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BEING MIDDLE CLASS IN BUCHAREST: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted intermittently in the capital city of Romania between 2015 and 2021, this paper demonstrates that to be middle class in Bucharest means to engage in 'grounding work'. This type of work enables class subjectification in a similar way to 'boundary work'. Yet, 'grounding work' is less about drawing boundaries between the middle class and their class others, and more about highlighting the foundations that support what lies within and without these boundaries. The middle class becomes the moral middle of the society. This is a work through which middle-class people speak and act themselves into existence, individually and jointly.

Keywords: Middle class, subjectivity, morality, Romania, ethnography

Lamont (2000) draws attention to the importance of 'boundary work' in the constitution of class subjectivities: by employing moral, symbolic and socio-economic criteria, people articulate their difference from their class others and conceptualise their place within the social world; such boundaries are consciously used in the pursuit of a positive self-identification. Historical and anthropological studies point out that an acute concern with in-betweenness prompts the middle classes to energetically engage in 'boundary work', although the distinction criteria vary over time and space (Heiman, Freeman and Liechty 2012; Marsh and Hongmei 2016; Donner 2017).

The argument put forward here is that 'grounding work', and not only 'boundary work', enables subjectification as middle class. This work is less about drawing boundaries between the middle class and their class others, and more about highlighting the foundations that support what lies within and without these boundaries. The foundation can only be morality, the most solid foundation possible in a secular world.[1] This

'work' is therefore about asserting the moral integrity of middle-class individuals and declaring moral acts and thoughts as the preserve of the middle class. Liechty (2012: 271) partially captures the specificity of this 'work' when he points out that middle-class groups '[locate] themselves in a socio-moral middle ground while locating their class Others in morally compromised social locations "above" and "below" themselves.' In contrast, the 'grounding work' operates with a different vision of the middle, not vertical, as the 'above' and 'below' terms suggest, but horizontal, indexing a concentrical disposition of the various societal strata and equating the middle with the centre/the core. This 'work' is meant to turn the middle class into the middle moral ground of the society, and, in the process, to proclaim (and create the illusion of) the stability and solidity of its position. More, the intention is to moralise and, thus, depoliticise the middle. Attention to this type of 'work' becomes even more important in the current anthropology of the middle class, which is less enthusiastic about achievements and more concerned with the tensions and contradictions between expectation and experience (Heiman, Freeman & Liechty 2012; Donner 2017).

Theoretical and Methodological Choices

In a research project about middle class in contemporary Romania, this 'work' has become intelligible in spontaneous and solicited reflections about what the middle class represents and about the middle class as a category of self-identification (spontaneous in the sense of not being solicited by the researcher; they are nevertheless prompted by experiences and events that their utterers found important for being and doing middle class, so in a wider sense they are also solicited). In the first case, I noted an inclination to focus on aspirations and efforts to live 'the good life', understood as a meaningful, morally undergirded existence. In the second case, I observed a tendency to self-characterise or evaluate the middle-class individual as a 'good person', understood as someone who knows and does what is right, and, more, an impulse to report on the pleasures of adopting the 'good person' position.

Analytically, this inquiry into what being and doing middle class entails is tantamount to investigating a process of class subjectification. In the theoretisation of class to which I subscribe, it does matter what people think about their social location and what they do to position themselves

in the overall structure of class positions (subjective class position or class identity). However, this does not mean that I ignore in my analysis the structural conditions of possibility and what the notion of class is meant to emphasise, namely that "indirect and impersonal forces might delimit our position in society or preordain the opportunities we will have and the quality of life we will enjoy" (Weiss 2019: 23).

I draw upon a distinction between class as category of 'social and political *analysis*' and category of 'social and political *practice*' that Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 4) propose. In the second sense, which I employ, class is embodied, that is, done and lived through practices and performances, rather than a component of an analytical system into which people are slotted according to some criterion or other. Further, class is articulated in discourses that individuals and groups use to define their social position and declare their interests. Class is, in brief, a 'bundle of discourses and performances' that create and mark differences between social groups (Lentz 2015: 42). More, in the sense I operate with, class is also experienced in ethical terms: 'class raises issues of the perceived relative worth of individuals, and about the relation between how people are valued economically, and how they and their actions are valued ethically' (Sayer 2010: 163). Emotions such as pride, shame, resentment, envy, compassion, fear and contempt (Sayer 2005) inform these definitions of worth and are, thus, central to the subjective experiences of class.

More specifically, in this paper, I do not understand middle class as a discrete group defined by occupation, income levels or consumer indicators, but pay particular attention to how it is defined through discourses about what being and doing middle class entails. I interpret the discourses as outcomes of a process of subjectification, that is, the negotiation of one's position within a particular social, economic and political context and in relation to what others in similar and different positions do and declare (Skeggs 1997).

Methodologically, in order to develop these lines of inquiry into being and doing middle class, I rely on definitions and reflections gathered through casual conversations, interviews[2], participant observation and content analysis of social media postings. The most challenging part in this research was the selection of the interviewees. I used different strategies: the first was to invite to take part in the research people whom I considered to be middle class, based on criteria such as education, occupation, property ownership, leisure activities and cultural consumption; the second strategy was to ask people in my social milieu to put me in contact

with persons whom they considered appropriate for my research project, also clarifying with them why they selected those persons. In addition, I made sure that I included persons from different segments of the middle class among my interviewees, for the combination of different forms of capital mark the experience of the 'middle' in different ways (Bourdieu 1984). However, I did not aim to map the middle class in all its diversity.

Definitions of the middle class emerged from these encounters, however they seemed to differ once the utterer moved away from the 'concrete' of economic resources, as the following exchanges illustrate:

Ş. L.: What does middle class mean to you?

S.C.: Middle class? What does middle class mean? Wait a second, is this good or not? What do you think?

Ş. L.: I am interested in what YOU think.

S. C.: Well, it means to have a car, to have money, to have a job, to be educated, to stand on your feet sort of. Wait a second, I don't think having a car belongs to this category…everyone buys a car. And I know a bloke who used to sleep in a huge BMW…[3]

M.C.: This is a research about the middle class in Romania. My first question is this: in your opinion, what are the defining characteristics of the middle class?

S.M.: I think we could define…well, I have never thought about this until now…but I think we can define a middle-class person as being the individual who has secured his existence. This person can satisfy the needs at the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, he has got everything he needs and, more importantly, he has an extra income. With this extra he can afford to invest, make, help…each person according to what one thinks and depending on what one believes in [..] Class exists. Let's be clear on this. Except that you need some basic criteria to be able to identify it. The problem starts here. [..] One of the reasons why the middle class in Romania is still not a stable category, a precise form or a certain level, is the fact that we no longer have moral guidelines. I mean this: when you talk about middle class, this is not only about money and properties. It is also about the way in which you use something, about the goal… how shall I put it? It is also about the ethics of the social use of these means […] I think there are at least two categories in the middle class. There is that common category, let me call it like this. These people have a normal dimension, they are healthy, I mean they don't have houses that are worth millions, only boorish, tasteless people have such houses. They have decent houses. It is actually a problem to own a house that it is well beyond your

needs, a maintenance problem first of all. I think we reach that point when a middle-class family needs to own a house that suits its needs, with the additional elements such as guest rooms and a large living room in which to host various events. […] Then there is the other category… I am not sure how to name them, maybe hypocrites? People who incessantly want to be at the top, want to be in vogue. Their houses are over-decorated, their cars are far beyond their needs…But they actually have no money, everything is on credit, everything is to show off…

A.S.: Who belongs to the middle class?

I.R.: The educated and the moneyed…and those who …are opened to the world, opportunities, in their free time take classes in personal development or spend time on Facebook and try to change the world, exchange and change opinions, express their opinions and worldviews. They also have the desire to surpass themselves, progress. They somehow feel that their place is not there, that they can do better and that they have to work hard to achieve this. For example, some of my university colleagues came by car to the faculty and said that their mums clean their houses, that they did not know how to use a washing machine, that they never had to or that they've just got back from their trips to Vienna, Venice and I don't know where. But, on the other hand, they were very entrepreneurial, I think this is the word. They were encouraged to start their own business, have initiatives, look for better things.[4]

Next to casual conversations and interviews, I draw upon observations of ways of being and doing middle class in public contexts, especially projects and places of socialisation, consumption and participation where middle-class people demonstrated their belonging and recognised others as belonging to this social space and where the overlaps and gaps between the material and discursive exemplifications of middle classness become visible. I followed on social media people whom I would categorise as middle class, not only personal acquaintances, but also persons whose opinions these acquaintances reposted and commented on.[5]

My interlocutors belonged to two categories: those who reluctantly included themselves in this category; and those who eagerly stated their belonging to this social formation (see below a discussion about the interlocutors who refused to self-identify as middle class).

B.R.: [long pause]…I don't think I have an image of the middle class people and, if we were to thick some objective criteria, I probably have some of them, but subjectively I don't picture myself as automatically

empathising [with middle class people]. Ah, well, I would like…and it would be wishful thinking to have someone include me into a box…and to consider one extreme, the uneducated and poor, people who can be easily manipulated, because they don't think with their own heads, and the other extreme those who became rich…and then this part of middle class, well, yes, I would probably be there. Look, until now, I have never imagined myself as belonging to the middle class…[6]

S. C.: I exceeded my condition [upward social mobility], that's for sure. But I don't know where I've arrived. I am not longer there, but I am not sure if I belong to the middle class or not. I mean sometimes, when I look around me, I ask myself if I don't earn too much and I tell myself that I had huge luck.[7]

For the first category, it was not necessarily a recognition of the fragility of 'being there' or a realisation that one was 'not yet there' in financial terms that impeded self-identification as middle class. The relational dimension of this notion and the implicit invocation of structural inequality and hierarchical stratification fed this reluctance, too. 'Class', Savage et al. (2001) point out, 'is not an innocent term but a loaded moral signifier.' Self-identification might be thus avoided for moral and political reasons. For the second category, it was rather their dream of belonging to the middle class that made them self-identify as such despite their limited capital, at least economic capital. They believed in the neoliberal promise that the middle class was a category open to everyone and strived to find a place for themselves within it.

I also met people who rejected the invitation to take part in my research because they thought that their disposable income was too low to guarantee them membership in the middle class. This reaction was all the more striking as the scholarly literature abounded in descriptions of the ways in which the middle class hid economic privilege under the cultural screens of hard work, achievement, meritocracy, honesty, civility, respectability or deservedness. I seemed to be offered the inverse, precisely because my interlocutors did not perceive themselves as being privileged and, therefore, tried to understand why this was the case. They admitted that they did not have to confront on a daily basis the anxieties of basic subsistence but emphasised that this did not make them 'proper' middle class either. The typical replies were: "Why would you think I belong to the middle class? I don't work for a corporation!" (i.e. I do not belong to the managerial-professional class) (B. M., researcher, mid-thirties) and

"Every month, one week before I get the salary, I have to borrow money. And you ask me if I think I belong to the middle class!" (I. P., mid-thirties, journalist).

Other researchers of postsocialist contexts have noted that class or middle class is reluctantly used for self-identification: Patico (2016: 280) points out that "class is an uncertain and emergent aspect of local social interaction"; Dunn (2008: 232) observes that "people don't perceive themselves overtly as members of social classes"; and recently Fengjiang and Steinmüller (2021: 18) emphasise that few of their interlocutors "acknowledge being 'middle class'". In this paper, I explore why this might be the case. In addition, I take discourses relating to the middle class, which need not actually mention these words, to be worthy objects of analysis.

The third methodological decision was to archive reflections about being and doing middle class posted on social media. I adopted this strategy in early 2017, when many middle-class persons I knew and/ or interviewed took part in the anticorruption protests and voiced their opinions and/or shared opinions that they appreciated. Discontent with the way politics had been carried out, especially with new legislation that would have helped politicians from the ruling party to evade corruption charges, brought thousands on the streets of Bucharest and other major cities. These protests have been described as the culmination of postsocialist middle-class politics. "In Romania, as in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc", notes Deoancă (2017: 4), "middle class activism hopes to forge a more democratic future through calls for transparency, legality, and virtuous citizenship" (see also Poenaru 2017). For me, the protests were the events that could trigger the kind of reflections I was interested in.

The anti-corruption protests permitted me not only to better position my interlocutors within the middle class, but also to expand my network. Firstly, not all of them took part in the protests. My left-leaning interlocutors considered the protests to be an irrelevant struggle between local and international capital. More, though they were among the first to criticise the limited impact of the measures that the then ruling party took to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, many appreciated their adoption. Therefore, they refrained from actively participating in the protests. Secondly, my interlocutors used social media to voice theirs and/or share opinions about ethics and politics. I started to follow on social media persons that kept appearing in these comments and/or shared postings. They became a category of 'indirect' interlocutors in this project. Thirdly, not all segments

of the middle class were engaged in the protests. The then ruling party that the protesters contested had middle-class members and supporters as well. I started thus to pay more attention to the "anxious coexistence of various middle classes" (Heiman, Liechty and Freeman 2012: 14). As the materials included in this article demonstrate, I also cultivated my ability to recognise ethnographically the thin line between 'boundary work' and 'grounding work' in the ways in which my middle-class interlocutors instrumentalised morality in interclass programme of exclusion and intraclass debate over standards of inclusion.

More, after the protests ended, I continued to follow the discourses and activities of politicians and activists who capitalised on their participation to these protests and introduced themselves as promoters of a new type of politics in which moral integrity prevails (e.g. Save Romania Union, a 'party of the middle class' that was formed after these protests and advertised themselves as a new class of uncorrupted politicians; Tudor Chirilă, an actor and activist who vocally promoted an initiative to forbid convicted people to occupy public offices; Valeriu Ciolan Nicolae, an activist who introduced himself as a 'good person' and competed as an independent candidate for the Chamber of Deputies in December 2020; he has recently started a series of social media posts in which he analyses the public CVs of various politicians and civil servants and points out their distance from a life of honest, middle-class achievement). They received support from sections of the middle class, including persons whom I knew and/or interviewed. Most recently, since the pandemic has started, I follow middle-class reactions to this health crisis, archiving comments that betray positioning as the 'good subject', that is, a responsible citizen who stays at home, respects physical distancing measures, wears mask and gets vaccinated.

The Middle Class during Socialism

This process of class subjectification takes place in a society where the middle class has recently had a particular ideological trajectory. In a socialist society, the regime propaganda proclaimed, there were no classes. However, in the really existing socialist society, a large middle stratum had gradually developed. The 'paternalist' Romanian state, like the other Eastern European socialist states, promised a 'good life' to the deserving 'working people' and put this promise into practice in different ways: by

subsidising basic provisioning (e.g., food, water, utilities); housing many of its citizens in standardised apartment blocks; building schools and hospitals; and guaranteeing free access to education, childcare and health care. As Gille, Scarboro and Mincytė (2020: 23) point out, this "socialist middle class [..] enjoyed high levels of economic certainty, much like its Western counterparts, but unlike them, this resulted primarily from full employment and from their free access to education, health care, cultural activities, retirement, and various social benefits". The state also encouraged its citizens to become discerning and demanding consumers, and to live cultured lives through participation in leisure and cultural activities (Crowley and Reid 2012; Bren and Neuburger 2012; Fehérváry 2013).

Gille, Scarboro and Mincytė (2020: 22) note the irony:

> a society aimed at transcending, if not eradicating, capitalism ended up incubating a massive social group that was the ideological opposite of the Leninist concept of the working class — that is, collectively minded and whose class consciousness arose out of its productive and collective contribution to society rather than from its ability to achieve individual levels of material comfort.

Historical and anthropological studies illustrate how class distinctions operated in the purportedly classless socialist societies (Fehérváry 2013; Wasiak 2020). More often than not, materials, practices and values that were associated with pre-socialist bourgeois lifestyles served as means to convey to the 'working people' their new status—as something to adopt, adapt, imitate, or on the contrary, distance themselves from (Dunham 1990).

The Middle Class during Postsocialism

In the postsocialist society, Romania along with the other Eastern European societies, the pretense of a classless society has vanished from the political discourse, being replaced by the disregard for class and, paradoxically, the promotion of the middle class at a time when wealth and poverty co-created each other and classes distanced one from the other even more clearly. The middle class has been introduced as the 'deserving class' and 'the dominant class of the future' (Crowley 2015), whose mere

presence guarantees the betterment of society. Its assumed propensity for moral conduct would contribute to the Europeanisation of society, the imagined espousal of liberal values would ensure democratic stability, and the envisaged capacity to consume would support the development of market economies. The middle class has been thus pushed for as an 'aspirational category' (Heiman, Freeman and Liechty 2012: 19), with the expectation that large parts of the population would work towards the means of distinction and advancement necessary to live a middle-class life.

In these public discourses, the critical part of the term, the notion of 'class' has been toned down.[8] This has happened through the casting of the middle class as 'a benign category, free of implications of exploitation and social struggle' (Heiman, Freeman and Liechty 2012: 18), and its portrayal as an open and inclusive category. Anyone could potentially join the middle class, for every individual has the ability to fashion his/her own life and 'make' it in the new societal order. This discursive centrality has also translated into concrete politics, which supported ideas and activities associated with the middle class, from entrepreneurship to suburban gated communities and commercial centres (Chelcea and Druță 2016).

The ideological investment in the middle class is a postsocialist project. However, the insistence on the socio-political mission of this class aligns with a globally hegemonic neoliberal agenda. This turns everywhere the middle class into its favourite subject, believing that it is convinced, or that it can be convinced, to accept that the market is the sole arbitrator of relationships with the state, community, family and self. Kalb (2014) interprets the widespread promotion and adoption of idioms and projects of middle classness as an issue of 'false consciousness'. For him, this is a manifestation of the ways in which the upper-class intervenes in the class struggle between the '1 percent' and the subaltern groups. In researching discourses and debates about what doing and being middle class entail, I concur with Lentz (2015: 15), who stresses that "it is important to explore struggles over class labels, and the practices of distinction associated with them, without implicit or explicit assumptions about 'false consciousness'".

A Sense of Fragility

The emphasis on the middle class has been put forward in a society that went through profound changes in a relatively short period of time. Parts of the population have benefited from these societal developments.

The early years of the post-socialist period in particular were full of optimism, with many people enthusiastically engaging in projects of betterment, from body care, consumption of imported goods, renovation of the newly bought socialist apartments, and the building of villas and detached houses on the urban outskirts to ambitious educational projects and entrepreneurship. In contrast, other societal segments experienced dispossession. They could observe and could dream about the kinds of lifestyles that became possible in the new politico-economic system but could not really experience them. They have had instead to deal with contracting labour markets, stagnant wages, downward occupational mobility, growing socio-economic differentiation, and a radically different spectrum of opportunities for success in the new society.

More to the interest of this paper, membership in the socialist middle class did not necessarily translate into membership in the postsocialist middle class. As Patterson (2011) points out, there was a socialist 'good life' to be lost as the socialist regime broke down. And more, as Fehérváry (2013: 22) emphasises, "the dream of a universal middle class, one that came with the national objective to extend modern prosperity to all citizens, died with state socialism".

The 2010s—the ethnographic research that informs this paper has been carried out intermittently since 2015—represents a period in which new opportunities, constraints, contradictions, and uncertainties have appeared, shaping existing economic, social, and political relationships for the worse rather than for the better. This is a post-EU accession period that has been marked by migration, many Romanians moving for shorter or longer periods of time to the western parts of Europe in search of better lives (some also left in search of the means to pay the debts that they had accumulated trying to live 'good lives' as proper capitalist subjects, either consumers or entrepreneurs). This also includes, though in small numbers, middle-class people in search of a better 'good life'. More, this is a post-2008 period, with the impact of austerity politics resulting from the global financial crisis still being felt, and with new crises bubbling up incessantly at the local and regional levels.

In the recent years, calls for more state support for the 'deserving' middle class and less for the 'undeserving' lower class—especially the poor living on state benefits—are put forward (L.M., an entrepreneur in her mid-forties, for example, told me that the state should do more to support people like her because they pay the taxes that support the pensioneers and all sorts of "beneficiaries of our money"). "Being middle-class is [..]

only ever a temporary promise" (Donner 2017: 18). The elusiveness of the promise of supporting the development of the middle class causes dissatisfaction and disappointment. The middle-class utterers of such calls express a frustrated sense of entitlement.

Economic horizons have been further contracting not only because of the global financial crisis but also because of the eagerness of local political elites to implement radical neoliberal policies. Commentators point out that Romania, like other Eastern European post-socialist societies, has so successfully 'transitioned' to capitalism that now places market fundamentalism at its core and politicians embrace neoliberal ideas that may seem extreme in the West (Cistelecan 2019). Neoliberalism has thus fostered a palpable sense of fragility among many inhabitants of this region.

Its most common manifestation during my research was a constant questioning of the purpose and means of studying an inexistent or illusory social formation. The following examples are illustrative of this kind of questioning:

S.D. (retired schoolteacher, early sixties): You say that your research is about the middle class. Is there really such a thing as the middle class? I don't think so. Then what do you study? And why?

S.M. (entrepreneur, mid forties): You kind of started this project too late. Now, after the financial crisis, many people find it hard to pay back the money they borrowed from the banks to buy large flats or build houses. Are they still middle class, if by the end of the month there is hardly anything left in their account? Actually, you can work with this definition: the middle-class person is in debt to the bank.

A.C. (engineer, mid forties): You should know that in Romania everyone thinks they are middle class. Mainly because they own a tiny flat. Romania has the highest number of house owners in the EU, except that most of these properties are flats in concrete blocks. But how many of these owners can really be called middle class, that is, people who enjoy security and prosperity?

V.L. (activist, early thirties): I can tell you what the middle class is! The middle class shouts loudly that healthcare should be privatised, but if they have to pay for surgery at a privately held hospital, they will empty their accounts. It's an illusory middle class.

R.P. (department manager, late twenties): Our shop is in Promenada Mall, and most of our customers work in corporations. The Romanians are rude, waiting for the cashier to put their shopping in the bag. They buy all sorts of expensive, foreign foods. As if they forgot how to cook, or

what their mothers cooked for them. This is the Romanian middle class, all about status, competition. You find a different story about the middle class in the books, all about decency, respectability. So, do we really have a middle class?

In all these examples, the existence of the middle class is discussed in relation to objectifiable economic criteria such as income, savings and property ownership (echoes of a conviction that in contemporary Romania money is the only means to obtain social validation?[9]). In our conversations, these persons did not use/refused to use middle class as a category of self-identification. However, in the stories about themselves and the reflections about their society there were frequent references to recognisable middle-class lifestyles and values (e.g. the importance of education, ideals of professionalism, investment in particular forms of leisure and implication in charity work and political activities, and references to integrity, dignity and decency).

Being middle class is a disquieting experience anywhere, not only in post-socialist Romania. 'Whether the middle class looks down towards the realm of less, or up towards the realm of more, there is the fear, always, of falling' (Ehrenreich 1989: 12). Yet, in recent times, this fear has been even more acute in this part of the world.

R.R. (sales manager, late twenties) summarised this sense of fragility:

In a middle-class family – let's take my family for example, my parents were both engineers – parents wake up in the morning and go to work. Children go to school. In the evening, they dine together. In the weekend, they go for a picnic in nature, go to the mountains [..] Some might call this a banal life, but others grew up like this. I think this is the life of the middle class. [..] Nowadays this is hardly the case. You give the money you earn to the bank. You worry [..] As a middle-class person, you should work and, in exchange, have a decent life. The state and the employer should offer you this. But I no longer feel this. The middle class is no longer a middle class. Now you are forced to take a loan to buy a house and a car, the perks that come with the middle classness. This means that you chain yourself to corporations, banks, whatever. This is now the middle class. The class that has, but actually doesn't have money. But shouldn't you also think that maybe in five years you won't be able to pay that loan? What's going to happen then? But, at the same time, you cannot limit yourself…We must understand this person too. If you don't take this loan and don't take this step, you cannot enter this game. What are you to do? Rent a house, take a mediocre job? So you take on this burden.[10]

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have increased this feeling of fragility. C.D. (academic, mid-thirties) has recently vented her frustration on Facebook:

> Until this damn pandemic, I thought I was part of the middle class. Low middle class, but still. Now I realise that there is no such thing, I mean the middle class. We are all poor and forced to stay at home. And there are those rich people who go on exotic vacations. And above all are the extremely rich, who do and undo things.

In the interview, she explained that she did not mean economic impoverishment, although many middle-class people might have experienced financial difficulties due to the pandemic. In her words:

> For me, belonging to the middle class is tantamount with having a civic consciousness, that is, you are aware of who you are, what you do, what you want, what you expect from the community, the nation, it is up to you how far you go with this projection. So [middle classness] has also this part in which you believe – well, I used to believe that I have a say. But now I think these things do not matter anymore. I have nothing to say, I no longer have a say, in the sense that even if I have something to say, nobody listens to me anymore, I have no power to make my work known because I cannot organise protests…

C. felt that an effect of the pandemic was the diminishing, if not erasure, of the very possibility of the middle class to be middle class, that is, a class that has its say in the society.

'Grounding work', that is, the work of highlighting the foundations that support what lies within and without the boundaries of the middle class, is a response to – and an attempt to alleviate – this sense of fragility. It takes the form of a discursive and practical demonstration to oneself and the others that the middle class is the middle moral ground of the society.

'Grounding Work'

In some cases, the encounter with the researcher was the first occasion to publicly (reflect on the opportunity to) self-identify as middle class. I include here my most telling experience, for these chain reactions are

revelatory for the kind of 'work' I discuss here. A friend of mine mediated my encounter with M. S., an investment banker in his late thirties. By way of introduction, M. S. recounted that he found surprising this request to take part in a research about the middle class. His first reaction was: "Why me?" His second thought was: "Do I really belong to the middle class?" During the first minutes of our encounter, he emphasised that he had never thought of himself in these terms and had never discussed this issue with friends and family. He could nevertheless explain what the middle class meant, and his personal story was one of hard work as means of achieving social mobility. During the interview, he verbalised a sudden conclusion: "R. [i.e. our common friend] must have thought that I am middle class because we have a summer house. But it is just a small wooden house we bought for little money in a remote village." Two years after this meeting, I found out from Facebook that he migrated for good to Germany, the country where a 'good citizen', who does his share of the contract and pays his taxes gets the respect and services he deserves from the state. At the end of the interview, I asked M.S. to put me in contact with someone whom he found appropriate for this research.

So I met A.N., his neighbour in a residential area in the south of Bucharest, an IT-ist in his late thirties. During the first minutes of our encounter, A.N. told me that he started laughing when M.S. invited him to take part in a research about the middle class. Then a few questions came to his mind: 'Is this something good? Is it something bad? Do I really belong to the middle class? But if I don't belong to the middle class, then who does?' This reasoning made him accept my invitation. He also pointed out that he had never thought of himself in these terms. He spoke about how his parents invested time and money into his education, his days as a poor but ambitious student in Bucharest, his working years in various corporations and his fulfilled dream of living in a detached house in the suburbia. Upon reflection, towards the end of our meeting, he suggested that belonging to middle class could be a topic of discussion for people in their twenties. Those like him (i.e. people in their thirties and forties) usually talked about the practicalities of adult life and the responsibilities that come with parenting. "You just live, don't think about life. The whole idea is to live comfortably", he concluded. I for one wanted to know why he laughed when M.S. approached him on my behalf. It turned out that the laugh was a way of hiding the pleasant surprise of being classified as middle class (the way he translated the invitation to take part in a research

about the middle class). At the end of the interview, I asked A.N. to put me in contact with someone whom he found appropriate for this research.

Then I interviewed C.D., A.N.'s co-worker, an IT-ist and failed entrepreneur in his early forties. He informed me that A.N. advised him to accept to be interviewed because, and he quoted him, "if we are not middle class, then who is? For the sake of a scientific project, you too have to talk to her". A.N. and C.D. had a good laugh, too. Upon reflection, C.D. thought his friend was right, although he has rarely, if ever, thought of himself in these terms. I asked him if he included himself in the middle class. C.D. replied pensively: "I do not know. I thought about this after A. told me about this interview. I thought of my neighbour. He lives next door, a house like mine, he earns more than I do probably, but he parks cars at a five stars hotel. He knows this cannot last forever. I got this from our conversations. But is he middle class or not? If nothing happens to my head, I can only go up [i.e. upward social mobility]." The interview turned to a search for an answer to this question. C.D. returned to this question during the interview, trying to place various acquaintances, and implicitly himself, in a particular class, using a variety of criteria, and ending up refining his own understanding of class as not being reducible to economic capital. At the end of the interview, I asked C.D. to put me in contact with someone whom he found appropriate for this research.

And so, finally, I encountered C.D.'s friend, S.A., a corporate middle manager in her mid-thirties. She did not comment on the invitation to take part in the research and did not question her belonging to the middle class. Instead, she went straight into a confident monologue about how the middle class was essential to the proper functioning of the society, a provider not only of money via the taxes it diligently paid, but also of a moral compass. I cannot know if her conversation with C.D., and the exchanges between these other persons, played any role in this straightforward self-classification and elaborated explanation of why the middle class is the moral ground of the society. Yet, her discourse is an example of 'grounding work', stemming from the certitude, felt and/or performed, of moral worth.

Building the Foundations

An exploration of the interrelated themes of the 'good life' and the 'good person' further reveals the 'grounding work' (i.e. building the foundations)

that goes into the making of middle-class subjectivity. As part of their self-categorisation and discussion about the middle class, my interlocutors detailed their aspirations to live a 'good life.' They elaborated on what constituted one, on the joy and satisfaction associated with it, the efforts they put into securing one for themselves and their children, and the difficulties they faced. Yet, regardless of how they practiced middle classness, in their discourses they insisted that 'the good life' that they referred to was not reducible to a 'consumerist' good life.

This understanding reverberated even on a fashion blog that some of my interlocutors read. L.P. (blogger and art director, late thirties) explained to her followers how they could distance themselves from consumerism and to what effects:

> Dress asceticism can extend to other aspects of life, too: less but better furniture, more meaningful holidays, more tasteful food, more soulful movies. And this is just the beginning. Because when you allow yourself to be good to yourself, when you learn to say NO, when you find out what really suits you, when you support those who believe in you through your choices, when you make progress day by day, you begin to understand that you do not need a lot of people, things and ideas for whom and in which "this is fine too" predominates, but a few pieces and hearts that make you a happier and better person.

The 'good life' was, in other words, less about material prosperity and hedonistic happiness, and more about a meaningful, morally undergirded existence. In support of this claim, my interlocutors spoke about civic engagement, political mobilisation and virtuous immobility.

A. D. (photographer, early thirties) informed me how pleased she was that in the recent years 'a critical mass of people has gathered, people who have understood very well that they have not only rights, but also obligations towards the others and the society in which they live.' She added that people like her and her husband understood that to 'live a life worth living, they had to do something, like engage civically, clean a park, donate unused clothes, participate in the life of their communities.' Our meeting took place a few days before she was due to take part in the Swimathon, a fundraising event in which she would swim to collect money for an NGO.

Participant observation and analysis of social media content allowed me to ascertain the extent to which this was not a demonstration for

the researcher, but 'grounding work' done for oneself and the others. The wider the public who witnessed the moral integrity of middle-class individuals, the better. The Facebook pages that I followed often included announcements about personal contributions to and/or social and humanitarian causes, their owners volunteering, signing petitions and supporting campaigns. In 2018, the year Romania celebrated 100 years since its establishment, a cultural magazine that oriented itself towards a middle-class readership, DOR, compiled a list of one hundred Romanians, the main criterion being their sustained contribution to the common good. From a different perspective, this was a demonstration of the neoliberal encroachment. Neoliberalism, Muehlebach (2012) emphasises, entails an intensification of not only market rationalities, but also moral sentiments.

I met A.D. again in the Victoria Square, while she was taking part in the anticorruption protests together with her children and she was singing their favourite slogan, "come outside if you care" (*ieşiţi din casă dacă vă pasă*). She explained to me that she took the children with her "to teach them to fight for what they care about and for their country". Other middle-class people I knew and/or interviewed were in the Victoria Square as well, to protest the amnesty for the corrupt. The moral acts and thoughts were, after all, the preserve of the middle class. One evening I went to the Square in the company of A.O. (academic, late thirties). He and his friends came almost every evening to the Square. A.O. introduced me as someone who returned to Bucharest after many years of living abroad and was now interested in politics, the way she had never been before. In the discussions that ensued, they emphasised that they intended to make a 'good life' for themselves in their native country. They were nevertheless aware that this was possible only if they did their share of the 'good', for them and their co-nationals, through all sorts of means, political participation included.

Despite inhabiting a society in which dysfunctionalities, injustices and illegalities had long been the norm; more, despite living in a society that had experienced wave after wave of migration, with millions of Romanians now living abroad, many other people I talked to or followed on social media stated that they did not want to leave their country. They were, as middle-class persons should be, exemplary citizens. They had chosen to stay, fight for and make possible a 'good life' life for themselves and the generations to come. The anti-corruption protests were one of their means of (re)asserting the social centrality of the middle class as the middle moral ground of the society.

I recounted this encounter with A.O.'s friends to an acquaintance, L. M. (entrepreneur, early forties). Instead of a reply, she underlined the paragraph she most liked in an article entitled 'We cannot all go', which was published in Dilema Veche, a cultural magazine targeting the middle class. The paragraph reads as follows:

> We cannot all pack and leave. I do not want to feel guilty that I did not plan to leave, that I did not even consider it as an option. I honestly think that one can live here if one does what one knows best, as people do everywhere. And if you care. Now I know that resignation and fatigue lurk at every street corner. You feel their cold breath at the back of your head when you enter a state hospital. Or when you need to solve some problems in a public institution. [..] It is always hard, exasperating, unfair. Something is not working. It gets complicated. It takes time. I do not think we can change the entire country, only the small countries within Romania. And for this you need energy and determination. Altruism and vision. It is hard, but it is possible.

L. spoke at great length about this virtuous immobility, something I could easily understand, she assumed, having returned to my native country to do my share of the 'good'. In all these instances, the emphasis on the 'good' rendered explicit what the speakers believed or wanted others to believe, namely, that the middle class represented the middle moral ground of the society.

The publicly oriented social media posts of my interlocutors often include announcements about social and humanitarian causes and/or personal contributions to these causes, usually in the form of volunteering activities and donations. The first category can be included under Morozov's (2009) term of slacktivism, a portmanteau of 'slacking' and 'activism' that is meant to emphasise that this "feel-good online activism [..] has zero political or social impact". However, rather than assessing the (in)efficacy of this online activity, I approach it in line with 'an anthropology of the good' (Robbins 2013). These posts are oriented both inwards and outwards. Keane (2015) notes that the explicit presentations, via social media in this case, turn ethical acts into something that others understand, debate, respond to and reproduce. More, these explicit presentations and the use of the interactive affordances of social media stimulate not only an intellectual, but also an affective response. In other words, they contribute to building up confidence in one's capacity and that of the others like him/her to be and do good. The second category of social media posts

confirms/consolidates this affective state, demonstrating their authors' virtuous character and belonging to a virtuous community (rarely referred to in class terms from within, though).

Most of my interlocutors and the middle-class persons I got acquainted with via social media shared a meritocratic vision of 'the good life' as personal achievement. It is worth mentioning here that only a fraction of these interlocutors, rather left-leaning, precarious creatives, envisioned the 'good life' as a collective state of well-being. They argued for the return of the modernist-socialist model of a state that takes care of all its citizens and provides public amenities. More, they fiercely criticised the middle class for their neoliberalised worldview and inability to see how neoliberalism will eventually hurt them too ("the critique of the middle class is a largely middle-class phenomenon" – Mazzarella 2005: 4). The first implication of this widespread meritocratic vision was that various forms of privilege and support were carefully edited out of the stories of how they lived or tried to achieve this 'good life'. In Ouroussoff's words (1993; quoted in Carrier 2015: 31), these are people who "think that they are where they are because they have earned it".

More, this vision of 'the good life' as personal achievement denotes that the one who forges a 'good life' for himself/herself and the significant others is a 'good person'. In the Romanian public space, the more common incarnation of the 'good person' is 'the beautiful person' (*omul frumos*). In this case, aesthetics is ethics, 'beautiful' referring not to aesthetically attractive features, but virtuous character. At a charity event, a young woman was selling white T-shirts. The slogan read "I love beautiful people, who do terrific things" (*Iubesc oamenii frumoȘi, care fac lucruri straȘnice*). I asked her, "Who are the beautiful people?". She smiled, gestured towards the packed hall and replied, "We are." She expressed confidence in her capacity and that of people around her to be and do good.

Exhibiting the Foundations

This type of work enables class subjectification. It operates through a particular combination of ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility. More, it declares moral capital to be the most important form of capital for the middle class and presumes morality to be the most stable and solid foundation that can possibly exist. Further, it proclaims the middle class to be the moral foundation of the society. In this way, this work 'grounds'

the middle class. It offers it a base, that is, morality, and offers the society a base, that is, the middle class as the moral ground. In circular fashion, by making it the stable and solid foundation of the society, it stabilises and solidifies the middle class. Consequently, it validates the aspirations to become middle class and legitimises the efforts to sustain middle-class status. This is, therefore, a type of work through which middle-class people speak and act themselves into existence, individually and jointly. Being middle class in Bucharest involves engaging in 'grounding work'. The stakes are existential. The recognition of this work becomes even more important in the current context. All over the world, not only in Romania, sections of the middle class struggle, their social reproduction seemingly impossible. Building/exhibiting the foundations is a discursive strategy to cover the feeling of sliding downwards.

NOTES

1   The persons who took part in this research stayed within a secular discursive framework, hence this framing in terms of morality. I did not investigate the relationship of this discourse to the religious models that have thrived in the public and private spheres throughout the country since 1989.

2   I have conducted research intermittently between 2016 and 2021, online research during the pandemic. Yet, some of the data used in this paper were collected between 2015 and 2017 as part of a larger project whose PI I was (UEFISCDI PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-2650, details of this project can be found at https://clasamijloc.wordpress.com/about/).

3   This interview was conducted by Ș. Lipan, doctoral researcher in the project on middle classness in Romania that I led between 2015 and 2017. (UEFISCDI PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-2650, details of this project can be found at https://clasamijloc.wordpress.com/about/).

4   This interview was conducted by A. Savu, doctoral researcher in the same project, (UEFISCDI PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-2650.

5   This is the method I employed most often in two periods of my research, first during the 2017 protests and secondly between 2020 and 2021, when the pandemic forced me to switch to online research.

6   This interview was conducted by A. Savu

7   This interview was conducted by Ș. Lipan.

8   For a discussion of the timid re-entrance of the notion of class in the academic, media, and political discourse in Romania since the late 2000s, see Ban (2015).

9   Patico (2005; 2008) focuses on impoverished Russian teachers, that is, a section of the socialist middle class which struggled to maintain this status during post-socialism. She shows how teachers pursued both material respectability and moral virtue. They simultaneously accommodated and resisted market forces.

10   This interview was conducted by Ș. Lipan.

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