



# The short life of the new middle classes in Portugal

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## Abstract

**This article is based on research addressing the process of consumption as a cultural practice, i.e., the goods and services consumed are equated in terms of their re-socialization by social actors. The research scope covered 24 households from Portugal's urban middle class, and the methodology involved long interviews and ethnography. This text explains some consumption practices and correlative cultural expressions of the new Portuguese middle classes, which confirms their very recent expansion, as well as their undeniable weakness, particularly financial. The strong tendency of this social segment for the simply *remediado* (person or family in average, modest, financial situation, just enough for their needs), together with the current financial crisis, point to a rather short life for Portugal's new middle classes.**

**Keywords:** Anthropology of consumption; new middle classes; 'crisis'; Portugal.

## INTRODUCTION

This text is based on research that approaches the process of consumption as a cultural practice, i.e. the goods and services consumed are equated in terms of their re-socialization by the social actors. The social actors in the research sample considered were members of 24 households, assembled because they can all be grouped in a common pre-defined category of 'middle class'. The self-imposed access to specific consumers, considering them in their regular consumption practices and locating them in their family contexts, was satisfied by adopting a clearly qualitative methodological device based on long interviews and ethnography with those Portuguese middle class households. (The following are major outputs arising from the research in question: (2009), *Experiências de Consumo. Estudos de Caso no Interior da Classe Média* [Consumption experiences. Case studies inside the middle class]; and (2011), *O Consumo para os Outros. Os Presentes como Linguagem de Sociabilidade* [Consumption for others. Gifts as a language of sociability].)

Before describing the methodology adopted and the social profile of the households interviewed, we have to consider (within the constraints imposed for the size of this article) the history of the theoretical treatment of the concept of middle class. It has been a matter of controversy from the start, because Marx and Weber, the

two founders of the sociology of social classes and stratification, view it in opposite ways. Marx gives absolute centrality to the sphere of the relations of production and, therefore, emphasizes the polarization of the classes by opposing capital and labour, i.e. the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. As a result, the intermediate strata of the social structure are perceived as doomed to vanish by the logic of concentration of capital, being viewed mainly as supporting the interests of the ruling class, while very little attention is paid to them. Marx saw the presence of a large middle class as the negation of his argument of two antagonistic social classes. Weber, however, also considers the existence of a relational structure of values and behaviours materialized through status groups. As a result, he not only recognizes the existence of the middle class but he also gives prominence to social mobility, both upward and downward, which is key to analysing the practices and representations of its members. This initial discord and the respective theoretical legacies led to the emergence of the two main currents of the sociology of social classes - Marxism and Weberianism - whose disputes about the phenomenon of the middle class were to last for the entire twentieth century.

As a rule, Marxists see the notion of a middle class more as a problem than as a solution and avoid the term

(Aguiar, 2010), accepting, if anything, the description 'intermediate categories' of the stratification (Another option is to use the expression "the so-called middle class" through which Marxists try to convey that they still do not subscribe to the idea that there is one.). In their critique of capitalism, they neglected as long as they could the sociological meaning of social mobility and the new socio-professional wage-earners, but the new social reality emerging in Europe from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century eventually required the expansion of the notion of middle class: 'even those who denied its existence as a class were forced to acknowledge this issue of sociological reflection as an important contribution to the understanding of industrial societies and their transformation.' (Estanque, 2012a: 111). The increased purchasing power of workers and the triumph of the welfare state in Europe, the proliferation of new professional groups linked to services and high levels of qualification and the significant increase of new salaried sectors embody a new social reality that requires the construction of new theoretical tools to understand the phenomenon of social mobility. From the Marxists there came studies which drew on complex conceptual development and unprecedented methodological sophistication, for the first time combining theoretical thinking and empirical analysis of actual social realities (Estanque, 2012b) (Examples of this output are: Althusser (et al., 1965); Poulantzas (1975); Wright (1985).). Beyond their specificities, these studies are even more united by the recurring critical approach to social mobility (generally subscribing to what is known as the Theory of Reproduction - (The Theory of Reproduction was proposed by Bourdieu & Passeron (1970) for the cross-comparison of formal education and social mobility. The emphasis was on the reproductive capacity of the educational system as a medium for spreading the dominant culture, which would lead to the reproduction of the established social system, with the educated - even those not from the bourgeoisie - joining and by the negative perception of the middle class. Seen as a factor to reduce the power and demands of the workers, the middle class is characterized by a number of rather unflattering qualities: compliant, individualistic, careerist, consumerist. Around the same time, however, studies appeared that substantiated theoretical combinations and overcame the old oppositions: 'some of the most interesting contributions to the understanding of the phenomenon of the middle class in industrial societies come from thinkers whose process was guided to a link between (...) Marxism and Weberianism' (Estanque, 2012a: 118). Basically, they reflect the need to address the distribution of various kinds of resources – economic, but also of social capital and education – and pay more heed to the symbolic and ideological dimensions (Parkin, 1971 and 1979; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). That is to say, although they recognize that work and the economic sphere produce

constraints for the social actors, at the same time they recognize, too, that the construction of their identities, subjectivities and values is by no means automatic. Actors can be seen as occupying particular positions in the social structure, but their actions, choices and representations cannot be forecast automatically, given this structural positioning. The values and representations of the middle class are neither immutable, nor do they reflect any essence intrinsic to it. Social relations and conflicts need to be seen in more plural terms, with greater attention being paid to their political and symbolic dimensions.

As P. Bourdieu (1972), M. Burawoy (1979) and A. Giddens (1984) would say, though social reality can only be fully grasped with the help of theory, this only matters insofar as it can reveal and provide meaning to social practice. Faced with the undeniable trend of upward social mobility observed in industrialized societies, especially in Europe since the 1960s, the basic principle of 'theory of practice' advises and requires the broad rethinking of the phenomenon of the middle class. Its undisputed growth means that the issue is now at the core of contemporary sociology, while also highlighting the inadequacy of continuing to try and explain today's capitalist society through a bipolar system of classes. In the wake of this theoretical reorientation, studies have appeared that try to access the symbolic and ideological dimensions of the life of the new middle class by considering its consumption choices and practices (In a terminology kept close to the Marxist legacy, these non-economic aspects are designated as "subjective dimensions", as opposed to the "objective dimension" of "class positioning"). The best known (and renowned) study is without doubt *La Distinction*, by P. Bourdieu in 1979, in which one of the things he advocates in relation to the 'consumption of cultural goods', is that the social categories on the rise adopt the typical attitude of copying the habits of the elite, i.e. the 'cultural goodwill' of the middle class. A better example of such revision of approaches is the study carried out by the team led by M. Savage (et al., 2008) on British society, whose structure and social stratification is presented via a model composed of three main classes (upper, middle and working). Here, the middle class is seen as embracing nearly a third of the population and comprising an amalgam of a range of social and occupational categories with many wage-earners (Note that, simply for linguistic convenience the term "middle class" is used - and has been used in this article - in the singular. It is established at the outset of all the controversy that the middle class internally comprises a number of subdivisions, recognizing that these have increased with the appearance of the new middle classes.). The study set out to clarify and understand the relations 'between belonging to a social class and cultural participation' (Savage et al., 2008: 1049). It is concluded that there are a culture and a *habitus* that typify the middle class, since,

in addition to the diversity of occupations, particularly in services, what unites members of the middle class are their everyday consumption and cultural practices. In other words, their identity is constructed at the symbolic and cultural level.

Finally, it must be mentioned that in the context of analysis of the movements of the sixties, the middle class was seen for the first time in terms of its active and transforming role. Such analyses establish a clear connection between the student movements of the 1960s and this social class, heralding the approach of what is known as 'middle-class radicalism' (Parkin, 1968; Crossley, 2003; Barker, 2008). However, in the last two decades, but particularly at the beginning of the 21st century, the middle class and social mobility gained added significance as a topic of reflection for very different reasons. Upward social mobility suffers clear setbacks while the conditions of stability and security of the middle class appear strongly threatened. The decline of the welfare state, changes in the labour field with the advance of Toyotism and, finally, the 'financial crisis' are producing devastating effects. The traditional heterogeneity of the middle class is now amplified, and there is widening gap between its lower segments and those at the top which form a minority. Segments that had previously achieved comfortable and supposedly stable positions are touched by growing instability and generalized insecurity while the minority at the top are becoming consolidated, enjoying purchasing power and influence that are beyond compare with those of the other segments (Esping-Andersen, 1993).

The purpose of the explanation in the preceding paragraphs was to provide an overview of the approaches (and controversies) relating to the middle class thus allowing the main lines of its problematization to be identified. Now that this has been done it will be easier to grasp the guidelines of the research. First I must mention the distance relative to the Marxist approach, not only because I recognize the existence of the middle class as such but also because the economic and professional sphere has not been chosen as the central space of analysis.

The intention was not to discuss the 'class positioning' of a group of actors, nor was to consider the effects of it on their identities and values. Recognizing their position as members of the new middle classes, the intention was to try to understand their values and representations by considering their consumption options and practices. Secondly, I have to mention the connection to the anthropology of consumption (McCracken, 1988; Miller, 1987 and 1998), meaning that it is the consumption process of the actors that has gained centrality in terms of analysis and that this process of consumption is seen as a cultural practice, i.e. as a process of assignment of meanings. In other words, and to be more specific: consumption is not limited to any act of purchase, rather it covers all the acts and decisions preceding and

subsequent to the actual purchase; commodities are all the goods and services provided by the market; through the consumption process, social actors remove commodities from impersonal establishments in which they originated and recontextualize them by means of specific appropriations. Viewed as a cultural practice, the process of consumption emerges as a potential medium of expression and communication of social actors by which it is possible to access their value constructions and assignments of meanings.

The research that underpins this article upheld the fundamental idea that commodities (even if mass produced) are inevitably something socialized and, at the same time, its main objective was to demonstrate the plurality of possible appropriations performed on the same commodities. It is with this in mind that the research sample consists of 24 households from the new middle classes. The intention was to show the co-existence of plural processes of appropriation of commodities carried out by social actors who enjoy the greatest possible structural proximity with one another (The intention was not, therefore, to grant the existence of a "middle-class culture" - along the lines of Savage et al., 2008 - nor equate the role of "cultural consumption" as a mechanism of social differentiation or reproduction of dominance - along the lines of Bourdieu, 1979). The successful achievement of these goals, however, made two supplementary analytical developments possible. On the one hand, it allowed access to the subjective experiences of consumption of the informants, abundantly illustrating the possibilities of re-socialization of the commodities. On the other hand, it also provided quite a comprehensive understanding of the values, representations and ambitions operating in the lives of those households from the new Portuguese middle classes.

The relative structural 'unity' of the research sample ensures that it is a medium that can help us to understand the social realignments taking place in Portuguese society and explain some of its peculiarities. In the qualitative characterization of the households that it was possible to achieve what stands out in various ways is the very recent nature of their upward social mobility and the strongly *remediado* tone of their lifestyles. These traits are related to the equally special political and social situation of Portuguese society, where the 1960s did not coincide with the strong growth of the new middle classes as it did in the rest of Europe. At that time, Portugal was a country under a fascist dictatorship, without even the most elementary political freedoms, where technological development, the tertiary sector and educational levels were very low and the building of the welfare state had not yet started. In these circumstances, the salaried middle class was merely residual and any significant flows of upward social mobility were only evident after the political and social revolution of 1974. This factor, while it makes issues such as 'middle class radicalism' irrelevant,

also makes both the weakness associated with the recent character of the social mobility experienced and the instability enhanced by the current context of 'crisis' even more obvious. I believe that this paper can remedy some of disregard that has been voted the phenomenon of the middle class in Portugal, and contribute to the understanding of its particular features.

Finally, there is a third point to be mentioned. This relates to the typology of social stratification chosen as a guide for defining the 'middle class' of the informants. Here the research found key support in the work of the team of Almeida, Costa and Machado (ACM). These are Portuguese sociologists who have been studying the structural dynamics of class formation in Portuguese society since 1980 (Almeida, Machado and Costa, 2006; Costa, Machado and Almeida, 2007). Recognizing the need to address the interrelated fields of occupation, job status and value patterns, the ACM team proposes, (after a series of versions) a model of social stratification comprising five classes: Entrepreneurs and Executives (C1); Professionals and Managers (C2); Self-employed (C3); Routine Employees (C4); and Industrial Workers (C5). The middle class as a whole is perceived as embracing classes C2, C3 and C4 and these sociologists also argue for there being a 'middle class culture' given that cultural and ideological affinities between those three categories can be seen. Taking the output of the ACM team as a reference, the research established a group of 24 households as its empirical sample. They were chosen because their members belong to the middle class according to the classification adopted, and they meet the additional condition that they keep a clear link with the urban setting, in terms of where they live and their lifestyle.

The intention was to constitute an exclusively urban 'middle class' so as to enhance access to households of the new, predominantly urban, middle classes (Systematization of data on the households in the research sample can be found in Duarte (2009: 102-103). Making use of terminology of Almeida Machado and Costa (2006), we can say here that the 24 households are regarded as belonging to the three subcategories of the middle class as follows: C2 - Professionals and Managers (7); C3 - Self-employed (6); C4 -Routine Employees (11)).

Regarding the methodological device put together, the potential social actors for participation in the research started by being contacted randomly from among visitors to *Norte shopping*, a large shopping centre in Porto city. The final formation of the research sample was arrived at by a subsequent selection from these initially contacted informants and comprised only the households that met the stated conditions. As already observed, the intention was to form an empirical 'middle class' which would favour access to households from the new, predominantly urban, middle classes. The empirical sample was then subjected to long term interviews and

ethnography, an exercise that took over eighteen months of contact with the selected households.

Furthermore, the analysis did not involve any specific, pre-defined consumption item. The consumption process bears something like a *praxis*, an actual action, whose results tend to be manifested in creating *environments* that assemble, expose and combine several consumer items. At the same time, except for strictly procedural research reasons, the selection of certain consumer items for analysis rather than others is always fairly arbitrary. In view of these considerations, I chose to establish six *consumption domains*: 'house and contents', 'food', 'offspring', 'personal appearance', 'recreation and culture' and 'gifts'. They represent particular subdivisions inherent in the organization of family life, and are immediately seen as embracing sets of goods and services.

To conclude this introduction, which is quite long by now, I would just like to point out that option for the middle class as a social area for analysis, and then addressing consumption as a cultural practice, offers the added value of being able to contribute to its characterization as a group. Beyond the possible internal heterogeneity of this sector of the social structure (which is also present within the research sample), its consideration as a whole reveals a certain normativity, that is able to provide a reasonably penetrating qualitative picture of the new Portuguese middle classes. Availing myself of held research - that I believe deserves the label of intrusive because of the access it allowed to the reality experienced by these new Portuguese middle class households - I have tried, in this paper, to explain some of their consumption practices and correlative cultural expressions. There is a time lag of just over five years between making contact with the informants and the writing of this text, and this has become significant due to the widespread financial crisis (state and society) in which Portugal is immersed. However, as will be seen, even before this the insecurity and weakness in this sector of the social structure stood out quite clearly. To its very recent expansion has never been given much opportunity for consolidation. (Still, I would draw attention to the fact that some trends relating to the 'ethnographic present' may seem strange because they are already a long way from what the same households today could allow.)

### **A recently expanding and shaky, social class**

Approaching consumption as a cultural practice has the significant merit of granting access to the cultural/moral interpretations and valuations underlying the subjects' consumption practices. These and all their constitutive consumer items serve as material support to the objectification of ideas, values and projects that we seek to understand. Looking for the 'middle class' of informants, both its recent expansion and its strong

tendency for the simply *remediado* can be confirmed. (Of course, given the internal heterogeneity of the research sample, there are substantial differences in terms of either the disposable income or dominant types of capital. But these are mainly differences of degree, over which there is an identically *weak* shade covering the majority of households.) This tendency manifests itself in multiple contexts and routines of the households' everyday life. To clarify the meaning of the statement, the general absence of inherited property should be noted, for instance.

Bearing in mind the widespread recurrence of ownership of the family home – a tendency that in fact runs throughout Portuguese society, judging from the rate of homeowners, which is around (or seems to be around) 70% (Barreto, 2002) – there may have been an attempt to emphasize the general exodus from the material misery that occurred from the 1970s. One should also note the recurrence, equally widespread, of the family home having been acquired by its current owners through a bank loan, and not inherited from previous generations. The financial effort involved in buying a home should also be borne in mind because the monthly mortgage often takes a third or half of the family income. (As it is amply proved by the current multiplication of defaults on mortgages and bank loans.) But if we are looking at movable property then we also have to note the almost total absence of inherited property. Among the informants, inherited items amounted to some odd pieces of crockery and cutlery, some watches and an oratory and one exceptional, because unique, case of a set of dining room furniture. A panorama so far removed from that described by Le Wita (1985) in relation to Parisian bourgeois families – for whom family memory is nourished by interwoven narratives stretching back in time by the handing down of houses, furniture and sundry objects through the generations – is not explained by any lesser interest in the family memory. Rather, it is explained by the widespread absence - until the current generation - of significant material assets. Among the new middle classes, the general lack of inherited property is an indirect illustration of the – also generalized – very recent possibility of achieving a level of economic wellbeing able to support the purchase of durable goods and their transmission between generations. The plausibility of this interpretation is reinforced by the recurrence also observed that some households had recently moved quite easily from the homes they had bought earlier to buy different family homes, in keeping with their improved material circumstances. This not only shows the perception of change relative to previous generations in terms of comfort but it also illustrates the impossibility of keeping two houses.

The *remediado shade* of middle class Portuguese and their only recently achieved correlative capacity to buy durable goods (or accredited, so as to be seen as such) can be illustrated almost paradigmatically through the enthusiasm for acquiring Vista Alegre china, in particular

dinnerware, acquired gradually with a prolonged effort. (The Vista Alegre brand actually achieved a paradigmatic resonance until by the number of households who adopted this behavior. While this cannot be proved, since I did not make contact with the informants again, this is a situation where it is legitimate to assume that the 'ethnographic present' reported is out of step with actual behaviour.) The absence of these inherited objects is symptomatic of the parsimony prevalent in previous generations. At the same time, it should be noted that this new interest shown and effort made by households in their acquisition, whose commitment and underlying value strongly suggest that such objects will become someone's inheritance.

Looking at other *consumption domains*, the same tendency for the simply *remediado* seemed to be especially demonstrated through the consideration of 'recreation and culture'. Here, the analysis concerns the activities and assets that households and their individual members use to organize and enjoy their spare time, defined as those periods not spent at work or doing routine chores. Starting with holidays, it is clear that these should not be seen as a trivialized habit if the term is assumed to mean time spent away from home, not just the legally defined period when people are not expected to work. In the study sample, the established practice of regular holidays emerged as the key indicator separating the less actually *remediado* households from the others that thus had to be identified. For these latter households, holidays are only occasional or enjoyed without leaving home, with sporadic recreational programs. Of course it is reasonable and legitimate to establish a connection between the type of holidays taken and changes in the relevant disposable incomes, with actually taking holidays being symptomatic of at least some financial freedom, especially if they are far away and repeated throughout the year. However, this interpretation should not hide the joint intervention of other areas related to the very novelty of the possibility of holidays and their cross-checking with issues of normative sensibilities and mindset, rooted in a particular family lifestyle.

Beyond the financial constraints (the effects of which could be decisive), the non-universality of holidays also betrayed the relatively recent introduction of this habit in some of the households. What I mean is that some households only occasionally took vacations, or quite simply did not take them at all, not only because of strict financial impossibility at the time, but because, since the opportunity has only arisen recently, it had not yet been assimilated as a regular behaviour. Some older people, especially, did not take regular holidays because this was not part of their normative sensibilities, of their lifestyle. Then there were also those households for which there had never been holidays because, very linearly, the expenditure and in particular the relevant holiday allowance, were needed for other purposes of higher priority, from balancing the family budget to decorating

the house, often including some investment for their children.

The same mix of financial weakness and recurring pattern of normative sensibility – and not just the potential heavy financial burden – was felt equally with respect to other forms of leisure that tended to be much underrepresented in households studied. Of the three forms of leisure identified, the broad magnitude of what I have called the *leisure at home* should be stressed. It typically involves staying in the family home, where, in addition to resting, the most popular evening pastime is getting together to watch television, with the same thing tending to happen at week-ends. This is basically a form of family leisure which presupposes that their respective homes are equipped with the essential audiovisual appliances as well as with the accessories needed to access encrypted television channels and/or obtain a variety of films. The incidence of what I have called *cultural leisure*, on the other hand, which involves going to various shows or buying goods such as books, newspapers and records of diverse origin, was generically residual. In terms of *cultural leisure*, the explanation of analytical recurrences is especially difficult because, except for going to the cinema – which was almost universal – the incidence of other manifestations and, in particular, the importance claimed for them by the people themselves, was confined to a very small number of informants and, moreover, of households. For example, it is true that at least one member of every household would occasionally go to the theatre, but only two or three households did so regularly, endorsing the formula of cultural consumption targeted demand. As for the habits of reading and listening to music, though it was ascertained that their consumption reached a somewhat broader range of informants, it must still be acknowledged that they were a minority. A comprehensive interpretation of the material available shows that we are looking at family contexts that did not really support lifestyles geared towards the appreciation of cultural consumption. (It should be explained that, together with the reduced incidence of *cultural leisure* we find some informants - mostly individuals rather than households as a whole - by whom goods such as books, musical and artistic media were especially valued. In these cases, the personal identity of each subject was mostly formed and defined by the relevant cultural consumption that complemented their identity.)

The third type of leisure activities identified – which I have called *fun leisure* or *going out culture* – relies on conviviality typically based on regular meetings ‘out of the house’ and in eating places and/or nightlife venues. In this case, the central analytical recurrence concerns the fact that this form of leisure is confined to a group of informants aged under 35, who are already in independent households, but have no children, or who are not yet independent of their parents’ households. The under-35s *fun leisure* involves typically *going out with*

*friends* to places of entertainment and conviviality and may or may not include a trip to the restaurant. It is important to draw attention to the distinctive nature of this way of using restaurants since, in this case, going to a restaurant is above all a chance to meet peers, through which a group identity is forged (Costa, 2003), basically characterized by the correlative absence of conviviality of a more strictly family nature. The *fun leisure* of the under-35s is an interesting topic because it lets us see the growing gap between the generations in terms of sociability behaviours and related consumption practices. Among the under-35s we should note the dynamism of their friendship networks and their recurring updating in public places (very often nocturnal), with ‘friends’ being elevated to a significant category in terms of their sociability and consumption practices. The contexts of sociability of older people, on the other hand, have very little impact on friendship networks that tend not to be materialized either in sharing a meal or in exchanging gifts. Expressing the adoption of new practices of sociability and consumption, the *fun leisure* of the under-35s is also an indicator of the different conditions of life that the older generations endured, when their efforts at restraint did not let them enjoy a generalized exchange of pleasantries with a circle of friends (The practice described as the *fun leisure* of the under-35s is another situation which it is legitimate to suppose has changed in the context of the current ‘crisis’).

### **Splits between the generations of parents and children**

Considering the middle class status of the informants, there is a set of variables whose incidence clearly differs according to the generation. They enable us to broadly understand some of the new normative lines characterizing the middle class, as well as the valuing meanings underlying them. One compelling fact about the new middle classes is the significant gap between the under-35s and the older generation in terms of educational level. While older people have lower formal educational qualifications, very often only having completed what was compulsory education, or fourth grade, a higher education qualification or positive expectation of gaining one, is virtually universal for young people today. Reproducing to some extent the effects of universalizing the education system and the opportunities made possible by the socio-economic changes in Portugal after 1974, this trend is also an indirect display of the role of formal education as a source of social reconfiguration (In Portuguese society, as in other European societies, formal education is regarded as an important channel of upward social mobility.). However, for these social actors it is still paradoxical (or a caricature) that the achievement of that goal of education, given the current context, is concomitant with high unemployment or jobs ‘beneath’ the qualifications gained.

Contrary to all their expectations, they are living in the skin the deceptive ideal of the meritocracy that is much more effective the lower the respective social capital resources. But apart from all the uncertainties, their hopes essentially still rest in obtaining an academic degree, which is also symptomatic of the underlying symbolic valuation.

Another divisive split in line with the trends that contrast the older generation and the under-35s is their respective models of sociability, and the corresponding inclusion/exclusion of *friends* as a significant socio-affective category. It is important to understand that, as the objectification of the idea of family, the house is fundamental to everyone as the material support of the 'home', and significant doses of attention, work and financial and symbolic investment are lavished on it. It can be said that nearly all the houses of the informants have quite appreciable levels of comfort. But it was also found that the actual space of the house, rather than being designed to accommodate social contacts of friendship and/or neighborliness and exchanges of hospitality, in fact serves mainly for the enjoyment of family sociability, often restricted to the members of the household.

Even though buying and maintaining a family home absorbs sizeable and ongoing underlying efforts (including financial ones), these efforts are far from being supported by the owners' habit of opening the house to people other than close relatives. It seems clear that the house is both the physical and metaphorical representation of the household that lives in it, and as such it is an important focus of attention. But at the same time, the efforts materialized there are hardly of a public nature, nor are they showy to the outside world. Consistent with this pattern, in addition to the daily, functional meal-sharing by household members, the house tends to host only fairly occasional *festive family table-sharing*, whose scope extends only to include some close relatives in a gathering to celebrate their birthdays. (The festive character of these meetings tends to cover little more than some exceptional dishes offered along with the birthday cake and glass of champagne, being it glaring that this shared occasion in fact provides the symbolic and ritualistic meaning of the event.) Overall, we can say that the act of 'having friends at home' does not form part of the normal routines of these households. The model of sociability of the informants aged over 35 has a perceptible tendency to be marked by a very low incidence of networks of friends and/or neighbours, and these are diluted even more when the focus involves exchanging hospitality, meals and gifts.

But for the under-35s we find a new model of sociability, whilst still not involving opening the house to extra-familial sociability, it nonetheless tends to embody friends as a significant socio-affective category, with whom they both meet up to share activities 'out of the house', particularly in eating places and entertainment

venues, and also exchange gifts. In this case, besides joining in the *fun leisure* mentioned above, the odd practice – entirely missing in the older age group – of celebrating birthdays with friends through a festive meal in a restaurant 'where everyone pays for themselves' has become commonplace. The explicit argument for (and not the mere acceptance of) this type of birthday party with friends, whose invitations mean that they want one another to be there, but not that the birthday person intends to or feels obliged to pay for the whole dinner, reflects the adoption of a new guideline in terms of sociability. Through this it is possible to satisfy the wishes of the group of friends, without which, after all, the burden of work or money would be excessively increased.

This scenario has three facets: the exceptional character of including friends in domestic sociability; the differing behaviours of the generations, and the new patterns of sociability of the under-35s. All these confirm both the very recent general improvement in material living conditions that allow some courtesy social relationships, and the implicit instability and weakness that therefore makes the real consolidation of these recently-established new norms most unlikely.

### **Descendants as the main family project**

Another trend that strongly characterizes the new middle classes is the *glorification of descendants*, by which the common perception of children as a means of future continuation of parents is superseded by viewing them as the mainstay of deeply-rooted family values (I do not wish to argue that the importance of descendants for the respective family and the expectations resting on them are uniquely middle class attitudes. But it so happens that the survey had to make the 'descendants' an area of special observation given the central role they could play in objectifying the very idea of family and defining their projects). The moral economy of the home, which tends to suppress and control any source of excessively personal desire by making it defer to broader family projects, is itself very focused on the *children* who seem to play a central role in the objectification of the very idea of family. Descendants tend to be elevated to the main family project, able to mould the lifestyle of the household, as well as their consumption choices.

Although the category *children* embodying this tendency covers descendants of all ages, those who, par excellence, are the catalysts of family projects – as such, rightly seen as legitimate beneficiaries of spending and consumption decisions especially centred on them – are young people inasmuch as they are approaching adulthood. As they near the end of secondary school, and most likely for a good few years, children gain an undeniable prominence in terms of family plans and their ultimate goals. In terms of the informants, consideration of this topic highlights some relevant analytical recurrences. First, the prospect that children reaching

higher education and even completing university courses, are targets of considerable emotional investment, albeit clearly relatable to both the recent but as yet small rise in Portuguese society's level of education and to the significant educational gap, already noted, between parents and children. Afterwards this emotional investment provides the necessary endorsement to the financial investment in children, which is assumed to be essential because, underlying both is the agreement on the expected change in various patterns of behaviour, including the use of certain new goods and services. Fully aware that children reaching higher education involves, or will come to involve, substantial additional expenditure for the household, this prospect is accepted as a fact that only needs to be discussed in order to find solutions that help to achieve it. (For a considerable number of cases in the sample, the emotional and financial investment underlying the valuation of formal education justified using private universities and paying the relevant monthly fee. The study of co-participation and private higher education in the exponential increase in the levels of schooling of Portuguese society is a topic of some analytical relevance.)

In addition to staunchly sticking to the project of providing their children with higher education, parents still define as being a duty the provision of other types of support that are equally demanding in terms of familiar options. For example, providing children with a variety of tourist experiences or enabling them to take a "final course trip" to the other side of the world, can result in a self-imposed sacrifice of going without holidays as a household, or even stopping this previous household practice altogether. (The commitment of households to enabling their children to fulfil holiday projects gives quite an accurate insight into the pivotal role played by the regular enjoyment of holidays in the internal subdivision of Portugal's middle class.) This form of 'family containment', which in practice is largely expressed in the abdication of parents in favour of their children, is normally experienced and fulfilled by the first without any drama or deeper regret. Quite the opposite. And the same logic can be extended to many other areas, such as the ambition to give them a car or significant financial help to be used to buy their own family home. At this level, it should be noted that the substantial material and utilitarian scope of help given to young adults by their families tends to last beyond entry into working life, especially when, despite this autonomy factor, these young adults still live with their parents. (Today, in January 2013, the Portuguese media are constantly discussing the dramatic, but recurrent, issue of unemployed homeless households who find themselves having to go back to living with their parents.) In these situations, repeated over and over again, there is no input to the household expenses from the younger members and, when it comes to individual consumption activities, these tend to be confined to personal appearance –

but not always wholly – and leisure activities.

Bearing in mind the range of the facets involved in this *glorification of descendants*, as well as the depth of self-imposed efforts, we can see that the very identity of the parents and the domestic group is closely linked to the financial and emotional investment made in children. The goals set, and the resources required from the household for the children, become the very ways and means of expressing identity, both for parents and for the household as a whole. Particularly when the outline goals are achieved, the children become the people towards whom the household plans and their ultimate goals are strategically considered. This central role of the descendants in shaping the very concept of household and household profile in turn shows the children's marked capacity for socialization in relation to their parents. The new preferences and practices engaged in by descendants – especially these young adults, and increasingly as they successfully consolidate their entry into adulthood – have a remarkable ability to socialize, with effects that are manifested in the adherence to new normativities and new consumption patterns, in household terms. This rebound effect occurs in matters as prosaic as introducing new eating habits in the household, or as subtle as the generation of new sensibilities. In the situations observed, the socializing performance of the descendants takes forms where the rebound metaphor is especially evocative in the case of change of perception of 'books', from a mainly instrumental category to a more general source of leisure time enjoyment and reflection. As for parents, the widespread emphasis on the importance of education and their efforts to encourage a 'liking for study' in their children usually involve the appreciation of books and other educational materials that are, however, essentially equivalent to teaching tools. Under the socializing influence of descendants, this more instrumental perception may be extended to embrace fiction and poetry, through which the importance of books and reading may be redefined, but also regarded as recreational resources and vehicles of more general reflection.

Particularly in relation to household consumption practices, the described *glorification of descendants* is reflected in the essential recurrence of consumer options being justifiably assessed as disjointed with respect to the two generations present in the household. The choice of the children as the main family project and the correlative identity dynamics centred on them lead to the interesting development of the adoption of different standards of assessment for the consumption by parents and children. This position comes to be manifested through attitudes as varied as: resorting or not to specialty stores and branded products; recognizing or not the need or relevance of a particular good or service, or triggering the mechanism of 'family containment' mentioned earlier, which basically amounts to abdication



in favour of the children. This behaviour illustrates quite well that the distinction between 'luxury' and 'necessity' never results from the simple price valuation and/or functionality of an article. It depends, first and foremost, on who is the recipient. At the same time, it should be remembered that this setting of different exacting standards for the consumer items purchased, or even the mere recognition that certain consumption practices may exist, are trends that are not confined to the more personal consumption but also seem to be repeated, as we have seen, for example, with respect to household holidays, which can be surrendered to meet the expectations of the children, seen as priority.

In conclusion, it is thus fitting to note that the financial investment made in the children not only defrays all the costs of their education and training outright, it also serves to support any new consumption practices and their correlative disjointed requirements, whose adoption is based on them being seen as especially appropriate or consistent with the status of the children's new educational condition. Looking at the emotional investment that these households make in that whole process, it is not hard to understand that the current feeling of having been disappointed in many of their most intimate and cherished expectations has profound and overwhelming implications that affect the very core of their identity construction.

### **When the cuts hit food**

Although cases of households whose budget constraints forced them to extend the cuts to the *food domain* were the exception at the time of the study, considering them here makes it possible to explain both another more radical aspect of the stated simply *remediado* tendency of Portugal's new middle classes, and the critical effects, produced at the level of identity issues, of an availability of material resources that are too weak and rickety. (In addition, the current context of an ever-worsening financial crisis let us think the prediction that identical situations may now spread to other households is not an exaggeration.)

Within the study sample, beyond the far-reaching financial insecurity that reached significant proportion of the households considered, it was possible to single out three domestic groups that were struggling with budgetary constraints unknown to the other households. Common to the households in question was that unemployment or subsequent precarious employment had affected one of the spouses, in fact, the wife. Because of the decrease in the family's disposable income caused by this, their spending considerations and corresponding adoption of saving strategies and 'cuts' were extended and also affected food.

A downward trend in the importance of food in household consumption patterns is a general indicator of improving economic conditions, as it reveals the

appearance or increase of expenses other than those of strict food survival. Thus, developed countries have seen a regular decrease in the relative spending on food. In the specific case of the three households in the study, the context of the financial crisis they were experiencing showed exactly the opposite trend in spending to keep the family and other 'grocery shopping' accounted for a disproportionate share of the total available budget. For these families, the proportion allocated to food was one third, or nearly one third, of their disposable income. (In the three households, about one third of household income was spent on repaying bank loans – whose absolute values were relatively modest – in two cases they were mortgage repayments and in the other it was for the family car.) At the level of their consumption practices, this financial outlook is particularly reflected in the near-zero rate of utilization of services, whether dry cleaning, tradesmen for home repairs or the hairdresser. At the same time, it is also noticeable that the extent and steadiness of routines related to the regular supply of food to the household becomes hugely relevant. As for the other households, supply mostly relies on supermarkets, but in this case various hypermarkets are regular shopping places because each has its own advantages with respect to different goods. Shopping trips are usually governed by the need to re-stock and the availability of funds, but in these households they may be split in order to take advantage of any known opportunities for 'bargains'. Moreover, whereas for the other households the domain of food consumption seems to be untouchable by occasional adverse financial contingencies, these households extend their efforts to containing spending on food. In this regard, it should be noted that the study did not confirm the conclusions reached by Bayet (et al., 1991) that changes in income do not have a significant influence on everyday provisions, food and daily expenses. For the households concerned, their cuts in consumption also cover food spending: the yogurts are either fewer or disappear, there is a different brand of cheese and fewer meals contain meat.

In addition, for these households an 'extra' or a permitted more indulgent consumption tends to come from the domain of food, with a trip to a restaurant, or opting for a particular type of meat, or a special dessert for Sunday lunch at home, being clear examples. Obviously we are not looking at especially greedy or demanding households, but rather at families in which, given the budget constraints, the other areas of consumption are very restricted and so not only are the 'excesses' a slightly less frugal meal but these are the only 'excesses' that can be suppressed when belts have to be tightened even more.

In the case of one of these households, its blatant, permanent self-restraint made approaching the household consumption habits and patterns a painful topic in that it forced its members again, and now with

a third party – to face up to the existing financial constraints.

In analytical terms, this entire situation highlights how relevant and plausible is the suggestion that budget difficulties may produce critical effects at the level of identity issues. If the relationships between people and consumables merit consideration as significant parts of the processes of construction and expression of personal identities, the impossibility of owning certain goods – or the severe reduction of that possibility – should not be read as a loss or difficulty in terms of mere material resources. The personal and/or household inability to acquire certain consumer items may mean, in terms of identity construction, a much deeper disaster. Not having the economic clout to consume what is seen as 'the minimum' can mean being condemned to the denial of a significant part of life. The impossibility of achieving aspirations construed as absolutely legitimate – which include consumption demands as prosaic as being able to ensure a complete meal that the whole family likes – cannot fail to unleash negative effects in terms of identity.

### Final Remarks

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville, in his work *Democracy in America*, saw the middle class as the key to strengthening the democratic order. E. Estanque (2012b), following a similar line of thought, stresses the central role that the middle classes can play in social cohesion and societal transformation. In this paper I have endorsed that same position. The continuous consistent growth of the middle class is an asset to the society that shelters it. The expansion of the middle class as it happened in Europe from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has led to an overall rise in people's living conditions, an increase in their levels of comfort and safety and an improvement in their educational and vocational qualifications. It is completely legitimate to assume the ambition of these social changes for Portuguese society. The problem we should be aware of is that in Portugal the growth of the middle class happened much later than in the rest of Western Europe. For various reasons that are, however, all linked to the dictatorship that ruled until 1974, it is not until the 1970s and 1980s that we see any significant expansion of the new urban middle classes, related to services. However, this tendency to upward social mobility, still very recent, is already facing real threats and setbacks. In other words, in the present context it is quite clear how short a life these Portuguese middle classes seem doomed to enjoy. National and international transformations in the economic and labour domains, the obstacles raised to maintaining a welfare state initiated such a short time ago, and the current 'crisis' are rocking the fragile stability of the Portuguese middle class. The final shove into a fall will have been the 'austerity measures' and 'budget cuts' imposed by the government and overseen by the *Troika* (composed of

the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund), in the wake of a request for international aid by the Portuguese government on 7 April, 2011.

Meanwhile, neither of the two social realignment movements has been the subject of enough academic attention capable of shedding light on their multiple shapes. The late expansion of the middle class and its incipient consolidation in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the current trend of blocking the middle class and related deterioration of its living conditions by reducing disposable income are two processes which – until a short while ago – had been pretty much disregarded, particularly in terms of their more subjective dimensions. Hence, choosing the middle class as a social space for analysis and approaching it via the focus of consumption as a cultural practice is indeed a pertinent project. Through its agency it has been possible to provide empirical evidence on some of the main social dynamics operating today in Portuguese society. Accessing the values and representations of the actors is an essential task when the goal is to understand the subjective dimensions of their lives. The essentially qualitative content of the empirical material considered and the interpretation produced – which deliberately does not intend to stop with the identification of structural regularities – have made it possible to achieve a kind of portrait of the new Portuguese middle classes. Some normative patterns and benchmarks may be taken from it. From their collective characterization as a social group there emerge, not exactly traces of hedonism or spending touted by some in the media, but, above all, a picture that confirms their very recent expansion and an undeniable weakness, particularly financial. The *remediado* tone emerges as the dominant trait of the new Portuguese middle classes, with the households in our study showing instability, insecurity and precariousness. The conspicuously shaky character of the living conditions of the households leaves little room for doubt that the real threat of the *remediado* tone can swiftly slide into *open poverty*. Given the current climate of 'crisis' and all that it has justified in terms of policy options, I fear there is no alternative but to recognize the looming danger that the new middle classes will fall victim to downward social mobility.

This decline and, therefore, their too-short life span appear to be proclaimed. The proposal submitted by Machado and Costa (1998) that the middle class in Portugal accounted for 47.3% of the active population in 1991, and its forecast growth of 10% per decade is not a prognosis that present developments are likely to confirm. Neither the new forms of work organization and related increases in insecurity and unemployment, nor the policies of budget restraint undertaken by the government indicate this. More likely by far is that the possibility that we may see in Portugal what has been being consolidated elsewhere in Europe since the 1960s

will be postponed yet again – until who knows when. Postponed until when, that is the question!

The only avenue of hope is perhaps the possibility that the end of all expectations of stability and/or improvement will have an impact on the political sphere, increasing the power of the people to make demands. According to J. M. Maravall (1972) a high intensity of social frustration can have this effect.

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