just about to learn how to say a sentence on a row when they feel that they can go shopping and look at people in dismissive ways... when you know that they used to be a group of pathetic losers’ (Cristian)

Notwithstanding being proud of origins, even if class background is strongly emphasised this does not entail a collective class identity. This is particularly interesting if one thinks of how a working class background is being presented as something to be proud of, but not necessarily involving a collective class identity as such.
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 don’t see it as something too 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. It just doesn’t seem to be meaningful or they just don’t think in those terms.

‘My dad was always an employee, working in a private company, very stable trajectory and my mum was at home with us... we were not too different from the common of the people’ (Isabel)

‘I studied at LMS school, lived close to the school in a very quiet area where most people were professionals who had children the same age as us... so, you had similar people living all close to the school, and you knew everybody, we had loads of friends... I wouldn’t know what else to say... we were all equal’ (Alejandra)

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 act necessarily guided by a need for social distinction. This need for distinction entails an attempt to be in a different position from that where ‘one belongs to’ or from ‘one’s place’, so it is therefore seeing 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 to 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. On the one hand, middle class identity provides enough ambiguity not to address to class in an overt way, and on the other, it allows for more mobile and less collective/traditional identities to given account of. On the other hand, this proves the importance of incorporating a more complex understanding of how authenticity claims are involved in class identity.

**Taste, authenticity and artificiality**

In previous parts of this paper I have stressed on the importance of exploring the horizontal nature of contemporary class taste. In other words, to explore the ways in which middle class identities differentiate from each other horizontally rather than vertically. In order to fully understand how this process of differentiation works it is necessary to investigate how authenticity claims operate. Within the different ways in which authenticity claims work, we find that the **authentic versus the artificial** distinction is a relatively frequent.

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. In particular, in my research, issues of authenticity versus artificiality are ways of establishing difference but are expressed as boundaries of 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 socioeconomic 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 establishing differences with other groups in relation to money and manners rather than focusing on culture as the French upper middle class does.

On a similar line of research, 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 exclusive 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 and 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 study, there is strong emphasis within different middle class identities that allude to senses of personal honesty and ‘antiphonyism’ (Southerton, 2002), which also comes across as being ordinary people or authentic people.

Authentic versus Artificial: against intellectualism, consumerism and arrivism

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). I found difficult to ask people about their tastes and they didn’t talk overtly about their cultural practices, unless the discussion was approached by referring to leisure activities and the like. But this use of authenticity as a way of judging taste, instead of contesting the hegemonic nature of taste, tends to reproduce a certain hierarchy without appealing to cultural boundaries.

In relation to the different ways of judging a particular taste, Lamont (1992) asserts that there are times in which cultural standards—which are at the core of the definition of taste—are questioned, but 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 has to do with avoiding ‘posing’ and being too different to the extent of denying the ‘origins’ (ethnic, class, national culture, etc). This is mostly related to intellectualism and being ‘trendy’, but also to being a ‘social climber’ For others, it has to do with being able to resist and fight homogenization and consumerism. This will be discussed in the next section. These notions of authenticity show some of the ways in which individualisation can be under social/collective scrutiny.

For example, Lamont (1992) in her study of the American and French upper middle class finds that the Americans are much more reluctant than the French to establish class boundaries on the basis on 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 hierarchization 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’ (Bourdieu, 2003: 125). Instead, values of friendliness, conflict avoidance, and cultural egalitarianism would reinforce the marginalization 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.

**Anti-intellectualism- anti trendy**

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’. For example, the following interviewee’s rejection to a 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 spending $2.000 on a coffee... besides, we never even look at the expositions and the pictures that are being shown’ (Marcia)

In this sense, Lamont also argues that anti-intellectualism -as well as implying ‘being down to earth and a regular person’, also involves having a pragmatic view of the role of education. In the case of her interviews, education is strongly emphasised for financial reasons, because of credentials and the chance of gaining access to a desirable lifestyle. In the case of my interviews, this is also the case, but there is also the need to stress that being ‘cultivated’ goes beyond of just having credentials, because it involves having certain
manners, but it is also different from being intellectually arrogant as it allows people to be authentic.

There are other critiques to the ‘intellectual/alternative’ taste which reflects how demanding is this kind of taste, in terms of manners, ways of talking, dressing and taking care of the body:

‘well, I’m not an intellectualoid but I don’t feel discriminated when I go to these places, because it is quite varied, there are in fact quite a few ‘intellectualoid’ places, but there are others that are different also’ (Claudia)

‘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 in terms of they ways people dress and how they talk... the kind of taste in relation to clothing and also the kind of places where you go for a coffee or a drink, for example, the intellectuals can and actually go to the most unknown and even decadent Peruvian restaurants as a way of saying ‘here we are the intellectuals, but we interact with the diversity, we open new spaces or make others more ‘cultural’... and regarding the way of dressing, well it also involves the colours that you use, or in the case of women, how they use their hair, the kind of earrings they use MLM: and in relation to the hair colour, which colour would be consider of bad taste for them?
Well, the artificial blonde is really a bad idea, probably the worst... you can dye your hair, but not blonde, and also the handmade earrings, or more ‘ethnic’ are also a bad idea, anything handmade, even these ethnic sweaters, for example XX would never wear such things’ (Paloma)

MLM: and among women, the idea of being thin, does it matter?
Of course, especially having so many gay friends, the look is very important, I have many gay friends and they would tell me, ‘you look ugly today’ or ‘you look a bit fat’, in any case, big girls are discriminated... but among the intellectual women it is not a matter of going to the gym to be thin, it is rather being thin because you are neurotic, but among gays, they love going to the gym’ (Paloma)

Another perspective to look at the distinction between authentic and artificial refers to the critique of trendy taste. As the matter of fact, the area in the city centre where I did my interviews has become one of the most fashionable areas over the past years. The next interviewee, while stating that he is exploring the new age world, he also wants to make sure that his taste is not confused with a trendy one, as if the latter lacked of authenticity and was about images:

‘I haven’t left this world, in this new path that I’m discovering I’m trying to recover also things that I left in the past and trying to integrate things, but I don’t do things because it is 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 perspective, 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, the European and the US taste are the most frequent. The distinction here shows how people tend to associate the former with a more mature, old 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, it is of good taste to prefer Europe rather than the US for many people. 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 the Mc Donald’s, the shopping centres (in English 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)

MLM: And why would you like to travel to Europe?
Ah, because of the historic sites, in fact, I’m not that fond of modernity
MLM: And what kind of countries or places do you see as too modern for you, or you don’t like?
United States, I’d never want to go there, I don’t like the lifestyle either, it doesn’t fit into our lifestyle’ (Gina)

The US taste seems 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 as probably a form of 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. For example, a friend of mine at the university asked me once if I had beans at home, and I said ‘of course, beans and also lentils, they are delicious!’ she replied, ‘how do you do it?’ She didn’t eat beans at her house because they didn’t like our traditional cuisine’(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 as of ‘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 on this sense, that the US taste seems more ‘dangerous’ as a way of pervading a supposedly distinctive Chilean culture.

On the other hand, the European taste is related to both the ‘material culture’ (historic sites, architecture, etc), but also the more living culture in terms of lifestyles:

‘Where I live, the houses are quite old, I don’t know how old and have a quite distinctive architecture, kind of French architecture. These houses are not too big but narrow and long (...) Fortunately, I’ve been able to travel and these kind of houses you can find them in a neighbourhood in Paris, the same kind of houses’ (Ariel)

The taste for the European aesthetics is usually associated with old and historic buildings in the City Centre:

‘Well, the majority if not all the adverts that want to look European are filmed here (City Centre), in the Calle Londres (London rd) or the Calle Paris (Paris Rd), just behind the cathedral... So, well, I think that it has something to do with adhering with a certain kind of lifestyle, more European, but most of all, in my opinion, it is about recovering the old areas of the city in order to do new stuff, recognising ourselves in the space in order to create new stuff’ (Cristian)

‘Although I think that most of the old building have not been kept well enough, there are still very interesting areas in the city centre, and it has been revitalised quite a lot, in the area of Lastarrea and Londres or Paris, or the barrio Brasil’ (Juan Jose)

And it also refers to cultural practices:

‘it was so exciting to find a group of musicians playing the accordion in the Metro in Paris, it was as if I was in a film, especially for me that I’m fond of films, so it was like being in one of those films, I loved the experience’ (Ariel)

‘Well, naturally here there is a more European style (City Centre), for a very simple reason, because the high bourgeoisie of the early century used to live here, so clearly now La Dehesa seems more ‘Americanised’ and in fact most of the ‘americanisation’ of Chile occurred during the 40s, basically with the creation of areas such as Providencia, for example, the concept of the actual house, with garden all of the things that we relate to the US, but in fact that architecture came from France, in other words, the idea of having houses with garden came from France, where it was created for workers to have a better quality of life, and here (Chile) it went through a process of ‘Americanisation’ (Carlos)

For some interviewees, the city of Buenos Aires works as a reference of a certain European taste:
(In relation to people in Buenos Aires) ‘they are more cultivated, and that’s amazing and the fact that they have cafes opened until three o’clock in the morning, you can have a nice coffee, they don’t have this strong thing about alcohol as it is in here (Chile).... they have a café culture, which also helps you relaxing and escaping form the logic of achievement. People there in Buenos Aires get together to chat, not to get drunk, that’s very unlikely... so, it doesn’t matter if it is late at night, even if you have insomnia, you can always go to Corrientes (area of Buenos Aires) and have a nice coffee’ (Paloma)

‘Well, first of all I have the impression that we won’t be able to talk about Santiago in general, but about the areas that I know. I have the impression that the areas where we usually move are quite ‘Yankees’, well I have to the US a couple of times after I lived there for a while, and what I think is that these house with front and back yard, with grass are more similar to the gringo houses, I have the impression that the area where we usually move has become much more ‘yankeeised’ and it clearly has nothing to do with a European city, nothing... Buenos Aires is a different case, Buenos Aires is quite a European city, don’t you think?’ (...) Well, but on the other hand, that area of the city centre, the old area... I’m not sure if you know but from all that area people started moving to the barrio alto. When I was studying at the Villa Maria School many of my friends were living in that area, although the school was over here (current barrio alto), the family of my husband used to have a house and live in the barrio Brasil, so in other words, the people in brackets that ‘moved’ to the barrio alto, many of them came from that area which was at the time the posh area if you like’ (Soledad)

These findings confirm that the authenticity vs artificiality distinction is not inherently hierarchical. Instead, it greatly works on the 2nd axis described by Bourdieu of horizontal differentiation. This distinction is not referring to high and low culture, but rather, for example, intellectuals vs ‘ordinary’ or some such. Finally, these notions of authenticity also show that although people value individuality, individualisation can be under social/collective scrutiny. Those ‘individualised’ can be questioned in moral terms as being ‘artificial’ or fake. In other words, the authentic/artificial distinction helps placing individualisation processes in a social register.

Conclusions
The literature on authenticity suggests that modern selves are compelled to be themselves and therefore authenticity could not be seen as a trivial desire, but as an actual moral ideal or discourse (claims). In other words, 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, 1994; Sayers, 1999; Anton, 2001; Ferrara, 2002 and Förnas, 1995, among others) are of the same mind in that individuals are currently compelled to be themselves. In other words, authenticity is a mandate in identity construction. There is agreement in stating that the quest for authenticity should not be seen as vain or a degrading expression of loss. For example, Taylor (1994) states that 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, they 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 obligated 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 work as referents, even in internal dialogues (Archer, 2003).

My argument towards the conclusions of this paper is about 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 individuality 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, and we accept that contemporary selves might be compelled to be themselves, it is also possible to explore the ways in which malaise and mismatch appear vis-à-vis debates of individualisation and increasing reflexivity. In other words, how they appears as rhetorics of authenticity.

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 that increasing individualisation and more reflexivity. More importantly, tensions between versions of authenticity that involve more self fashioning and others that stress continuities with origins, have not been considered.

In my study about 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- 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.

But authenticity claims do not stop there. Just as some versions of authenticity question projects of self-fashioning through discourses of anti-intellectualism or anti-cosmopolitanism, there are others that stress the need to be themselves and true to themselves. For example, I have showed how authenticity is also a strong critique to acting out of false motives such as pretentiousness, as 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 rhetorics of authenticity.

This research has shown how there is an inclusive middle class identity, which may be hiding tensions between different trajectories, identities, projects of the self and versions of authenticity. Although the fact that ‘everybody’ is claiming a middle class identity in Chile may appear as paradoxical with claims of distinctiveness of personal trajectories, this is coherent 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 as being contradictory because they emphasise their particular and distinctive trajectories, and at the same time claim for authenticity as ordinariness.

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