

# The All-Meaning Middle and the Alchemy of Class

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The last several years have been particularly active ones in the on-again-off-again discussion among economists and sociologists, primarily, about the size of the global middle class, its impact on world markets, and its likely contribution to entrepreneurial innovation and global prospects of democracy. One need only survey the production of OECD and World Bank working papers and Economist and Foreign Policy articles published over the last three to five years to see that something of note is happening.<sup>1</sup> The discussion has been global, with countries like China and India figuring prominently, but Latin America's recent high growth rates and gains in reducing income inequality have brought it very much into the conversation as well.<sup>2</sup> The issues in debate harken back to the heyday of Modernization Theory some 40 or 50 years ago, albeit with at least one new wrinkle: the optimistic hope that a growing middle class in the Developing World, in Asia in particular, might create new consumer markets to save the world economy from a theorized post-2008 crisis of under-consumption in the traditionally rich countries.

The explosion of literature on the global middle class has also reignited some very old—but still very interesting—debates about how to define “middle class” in the first place.<sup>3</sup> Economists, to unfairly overgeneralize, tend to seek a single global definition that can provide not only a measure of how big the middle class might be in any given country, but also an aggregate figure of just how large the world's middle class is and how fast it is growing. In most cases this approach is built on defining a “middle-class” range of daily income, corrected for Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). Predictably, though, scholars disagree vehemently about where that range should lie. Some argue that simply being above the line

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of object poverty places one in the middle class; for Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, for example, to be middle class is to earn \$2 to \$10 a day per individual in PPP.<sup>4</sup> At the higher end, Branko Milanovic and Shlomo Yitzhaki define a middle-class income as \$12 to \$50 a day per individual in PPP. That figure was derived, to oversimplify a paper filled with equations, from \$12 a day being the median PPP income in Brazil, and \$50 a day the median PPP income in Italy, with Brazil and Italy respectively setting the bottom and top end of middling-per-capita-income countries.<sup>5</sup>

Opponents of defining the middle class in terms of a globally-corrected absolute income figure point out that Purchasing Power Parity is a highly imperfect instrument even at measuring what it purports to measure, which is how well one lives in country X on income Y. Part of the problem comes from the relationship between what gets counted to determine PPP and what consumption goods define middle classness. This critique, for example, led Uri Dadush and Shimelse Ali to search for one specific consumption good to serve as proxy shorthand for a middle-class living standard. They chose the automobile, I suspect in part because the licensing and registration of drivers and cars make worldwide data on automobile ownership more accurate than statistics on ownership of virtually any other goods. Dadush and Ali contend that someone who owns an automobile has, by definition, a disposable income that exceeds basic needs, and that the automobile is cited the world around as a quintessential symbol of membership in the middle class.<sup>6</sup>

Still others reject entirely the idea that middle classness can be measured in absolute terms on a single world scale, because being in the middle is a relational thing, and people arguably perceive themselves always in comparison to others in their own society. So the main alternative approach among quantifiers is to define the middle class as a function of distance from the national median income. In other words, a middle class person would be someone whose income ranged from 75 per cent to 125 per cent of the national median (or 50 per cent to 150 per cent, or some similar figure). Figuring the size of the middle class in this way can identify differences between one country and the next and can chart certain kinds of change over time: for example, a nation with a more unequal income distribution (a higher gini coefficient) will almost inevitably have a smaller percentage of people in that 75 per cent to 125 per cent range than a nation with a lower gini coefficient (i.e., a more equitable distribution). But critics of this distance-from-the-median definition of middle classness are quick to point out a major limitation: although a more egalitarian distribution of wealth makes the middle class bigger, an across-the-board improvement in a nation's living standard has no effect whatsoever on the measured size of its middle class. Defining the middle class *relationally* thus thwarts any possibility

of documenting how economic growth by itself might raise significant numbers of people into the middle class, which is precisely one of the key processes that economists hope to analyze. In other words, with a distance-from-the-median definition of the middle class, a rising tide does not lift all boats into middle-classness, or at least not in a measurable way.

Sociologists, too, are generally interested in bringing objective rigor to the definition and measurement of the middle class, but they are less likely than economists to fixate on income or net wealth as the sole defining factor. Indeed, the debates in the sociological literature are too rich, varied, and creative to summarize here. An influential school of neo-Marxists have defined the middle class in terms of its members' relationship to the ownership of capital and place in the division of labor (see, for example, Anthony Giddens' theory of class "structuration" or Erik Olin Wright's idea of "contradictory locations within class relations").<sup>7</sup> An equally important tradition, going back at least to Max Weber, focuses on *status*.<sup>8</sup> And in more recent years Pierre Bourdieu, with his concept of "*habitus*" and his focus on the multiple types of capital that individuals may possess, achieved near-superstar status among social theorists.<sup>9</sup>

But behind my appreciation of—even fascination with—the sociological literature, there has always lurked a profound epistemological unease rooted in one simple question: Who ultimately gets to decide how people are categorized by class? The scholar or the subject? It is not an easy question. I have enormous respect for the rigor that comes from an objective, theory-driven approach where the researcher maps out society's inner structure according to rules of his or her own invention and insight, to interpret a body of verifiable empirical data. What I could never embrace, however, was the idea that the product of such objective research would be relevant in the real world, no matter how subtle and fascinating the analysis, if the researcher's model was not somehow derived from what people themselves thought and said about their own individual and collective circumstances.

Consider the example of sociologist Dennis Gilbert. In his work on the Mexican middle class, Gilbert defined the class by what seemed to be entirely objective criteria, as those with incomes from 1.5 to 3 times the national median and an occupation in one of the higher white-collar categories as defined by Mexico's National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information Technology.<sup>10</sup> But how did Gilbert come up with that objective standard? He went from house to house in Cuernavaca with a survey followed up by interviews, asking those Cuernavaca families how *they* defined the middle class. In other words, his objective, quantitative definition was derived from the collective subjectivity of his research population.

At one level, this only makes sense. Why would a scholar impose a theoretical model of class stratification without testing first to see if members of the society under study made those same distinctions? Is it not logical, if a theorist wants to propose automobile ownership as a definition of middle classness, that he would first want to make sure that people in the countries he was studying did in fact value car ownership and not, say, the number of cattle or wives or brothel visits? And wouldn't he, moreover, want to know whether "middle class" was a concept that had any cultural meaning in a given society? Otherwise, is the researcher not simply crunching statistics on something arbitrary, a concern that is meaningful nowhere else but in his or her own mind? Why not document instead the percentage of tall or red-haired people, or per capita pineapple consumption? Scientific precision need not equate to relevance or resonance.

The problems inherent in quantitative, empirical approaches to class definition strengthen the case for the inductive method, for studying class as a subjective cultural invention, an abstract product of a society's collective mind. That is the school with which my own work has long been identified.<sup>11</sup> And while I do not flee from identification with cultural history and the linguistic turn, I hope in this introduction to make a confession: that I have never ceased to be troubled in profound ways by some of the implications of seeing class as a construction. The more time goes on the more troubled I have become. Allow me to explain my discomfort, first with an example from contemporary U.S. politics, and then by referencing some recent scholarship.

In the 2012 U.S. Presidential campaign, both candidates presented themselves as champions of the middle class, almost to the exclusion of discussion of any other class. Speaking for 53 minutes on June 14, 2012, at a community college near Cleveland, Ohio, Barack Obama used the phrase "middle class" 23 times, or once every two minutes, peaking at one moment with nine mentions over an eleven-minute span.<sup>12</sup> The phrase "working class" did not appear a single instance, despite this being a speech that commentators at the time described as unusually combative, defining Obama's progressive economic and social vision. He did mention "workers" three times, "working families" once, and "hardworking" twice (once in reference to families and once to immigrants); he also made one reference to "people who, no matter how hard they work, can barely make ends meet," one to "people who are struggling to pay their bills," and one to "vulnerable families." Interestingly, however, rather than explicitly referencing "poverty," "the poor," or even "the working poor," Obama chose instead to speak of "folks who aren't yet in the middle class" and "people striving to get into the middle class."<sup>13</sup> Implicit in this formulation was the idea that the normal, natural, default American *was* middle-class, or at least had been in the past and should be in the future.

Obama's opponent Mitt Romney met with criticism for not referencing the middle class nearly as often, and the Republicans seemed to learn their lesson. In a December 4, 2012, speech at the Jack Kemp Foundation, Senator Marco Rubio invoked the middle class 35 times, beating Obama by a dozen. Rubio talked about workers and the poor in almost exactly the same terms that Obama did, for example speaking of "young Americans [who] do not have the skills they need to get a middle class job because they grew up in an unstable environment."<sup>14</sup> Rubio spoke of cultural obstacles to mobility into the middle class, and used the phrase "middle-class job creation" a dozen or so times. Republican and Democratic economic prescriptions vary widely, but the discursive similarities were unmistakable: there was almost an escalating arms race in pandering to the middle class, and a reasonable case can be made that Rubio was the more thoughtful and theory-driven of the two in his pandering:

The existence of a large and vibrant American middle class goes to the very essence of America's exceptional identity. Every country has rich people. But only a few places have achieved a vibrant and stable middle class. And in the history of the world, none has been more vibrant and more stable than the American middle class. ...

One of the fundamental promises of America is the opportunity to make it to the middle class. But today, there is a growing opportunity gap developing. And millions of Americans worry that they may never achieve middle class prosperity and stability and that their children will be trapped as well with the same life and the same problems.<sup>15</sup>

Rachel Heiman, Mark Liechty, and Carla Freeman argue in a 2012 book that the phrase "middle class," not just in Obama and Rubio's United States but in societies the world over, is a term of art designed to mystify. Even as "middle-class" becomes an ever more ubiquitous category of self-identification, its express purpose is to challenge the validity of a class-based theorization of society. Paradoxically, according to Heiman, Liechty and Freeman, a phrase that includes the word "class" in fact denies the existence of classes and class conflict, in part because "middle class" is, in their words, an "aspirational category":

Imagined as inclusive and open to any hard-working, deserving, "entrepreneurial" individual, the middle classes have become the (largely depoliticized) ideological and social construct upon which the neoliberal state rests its political legitimacy.<sup>16</sup>

Heiman, Liechty and Freeman continue:

This middle-class aspiration is, we believe, one of the key political dynamics of contemporary states: by shifting the desires of marginalized groups away from liberatory politics (which would threaten the state's capitalist and, in some instances, repressive underpinnings) and toward relatively depoliticized aspirations for middle-class goods and lifestyles, states can contain discontent (including demands for public education, health care, infrastructure, and so forth), within the confines of never-ending private quests for the consumerist 'good life'.

And they conclude:

Whether as a form of self-identification or aspiration, middle-class subjectivity shifts consumerist longing and political action away from social transformation (for the public good) to private transformation (for oneself, one's family, or one's social group).<sup>17</sup>

In short, "middle class" as an identity construct is, if we are to believe Heiman, Liechty, and Freeman, not a way to make sense of any objective reality but a way to *deny* the reality of socioeconomic stratification in service to a neoliberal status quo that fools people into believing that anyone can become middle-class if they work hard enough. The very term middle class creates a world of fantasy, where the rich do not exploit the poor and social mobility is open to all, the same neoliberal fantasy world that appears in the political rhetoric of Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Marco Rubio alike.

And yet that is not the whole story, because it is not true, as Heiman, Liechty, and Freeman assert, that the aspirational discourse of the middle class leads everyone to embrace the neoliberal status quo, to give themselves over to consumerism and to abandon all forms of collective struggle for liberation and social transformation. In recent social movements in Argentina, the Philippines, and the Arab world, people who self-identified as middle-class have found themselves enmeshed in often violent political struggles, calling for radical social change or at least a radical change of leadership.<sup>18</sup> But the discourse of the middle class in these oppositional movements is every bit as much a term of art, and its principal goal and function is, yet again, mystification and myth-creation. Let me try to spin out an argument here: I start from an unprovable proposition, which must be taken on faith, that there is no such thing as a purely grassroots movement sprung up *ex nihilo*. All movements require a core of committed leaders,

whether those leaders are an organized political party or an interest group that feels deeply aggrieved. At the same time, political movements have an interest in appearing to represent the largest possible collectivity, *the people*, in whose name they purport to speak and act. This claim to represent the vast majority is almost always basically a lie, but a lie that social movements get away with quite frequently.

My point is that movements lose legitimacy to the extent that they are seen to be partisan (and therefore just about replacing one group of scoundrels with a different group of scoundrels), or to the extent that they are seen to represent a specific class or sectoral interest. To illustrate this with a historical example, consider the well-known book about nineteenth-century Argentine politics, Hilda Sabato's *La política en las calles*.<sup>19</sup> Sabato argued that the principal locus of politics in 1860s and 1870s Buenos Aires was not in elections, which were kind of like street wars for the control of ballot boxes, but in civic demonstrations, public mobilizations of the populace on behalf of one cause or another. She described these civic mobilizations as following almost a set script—they needed to include a leadership in which the most respectable elements of society were represented, and participants had to comport themselves with the utmost decorum. The goal was for the mobilization to successfully represent itself as the voice of the entire people, not of any socio-economic interest or political faction.<sup>20</sup>

Many years later, in 2001, in the same city, demonstrators marching in some of the identical streets and plazas forced Argentine President Fernando de la Rúa to resign. Based on my reading of those who have described these mobilizations, I would argue that a dynamic similar to that described by Sabato was in operation.<sup>21</sup> Gone, however, were the days when a civic movement could pull off the illusion of representing the people's general will by acting with decorum and trumpeting that their numbers included the "best elements of society." At the same time, given the ideological trajectory of the post-Berlin Wall West, it was equally unlikely for opinion-makers to attribute positive qualities to "the masses," "the working classes," or, heaven forbid, "the proletariat." Even "the people," "*el pueblo*," a discourse once so powerful that it gave its name to Latin America's quintessential political innovation, populism, was discredited by overuse and through guilt by association with the revolutionary left. In Spanish-speaking countries the term "clases populares" had its day, but I would argue that by the 2000s this discourse no longer worked particularly well either. Nor do I believe that recent trendy phrases such as "social movements" or "civil society" are likely to fare better in the long run.

We may, however, be living in a moment when the discourse of "middle class" achieves what no other discourse can do: to take a phrase that definitionally would seem to refer to one sector of society, a special interest, and magically transform it



into the general interest, a symbolic proxy for the entire nation. After all, we have seen the discursive middle class, the middle class of people's self-identifications, expand at both ends even in the face of growing income polarization. American millionaires identify as middle-class—and the press, politicians and the public go along—because they work hard for their millions and didn't inherit them, because they like football and eat hamburgers like regular guys, and besides, it's hard to live in Manhattan on half a million dollars a year when your billionaire hedge fund neighbor keeps driving up condo prices and private school tuitions.<sup>22</sup> The subjective middle class in developing countries also expands ever more up the income scale because of international comparisons.<sup>23</sup> People in the top 10 per cent of the income distribution in Peru or Honduras might be rich by their own national standards, but when comparing themselves to people in Britain or the United States they see themselves as middle-class. And at the other end, "middle class" expands as an aspiration, sometimes as a moral label that distinguishes the hard-working head of household with healthy habits and high hopes for his children from an imagined underclass, from those people who allegedly do not value education, are lazy and have poor hygiene, keep having babies, do not keep up their homes, and are little better than criminals or animals.<sup>24</sup> As there ceases to be a positive set of stereotypes attached to people who are poor or who work with their hands, the only healthy class becomes the middle class, and the middle class becomes the entire nation.

So again, who gets to name and classify people, the scholar or the subject? I appear to have established that the answer can be neither one, because the scholar creates, in his own head, models of the middle class that may or may not be relevant to the lives of those he studies, yet the subject may well be engaged in an enterprise of mass self-deception and aspirational myth-making, either to deny the reality of class or in order to pretend to speak for the entire nation by incanting that magical phrase "middle class." This, I think, is why study of the middle class is so challenging and so fraught with peril. Everywhere there are rocky shores: the Scylla of excessive abstract theorization disconnected from the lives of real individuals, the Charybdis of giving overmuch credence to people's self-interested or self-deluded mythologizing.

And yet I do not advocate throwing in the towel and going home. We have a useful precedent in thinking about how to deal with an analogous concept—race—that like class is simultaneously a heavily mythologized ideological fantasy and yet, at the same time, a very real source of privilege and oppression. We all know, or at least for some 30 years it has been the majority view among scholars, that races do not exist. The biological evidence to justify the idea of a Caucasian or Negroid or Asiatic race is simply not compelling, especially since analysis of the human genome has shown that genetic variation *within* races dwarfs genetic



difference *between* races.<sup>25</sup> The supposed science of race from the 18th and 19th centuries has been exposed as a colonial invention. But if there are no biological races, socially and culturally constructed races clearly do exist, or in the current parlance, races are not real but “racialized persons” are.<sup>26</sup>

This understanding has become so mainstream, at least in progressive circles in the US and Canada, that it has come to the point that my own university has a faculty-student mentorship program called “Faculty Mentors for Self-Identified Racialized Students.” A decade ago a similar program might have been called a minority mentorship program, and while the extreme political correctness of the new title may evoke laughter, a genuine theory inspires it. First, my university knows better than to label people racially, recognizing that only the student him- or herself may exercise that right. To be part of the faculty mentorship program, the student must self-identify as a member of one of the groups for whom the program was designed. But if races are constructions, what is the student self-identifying *as*? Not as black or Latino or Asian, but as a “racialized person,” as a person who society categorizes in racial ways. The student *self*-identifies as someone who *others* construct as nonwhite.

Put another way, the policy seeks to balance two contradictory facts. Fact 1: Races do not exist—they are a colonial fantasy devoid of any scientific basis. Fact 2: A young man with dark skin and kinky hair, stopped by the police while driving his car at night in a typical British or French or American city, *is* black. No matter that race is a nefarious ideological construction: in that situation races unquestionably exist, in profound, life-affecting ways. It makes no difference how the driver of that car self-identifies racially. Perhaps the motorist is Brazilian and in Brazil he is accustomed to being perceived as white.<sup>27</sup> But that night, in that setting, he is black, proving that races exist as real and concrete entities, defined by characteristics that people quite literally *see*, characteristics that entire societies have learned to interpret as markers of biological race even if geneticists insist that they are no such thing. “Race is not just a conception,” writes Matthew Frye Jacobson, “it is a *perception*. The problem is not merely how races are comprehended, but how they are seen.”<sup>28</sup> Matthew Guterl seconds this idea: “For much of the past five hundred years, here [in the United States] and around the world, people have performed this act [of seeing race] every day, without a thought, simply by saying—to themselves or to others, and no matter their politics—‘he is a Negro,’ or ‘she looks Mexican,’ or ‘he looks Asian.’”<sup>29</sup>

Guterl argues that in the United States, at least traditionally, race has been “tracked [and] verified, in most cases, on the body,”<sup>30</sup> or in other words as a function of physical appearance: color, hair, lips, nose. The literature on “social race” in Latin America has long pointed to a wider range of cues that influence racial perception: regional origins, education, occupation, dress, speech, friend-

ships, and income among them.<sup>31</sup> The old saying that “money whitens” needs to be understood in Latin America not as a mere metaphor—that whites are more accepting of prosperous blacks—but as a bold statement of fact: that money and other similar social cues *influence the race that people actually perceive* when they look at an individual. (Interestingly, recent research suggests that U.S. racial perceptions are also moving away from an exclusive focus on physical traits).<sup>32</sup> But regardless of what the keys to perception may be, the end result is that certain arbitrary characteristics come to be perceived as both consequential and innate (“conceptions of difference successfully masquerade as nature”). And because perceptions have consequences, races become facts through a process that Jacobson calls “the alchemy of race.” “The awesome power of race as an ideology,” he concludes, “resides precisely in its ability to pass as a feature of the physical landscape.”<sup>33</sup>

I believe that this understanding of race, as an ideological fiction that people nonetheless see and act upon and therefore make real, is the analogy that we need to bring to our study of the middle class. The analogy is not perfect: for one thing, almost no one believes that class is a biological given, a “feature of the physical landscape.” Indeed, most people today would characterize class as mutable, achieved, even transitory: a condition, not an essence, and in this regard about as distant as one can imagine from the way we still instinctively think of race. Furthermore, while it is a simple matter to refute the significance of genetic difference between people of different so-called “races,” no one can deny the unequal distribution of wealth, education, and life prospects in just about every nation, province, and town the world over. There *are* rich and poor and those in the middle, social elites and marginalized people; it is a fact.

Nevertheless, I would still argue that there is such a thing as an “alchemy of class,” and that we benefit from thinking of class, just like race, in terms of a magical transformation of an imaginary construct, or at very least an abstraction, into something *seen*, and from something seen into something acted upon, opening or closing doors, enabling or undermining one’s life chances. The challenge for the scholar is to discern the laws of class perception in any given society. What, in class terms, is the analogy to the process by which a policeman sees as “black,” and judges as a potential criminal, the young man caught driving the wrong car in the wrong neighborhood? What is the currency of class, the secret code of social behavior and public presentation, the unstated assumptions that lead people to perceive and treat one person as respectably middle class and another person as something else? What consequences does one’s perceived class have in the world of day-to-day social relations, for how people are treated by those in authority, for how people themselves behave consciously or unconsciously in their social relations with others, for the subtle and often unconscious behaviors

of others toward them? How are what Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár call “symbolic boundaries” enforced, contested or negotiated, by individuals and by collectivities?<sup>34</sup>

It is not my intention here to provide answers, but only to set out some ways in which we might best formulate the questions, by breaking them down into six categories: a) the markers of middle-classness, the attributes that people in any given society *see* and recognize in those they identify as middle-class; b) stigmata that function as anti-markers, inherent barriers to being seen and recognized as middle-class; c) the ease or difficulty of obtaining or achieving those markers and/or of escaping or overcoming stigmata; d) a related issue, the convertibility (or not) of different types of “capital”; e) how middle-classness is or is not mapped onto other forms of distinction/discrimination, such as race and ethnicity; and finally f) to what extent middle-classness *matters*, the benefits of membership, so to speak, especially its effect on one’s ability to exercise the rights and obtain the benefits that the State theoretically confers on all citizens, but in practice rarely confers in equal measure.

**Markers of middle classness:** We need to think carefully about the things that people see or otherwise sense when consciously or unconsciously regarding one another in search of class cues. Do people in a particular society primarily notice the trappings of wealth and lifestyle? Is there a uniquely mesocratic consumption aesthetic, distinct from aristocratic and plebeian tastes? Middle-class products, brands, and pastimes? Does residence in specific neighborhoods or in a certain type of dwelling bestow middle classness? Alternatively, is class perceived in evidence of education, erudition, culture, or refinement that money less easily buys? Are there upper, lower, and middle-class accents and speech patterns? Elements of manners, self-presentation, and performance? Must one be employed in specific occupations? Must one have attended certain schools, belong to certain clubs, and have a certain set of friends? How much does one’s surname, birthplace, or kin relations count?

**Stigmata or anti-markers:** Just as we need to identify those things that people identify as markers of middle-classness, we must also pay attention to any characteristics that would exclude a person from society’s consideration as middle-class, characteristics that indelibly brand someone as plebeian or ignoble. I am not talking here about the simple absence of middle-class markers, but about things that *disqualify*, that negate all the other “middle-class” qualities that a person may possess. For example, while a society might identify certain consumption goods as typical of the middle or upper class, they might still refuse consideration to someone known to have earned his fortune by criminal means. Can well-off garbage collectors or slaughterhouse workers ever earn consideration

as middle-class? Can their children? Cases of “impure blood,” lowly caste, the wrong religion, immigrant or rural origins, all might be examples of stigmata.

**Mobility, the ease or difficulty of obtaining middle-class markers and escaping stigmata:** Are the paths to attainment of the visible and accepted markers of class only theoretically open, or do they genuinely exist for large numbers of people? Here, first and foremost, I include many of the classic measurements of social mobility: does a dynamic economy offer opportunities for those born in poverty to obtain wealth? Is access to an education of recognized quality open to children of all backgrounds? If certain jobs are a hallmark of middle-classness, do employers recruit for those jobs using strictly meritocratic criteria? Here I am talking both about the levelness of the playing field and about the magnitude of the prizes available to society’s winners. I also include in this category the kind of social and cultural openness that minimizes stigmata and facilitates “passing.” How easy or difficult is it to hide or disguise one’s origins, be they geographical, family, social, or whatever? Does everyone know who everyone is and where he/she comes from, or does anonymity breed the freedom to be a “clean slate”?

**Convertibility of different forms of “capital”:** Although akin to mobility in many ways, this category is subtly different.<sup>35</sup> Some traditional, closed, aristocratic societies with scant social mobility nevertheless found ways for those with newly acquired fortunes to filter into the highest elite, by purchasing noble titles, marrying into established families, consuming elegantly, buying an expensive private education, engaging in highly visible charitable activities, or some similar stratagem. Society might not recognize money itself—especially when newly or dubiously obtained—as a marker of status, but money could be quietly converted into things that *were* so recognized. If the outward display of refined taste is what drives society’s perception of one’s class, what are the pathways to that proper display? There was a time, for example, when sumptuary laws expressly prohibited those of “tainted blood” from obtaining the elegant consumer goods that visibly identified the nobility. Cultural prejudice against social climbers or *nouveaux riches* later served a similar purpose.<sup>36</sup> If erudition or “culture” is the marker of middle-classness, can the proper schooling and breeding be purchased? Are prestigious private clubs open to all who can afford the fees or must aspirants pass a vetting process? Do practices of housing discrimination and redlining control access to high-status neighborhoods, excluding people who could afford to live there but are not “the right sort”? If ascribed characteristics such as surname or caste still count for much, are there ways to escape—or to convince people to agree to overlook—one’s birth? Can talent or expertise or physical beauty, for example, be exchanged in the labor market or the marriage market for wealth or for a prestigious family name?

**How class is mapped onto racial, ethnic, gender or other hierarchies:** In some ways this fifth category encompasses each of the previous four. After all, markers and stigmata, pathways and barriers to social mobility, and the ways that different forms of “capital” can or cannot be converted, are precisely the locations where racial prejudice and other forms of discrimination enter into how individuals and societies “see” class. In many Western societies, for example, the middle class is implicitly imagined as white, and nonwhite aspirants must overcome a strong initial presumption that they do not belong. Mobility prospects may vary significantly by immigrant group, or by gender. Crucial differences between societies very often come down to these different mappings.

**The extent that class counts:** Although we tend to consider societies more or less egalitarian in accordance with their raw levels of wealth inequality and/or their mobility statistics, a third and sometimes overlooked measure revolves around the *difference* that a society’s perception of one’s class actually makes. How is a shabbily-dressed or inarticulate person treated in a government office, or on the street by police? Is the effective exercise of citizenship predicated on a public performance of culture, wealth, and “respectability”?<sup>37</sup> Years ago Brazilian sociologist Roberto DaMatta distinguished between procedurally egalitarian cultures where the overt assertion of class privilege is rare, and more openly hierarchical cultures where claims to special privilege are a common occurrence to which people quietly acquiesce. In the former, for example, people might react to a well-dressed man trying to cut to the head of a line by asking: “Who do you think you are?” while in the latter the line-cutter might explicitly announce his right to preferential treatment with the words: “Do you know who you’re talking to?”<sup>38</sup> Although we may presume that more economically egalitarian societies are likely to also be more culturally egalitarian, there is no reason why this must inevitably be so. There need not be any set correlation between the rigidity or fluidity of class boundaries and the lived consequences of those boundaries. Do those inside and outside of the middle class have roughly similar or highly differential access to health care, pensions, unemployment insurance, and other elements of a social safety net? What about access to credit? To legal representation? How class-endogamous are marriage patterns? Residential patterns? Patterns of educational access and attainment?

By now it should be clear that most of the recent econometric literature on the global middle class cited at the outset of this article is rather spectacularly *unsuited* to answer these kinds of questions. Just as unsuited are the political platitudes of Barack Obama and Marco Rubio, or the focus on people’s self-identifications to the exclusion of a deeper discussion of how individuals and societies *see* class and act upon what they see. Only careful multidisciplinary empirical research may begin to help us unlock the often hidden, often unconscious, and always

complex alchemy by which individuals and societies conjure up their middle classes from the raw clay of everyday perceptions and interactions.

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## Notes

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