THE CONTESTED SPACES OF CHILE’S MIDDLE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

For more than a century, scholars have struggled to define and understand middle classes in the developed capitalist West. While scholarship initially focused on the occupational structure (Wacquant, 1991; Chan, T. W., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (2007). Class and status: The conceptual distinction and its empirical relevance. American Sociological Review, 72(4), 512–532; Wright, E. O. (2005). Foundations of a neo-Marxist class analysis. In: E.O. Wright (Ed.) Approaches to class analysis (pp. 4–30). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) influential work sought to demonstrate how the occupational, educational, and cultural fields combine to configure classes and to reproduce the class structure. Subsequent work has either extended or challenged Bourdieu’s framework, though with a sustained focus on the cultural and symbolic dimensions of class. Recently, authors have taken these concerns to the Global South, adapting these concepts to the specific circumstances of postcolonial settings in a globalizing world. This chapter contributes to this discussion through an analysis of 63 semistructured interviews with urban, middle-class Chileans and photographs of 28 home interiors. I find that the middle classes comprise several fractions with distinct occupational and educational profiles. Members of these fractions seek meaningful identities while engaging in symbolic combat with other groups in a society historically marked by an aristocratic elite, a recent
military dictatorship, and current free market policies that have reconfigured possibilities for upward and downward mobility while integrating Chile more firmly within global commodity and image circuits. Each group evidences important gender and age divisions. The principal foci of conflict are cultural consumption, childrearing and education, and electronic media use. Members of Chile’s middle classes are locked in an unresolved conflict over who they are, who they should be, and where they fit in the global cultural economy.

While there is a long tradition of scholarship on the middle classes in the developed capitalist West, only recently have scholars considered the cultural dimensions of middle classes in the Global South. This chapter examines the contemporary middle classes in Chile, where three decades of neoliberal policies and the legacies of dictatorship have shifted the contours of symbolic struggles across class fractions. I explore how urban, middle-class Chileans display distinct and symbolically opposed tastes and lifestyles through their patterns of consumption, childrearing, education, and identity. These patterns reflect individuals’ and groups’ efforts to sustain nationally based political and cultural traditions in a neoliberal, post-authoritarian setting, to maintain or improve their social position in relation to competing class fractions, or to negotiate the boundaries between national and global cultural trends and practices.

Chile is an apt setting for exploring these issues. During Augusto Pinochet’s military rule (1973–1990), it was one of the first developing world countries to impose neoliberal policies, sparking transformations in firms, markets, and services (Constable & Valenzuela, 1991; Martínez & Díaz, 1996; Winn, 2004; Sabatini & Arenas, 2000; INE, 2008). These policies provoked changes in the occupational structure, cultural practices, and political identities, which are now revealed through new forms of consumption (Moulian, 1998; Tironi, 1999), as members of the middle classes construct new identities (Ariztía, 2009a, 2009b; Méndez, 2006, 2008). This chapter contributes to recent interest in middle-class identities by examining the cultural practices and identities of distinct middle-class occupational groups. The focus on cultural differences within the middle classes complements studies elsewhere in Latin America that seek to identify elements that unite the middle class (O’Dougherty, 2002; Colloredo-Mansfeld, 1999; Wilk, 2006).

I focus on symbolic competition between middle-class fractions, developing a typology based on occupation and education that also considers political, religious, and regional sources of identity. An aristocratic tradition
criticizing upwardly mobile groups’ materialism permeates discussions of consumption, work, education, and childrearing. I find important horizontal and vertical differences between class fractions (Bourdieu, 1984, 2000). Public employees, educators, and artists emphasize their cultivation, favoring European art, folk culture, and protest music, while criticizing U.S.-based globalization; privately employed professionals highlight their family loyalty and moral worth, preferring Chilean art and decorations reflecting family ties, and U.S.-based media products while criticizing social climbers and intellectuals; and members of the lower middle class emphasize their practicality and outsider status, displaying frugal tastes, enjoying a rich family-based social life, and feeling squeezed between the upper middle class and the poor. Each group displays important variations in identities and tastes based on gender and age. A detailed analysis of these findings follows a review of scholarship on the middle classes in Chile and a discussion of this study’s design and methodology.

THE MIDDLE CLASSES IN CHILE

Scholars have recently addressed how globalization – understood here as the intensification of economic, political, and cultural connections across localities, regions, nations, and the planet – affects national cultural patterns. Ritzer (2003) and Caldeira (2000) argue that the expansion of American commercial and media culture weakens local cultures, whereas O’Dougherty (2002) and Caldwell (2002) argue that globalization has led Brazilians and Russians to affirm their national identities. In contrast, Wilk (2006) sees the global and the local as mutually constitutive. Belizean migration to the United States and U.S. tourism in Belize increased demand for Belizean national cuisine rather than American foods. García Canclini (2001) argues that in Latin America, declines in the national media, film, and music industries have coincided with the rise of neoliberal policies and the expansion of U.S. media companies. Latin Americans increasingly consume Hollywood films and only a small elite view nationally made films, in part due to declining government subsidies of the film industry. The population has shifted its cultural point of reference from Europe to the United States.

While Chile’s middle classes date back to the 19th-century emergence of small entrepreneurs (Salazar & Pinto, 1999, pp. 70–74), I focus on their evolution during the 20th century. From the 1920s until the mid-1970s, the
middle classes grew through public employment in the civil service, education, and health sectors (Cerda, 1998, p. 133). Middle-class membership was signaled by a high level of education, an interest in high culture, and an austere lifestyle. Middle-class people secured jobs and solved personal problems by drawing on clientelistic ties with party members or state officials (Salazar & Pinto, 1999; Barozet, 2006).

Pinochet’s free market reforms (trade liberalization, privatization, and deregulation) beginning in the 1970s led to declining public employment, incomes, and status for middle-class employees (Adler Lomnitz & Melnick, 1994). During the 1970s, declining relative prices in consumer goods and increased availability of credit gave members of the middle classes growing access to consumer durables (Martinez & Tironi, 1985). Additionally, as public employment declined in the 1980s, middle-class citizens took refuge in private sector jobs and self-employment. The 1990s witnessed growing employment in private services and recovering public employment (especially in education and health), while the incomes of the self-employed grew more quickly than those of salaried employees (León & Martinez, 2007). Chile’s free market reforms have made the income structure highly rigid at the top and bottom ends (Chile is one of the most unequal countries in the most unequal region in the world), but there has been modest upward mobility in the middle of the income distribution (Torche, 2005).

The 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s also witnessed the transformation of housing, retail, and credit sectors. The Pinochet regime’s land market liberalization allowed real estate developers to build gated communities and shopping centers on cheap land in mixed- and low-income areas outside the traditional elite enclave in eastern Santiago. High-rise apartment construction also increased sharply throughout Santiago. Malls and big-box stores grew, consumer credit became more widely available, and the advertising and media industries became more sophisticated and globally connected (Sabatini & Cáceres, 2004; Sabatini & Arenas, 2000; Purcell, 2008; Salcedo, 2003; Cox, Parrado, & Ruiz-Tagle, 2006; INE, 2008). These phenomena have contributed to the democratization of consumption (Tironi, 1999) and incipient patterns of individualization (PNUD, 2002).

These changes have influenced middle-class identities. Méndez (2006, 2008) examines the identities of members of distinct middle-class fractions in Santiago. She finds that individuals face challenges negotiating the transition from their childhood-based habitus to their adult-based class communities – they experience a mismatch between capital and field. Interviewees also have difficulties determining whether authenticity means being true to one’s origins or developing a new identity project. Following...
Lamont (1992), she argues that individuals manage these tensions by making moral judgments of those in other class fractions.2

Ariztía (2009a, 2009b) examines the construction of middle-class identities through the interaction between real estate developers and upwardly mobile Santiago residents. Developers design and market new housing developments as a “step up” for citizens with modest backgrounds. New residents gain decorative ideas from showrooms and new neighbors and remodel homes by using sweat equity and activating personal networks. Residents interpret their upward mobility in light of their interaction with housing industry experts, neighbors, and the material properties of the housing development.

Like Bennett, Savage, Silva, Warde, and Gayo-Cal (2009), Gayo, Teitelboim, and Méndez’s (2009) multiple correspondence analysis of survey data on cultural practices finds that class and age crucially shape cultural practices in Chile. Upper and middle-class Chileans have higher levels of cultural participation and more connection with high culture and diverse cultural products than their poorer counterparts, while youth are more involved in cultural production than older adults who participate as spectators.3

Two recent works illustrate the historic and contemporary manifestations of symbolic divisions within the middle class. Contardo (2008) argues that Chile’s landed aristocracy, which emerged during the conquest and stabilized in the 19th century, developed social prejudices toward individuals with indigenous physical features, people with Jewish or Middle Eastern backgrounds, conspicuous consumers, and those who lacked an elite surname. These patterns of discrimination restricted entry to the elite although subordinate groups have sought social mobility by emulating elite prejudices.

Subercaseaux’s (2009) novel, “I Have a House for Sale in the Wealthy Neighborhood,” chronicles position taking in the housing market by members of different upper class fractions and aspiring new entrants to the elite. Conservative aristocratic families feel threatened by the new rich and those practicing alternative lifestyles, conservative and progressive segments of the upper class unite in their hostility toward the poor, and the new rich face harsh stigma as they attempt to join elite circles. These prejudices and exclusions are manifest in the real estate market, where residence in symbolically coded neighborhoods and homes, and use of specific decorative styles become the weapons elite class fractions use in symbolic conflicts.

My analysis extends the work of Méndez (2006, 2008), Contardo (2008), and Subercaseaux (2009). I identify three class fractions whose contrasting
tastes reflect their distinct profiles of economic and cultural capital and divergent ideological orientations. Extending Bennett et al. (2009) and Gayo et al. (2009), I examine divisions within each fraction based on gender and age, while examining diverse cultural practices among privileged groups. Intellectuals sharply criticize U.S.-based globalization, while professionals and the lower middle class enjoy U.S.-based cultural and media products, signally ideological diversity among these groups.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is based on 68 semistructured interviews with 77 adults (several interviews included both spouses) aged 36–59 years old. The interviewees reside in Ñuñoa, an Eastern Santiago municipality where civil servants and immigrant (Jewish and Middle Eastern) entrepreneurs historically resided and that includes a rich educational and cultural resources; and La Florida, a growing southern Santiago suburb with limited cultural and educational institutions and a growing presence of upwardly mobile lower middle class and professional fractions. Both municipalities are socioeconomically diverse, though average earnings are higher in Ñuñoa.

This study began with snowball samples in each area followed by focused research on parents in traditional Catholic and secular alternative schools. Interview questions focused on adults’ family, educational, and occupational histories; family monthly income; rationale for choices of children’s school and home; tastes in home decoration, food, and entertainment; and attendance at cultural events. Additionally, I conducted participant observation at school and other social events and photographed 31 living rooms.

Many interviewees have experienced unemployment and frequent job and career shifts, reflecting Chile’s free market economic model and weakly regulated labor market (Martinez & Diaz, 1996; Frank, 2004; Constable & Valenzuela, 1991). Many women interviewed are currently employed, reflecting growing female labor force participation. Today 44.5% of Chilean women are employed, though better educated women have higher participation rates, reflecting greater labor market returns to education (Castañeda, 2010; Contreras, Puentes, & Rau, 2006). The sample includes a high incidence of divorce or separation resulting in female-headed households or blended families, reflecting national trends (Tironi, 2005).
Following work on the cultural dimensions of middle classes, I identify three class fractions with different occupational and educational profiles, world-views, as well as discourses and practices regarding consumption, education, and childrearing. First, the left-wing intelligentsia is composed of highly educated Santiago natives with strong ties to elite universities and the public sector. Second, successful professionals hail from Santiago and the provinces, have technical or university degrees, are richer in economic capital, have strong ties to the private sector, and are highly religious. Third, members of the lower middle class have lower capital volume than the first two fractions, modest origins, and a strong sense of social exclusion.

Each group includes significant internal divisions based on gender and age, and all are strongly shaped by the enduring prejudices introduced by Chile’s 19th-century oligarchy. My analysis points to cultural capital’s strong imprint on different class fractions as well as groups’ sharply contrasting worldviews. Chile’s middle classes are engaged in intense conflict over the principles of domination and virtue that hold sway for themselves and their children.

Though it may appear surprising that a left-wing intelligentsia survived Chile’s 17-year conservative dictatorship, this group emerged during the 1980s student protests at the Catholic University and University of Chile. Their generation gave rise to renewed interest in folk music and crafts as an emblem of solidarity with the poor (Constable & Valenzuela, 1991), and the elite or intellectual origins of many left-wing families equipped them with skills and contacts permitting effective reinsertion into labor markets and universities with the 1990 return to democracy. Further, public sector expansion under two decades of civilian rule by presidents leading a center–left coalition favored the job prospects of civic-minded, well-educated adults.

Almost all members of this group have university degrees (some have MAs), and many have university-educated parents, a rarity until recently in Chile. Most work in education, the arts, health care, information technology, and other fields requiring significant education, and many are publicly employed. Their gross monthly incomes average between $2,000 and $4,000, placing them in the bottom half of the top-income quintile and the second quintile (AIM, 2008).
Members of this fraction evidence serious engagement with the Chilean, Latin American, and European fine arts, art film, Latin American crafts, and education as an end in itself. Their interest in the fine arts is evident in the following example. Morgana, a physical education teacher and single mother described her favorite painters:

I love Van Gogh, I think he’s fascinating … I love Picasso … I love Matta … I love Dali – those melting clocks. That gal over there on the wall – that Dali painting is called, “Woman Looking out the Window.” … Even though some people think because I am a physical education teacher I don’t know about anything – they used to call us “muscle heads” in college – I love art and I have a lot of art books upstairs, I recognize painters, I go to a lot of art exhibits, and I like to read a lot (interview, December 1, 2008).
Like displaying examples of European fine art in one’s home, viewing art films is a crucial setting for intensifying group ties and expressing distaste for Hollywood commercialism. Batica, an artist who also works in a human rights NGO, comments:

We’re really open-minded, but we never go to those silly movies … We love European films and directors. There are a lot of art films – we like those intelligent films, like they killed someone and later the film takes a strange turn. Or suspense films. We’d never go to Rambo. I don’t know how to explain it – like really obvious movies – there’s always a really good guy and a really bad guy. What was that one – Dustin, Fastin, Ostin?

Interviewer: Austin Powers?

Batica: Yeah, something like that – those things never appeal to us … We like dramas. We don’t like horror films, either. We never go to see “Chucky” – or Chacky, I don’t know – we never go to those. (interview, October 1, 2008)

Batica underscores her own and her partner’s intelligence and knowledge of European art films, while poking fun at lowbrow Hollywood films and implicitly at viewers who like films she views as simple minded and pointless.

While the above examples point to cultivation, discussions of home interiors focus on differences between authentic tastes and prefabricated “showroom” houses. The display of crafts is often tied to leftist political identities and discomfort with or critique of contemporary retail and housing development. As Tatiana, a pharmacist, and Leo, an architect, comment,

Tatiana: All of the things in our house have a sentimental value – they are mementos from trips, handmade things. Leo made that painting … We don’t like antiques. We like crafts or hand made goods.

Leo: The thing that is so interesting about handmade goods is that people take something that is lifeless and give it life.

Tatiana: When we travel, we try to get to know the local music, books, and recipes, to get a sense of the human value of a place and bring a little piece of the world back to our children.

Tatiana: A friend from El Salvador gave us that object and said, “I want to leave a small memento from El Salvador in your home.”

Leo: We want to have things that show our children that the world is bigger than what they see every day.

Tatiana: I have a fixation with roots. They are the strength that gives you identity. I’d like to be a Mapuche [native peoples in Chile] – authentic. I studied modern, Cuban, African, and Mapuche dance – I like pure things.

Leo: I admire woodcarvers, people who can draw. They make authentic things … Showroom houses appeal to people who don’t have the tools to satisfy their needs. It’s a superficial model associated with people who don’t control their own destiny. They don’t live; they exist – they inhabit a set design that is not made for people. It lacks feeling. I’m not making an aesthetic judgment; I’m making a human judgment (interview, April 14, 2009)
Leo and Tatiana focus on the idea that native and rural peoples produce and preserve authentic traditions through crafts in contrast to artificial showroom houses. Leo uses his architectural knowledge to argue that these homes appeal to, but psychically harm their owners, distancing himself and his wife from their superficial inhabitants and designers. They criticize materialistic, upwardly mobile Chileans who favor apartment towers, malls, and showroom houses.

Here, like Méndez (2006, 2008), I argue that the two combine knowledge of high culture (architecture) and popular culture to show that they are more authentic and knowledgeable than those who seek purely material gain and lack an appreciation for beautiful objects. In contrast to Bourdieu's argument, in contemporary Chile, high and low culture do not occupy two opposite poles; rather, these individuals contrast the simultaneous appropriation of high and folk culture to consumption of mass culture and hedonism. Additionally, folk artifacts serve the didactic function of providing children with international and multicultural awareness and sensitivity.

This couple implicitly contrasts the globalization of standardized, mass-produced housing and design with authentic, local Latin American crafts. However, as Barr Melej (1998) argues, in the 1920s and 1930s, middle-class political reformers tried to wrest the concept of the Chilean nation from the landholding elite by reappropriating the image of the cowboy (huaso) and deploying it in populist terms. This cultural strategy had affinities with Latin American populism and indigenism evident in the work of the Peruvian radical intellectual José María de los Ríos and the concept of the Cosmic Race developed after the Mexican revolution, and the ideal of a continent-wide nationalism present in the Chilean Socialist Party (Mallon, 1992; Drake, 1978).

Moreover, the contemporary revalorization of “authentic” cultures is part of contemporary global processes. Globalization has led immigrants, tourists, and successful businesspersons with indigenous backgrounds to value “authentic” cultures (Appadurai, 1996; Wherry, 2008; Colloredo-Mansfeld, 1999). The turn toward the “native” has historical roots in Chile and Latin America, and the revalorization of roots results from contemporary globalization.

Intellectuals’ distaste for shopping malls also reflects the rejection of standardization. Paci, who studied physical education and now works in pharmaceutical sales, comments: “I don’t shop often in malls unless I have something specific to buy … I don’t like the aesthetic, the artificial light, the multitude of people walking. I’d rather have fresh air and walk other places”
(interview, September 9, 2008). By noting her preference for more authentic urban environments over malls, Paci distances herself from mall designers and patrons. She thus offers class-based judgments of “poor” taste while rejecting global forms of architecture and retail development. Hence, her rejection of malls is also a defense of local traditions of urban dwelling.4

Work is another setting for boundary construction. Ricardo, a judge, comments:

At work, I think it’s different to resolve disputes involving people from La Victoria [a poor settlement created by communist activists in a 1950s land takeover] and La Pintana [a low income community created after the dictatorship’s slum clearance policies] – they have different histories, traditions and spaces. My colleagues look at it from a distance and have really conservative and rigid opinions ... They’re young judges without much life outside work. So, you start talking to them about what you did on the weekend, a really interesting book you read and get no reply ... They have few interests beyond the typical ones of what to buy, vacations, and their kids. (interview, May 5, 2009)

Here, Ricardo associates political conservatism and materialism with the absence of intellectual interests. Because he is deeply engaged with intellectual activity and social justice, he finds interactions with colleagues discouraging.

Because adults in this group value “educating the whole person,” they offer their children enrichment activities and attempt to shield them from commercial media culture. Victor, a history teacher and journalist who leads historic walking tours, comments,

We like classic films, good directors, films that have won Oscars. When we go to the movies with our kids, due to generational differences, we try to see something we all like – we try to adapt to the boys’ taste. They’ve seen some classic films and we’ve seen some silly films. But, luckily, they have seen a lot of movies that your average teenager has not seen. (interview, October 7, 2008)

Other parents limit children’s television or internet use. Evelyn, an art teacher at her children’s alternative school, comments: “We have to restrict their internet use because otherwise they would be online chatting, downloading movies, and listening to music all day. We chose not to have cable TV to limit their choices as well” (interview, May 6, 2009). She restricts access to electronic media to promote her children’s cognitive and emotional development.

Much like their tastes in film, intellectuals have diverse music tastes. Most express a preference for 1980s Chilean protest music (canto nuevo and nueva
trova) but also enjoy diverse musical forms. Rodrigo, a machine salesman, and Lenka, a math teacher, comment:

Lenka: I like blues and jazz.
Rodrigo: I like nueva trova, songs in that style had a big influence on me – all of the Chilean song (canción chilena) from the dictatorship era ... all of the resistance songs ... I also like boleros.

L: We listen to a lot of bolero, tango [both well-known forms of Latin American popular music]
R: I’ve learned to like jazz. I didn’t like it at first, and Lenka [introduced me to it] (interview, November 17, 2008).

Here, we see the association between music and left political identities as well as a taste for diverse musical styles demonstrating cultivation and distinction. Because these adults are intensely involved with their children’s education, they are at times judgmental of other adults’ parenting styles.

As Ivan, an urban planner, comments,

I’ve noticed that our peers are less involved with their children than we are ... The big problem is that they work like crazy, the mother and father ... And then they feel guilty, and they try to offer their children compensatory gifts, and then the children act out – you get the point? The other day we had a PTA meeting, and several mothers said they told their children three or four times to do their homework and then they didn’t know what to do. So, you can see they have a mess on their hands, right? And then you have the couples who are separated and each parent says something different – what’s the kid supposed to think? I think the mothers feel guilty and want to fulfill their maternal role; but in the end, their job is more important. All of our decisions revolve around how they affect our daughter and her education. (interview, May 27, 2009)

Here, adults contrast their focus on education with other parents’ emphasis on work and consumption. For Ivan, participation in consumer culture results in neglect of one’s children.

There are important gender differences among intellectuals. Rafael, an educational researcher, comments, “We have really neglected decoration in our house. If my wife had her way, we’d have more decoration ... I much more enjoy our backyard, while my wife prefers entertaining indoors” (interview, April 22, 2009). These splits reproduce symbolic differences between outside (male) and inside (female), while decoration as feminine (Bourdieu, 1977).

Another gendered phenomenon is the downward mobility and stigma of single mothers’ experience. As Juanita, an agronomist and single mother, comments, “Having two incomes really helps the family budget. At times I feel disadvantaged in relation to my peers because I can’t enjoy some of the same privileges as they do” (interview, September 12, 2008). In another
example, Aniluap, a freelance advertiser and transcriber, comments, “I don’t know if I am such an ideal representative of the middle class because I have a dysfunctional family life. Since I have had three children by three different men, I often feel excluded and put down at my youngest daughter’s school” (interview, April 5, 2008). These examples highlight how gender inequalities in the labor market and traditional gender norms significantly diminish the life chances and status of educated, professional single mothers.

Many informants feel uncomfortable with their prosperity. Tatiana, interviewed above, comments, “People are often impressed that I am a chemical pharmacist. Just to burst their bubble, when people ask about my profession, I tell them I’m a public employee” (interview, April 14, 2009).

Mario, a computer specialist, comments, “Our children asked why their mother is the municipal head of the Ministry of Education and they attend a private school. Well, the school was founded by parents who were political activists under the dictatorship to shield their children from repressive environments … It’s become customary for parents to pay for education” (interview, April 29, 2009).

These interviews illuminate the ambivalence members of the left-wing intelligentsia feel. They are acutely aware of the conflict between their privileges and their political ideals. Like Méndez (2006), I argue that they face a mismatch between the habitus they developed as children and young adults when they faced hardships and political repression, and their comfortable adult life in a society where they feel like cultural and political outsiders. They express this tension through ambivalence and efforts to minimize evidence of their prosperity so that they might not be compared with the materialistic adults whose values they reject.

**Professionals**

Like intellectuals, professionals are primarily university educated, though some have technical degrees. Members of this group work in banking, pharmaceutical sales, family businesses, engineering, and design and advertising. Their incomes are similar to those of the first group. Like the intellectuals, they value education, but see it as a means to professional success rather than as an end in itself. Many members of this group are religious, with some identifying with the Catholic Church’s social mission.

They lack the intellectuals’ ambivalence about their social position, though they share the former’s criticism of others’ materialism. In contrast to
intellectuals, they express suspicion of intellectualism, and some feel inferior
to intellectuals or members of the elite.

I begin by discussing artwork. Patricia is the daughter of an immigrant
businessman who grew up in a provincial town, and her husband is an
agronomist from an elite family. She has a business degree and is the
assistant of a prominent businessman. She comments:

My husband’s godmother, Carmen Correa, painted that one. The other one is a
Francisco de la Puente; he is also well known ... We like art but don’t really go to
museums or galleries. If we have the chance to talk to an artist, we do so. There’s a
painter in our family, Hernán Gana. We talked to him and got more interested in art.
We’ve had the chance to meet painters who are equipping their studios. One was renting
a space from the Trappist monks, so the children could see an artist’s studio (interview,
March 6, 2009).

Marcelo studied physical education though he sells pharmaceuticals. His
father was a bank executive, and a grandmother came from the agricultural
elite. Marcelo’s tastes in art reflect his identification with the rural life he
enjoyed on his grandmother’s estate. His elegantly decorated apartment
includes reproductions of paintings depicting a British hunting expedition,
tapestries with scenes of the European nobility, meal trays with images of
horses, as well as a portrait of Saint John Calasanz, the namesake of his children’s school: “I really love horses, which is why you see all kinds of horses. Calasanz opened the first public school ever in Spain – he was a visionary. You see that dog? When JC Penney closed, they had a fire sale. I convinced my wife to go and we bought that painting for a third of its original price” (interview, March 23, 2009). His interest in images of the rural gentry (hunting scenes), nobles, and focus on religious material reflect his family’s aristocratic origins and his strong Catholic faith.

Marcelo and Patricia have distinct aesthetic tastes from members of the intelligentsia. Their family ties to an economic elite lead them to favor images of luxury, religious and historical themes, and to focus on social connections with well-known artists rather than knowledge of consecrated artworks (Bourdieu, 1984; Bennett et al., 2009).

Members of this group with more modest origins commented that a retired mother or sibling had given them paintings they produced after taking art classes and that some produced their own artwork. Here, individuals’ social capital influences the art displayed in their homes. Carola,
a computer engineer, comments, “I have several oil paintings my mother gave me. She has been taking classes for ten years. When I visit her studio, if I like a painting, she says, ‘go ahead and take it home.’” (interview, March 25, 2009). She does not refer to the content of these paintings: they signal social relationships rather than indicating the owner’s refinement.

Members of this group display four different tastes in home decoration. The first two focus on traditional styles, family history, and simplicity. Patricia, cited above, comments:

We’re really traditionalist. Many things here are wedding gifts. We like antiques and we have a bunch of old cigarette lighters from my father-in-law who was a diplomat. Our tastes are really conservative. I like the fact that there’s a living room and a dining room and the children know that we can sit and chat in the living room … We have a family life, not like those houses where the owners say, “this is the dining room but you can’t go inside.” I want the kids to know there is a certain order. (interview, March 6, 2009)

A second taste, popular among interviewees with rural origins, is for rustic furniture. Mickey, a history teacher from a provincial city who is married to a pharmacist, comments, “We both like high quality hard-woods. I think it has to do with our childhood. My husband grew up in the country … So he feels close to the land; to trees … Our style is simple. We don’t like houses that are full of furniture or decorations” (interview, November 9, 2008).

While the above examples illustrate the rejection of contemporary design and decoration, others have contrasting tastes. Paula is a designer who worked in design and banking:

We bought a dining room table for eight from friends who build furniture … They make modern furniture along traditional lines … My husband doesn’t like old things, either, so we went more for modern things … All the furniture we bought from a guy my husband went to college with who has a store with really pretty things. (interview, March 27, 2009)

Paula, like other interviewees who work in advertising or design, diverges from the trend toward either classic or rustic furnishings because of her training, employment, and social ties to the design and advertising industry, where the accent is placed on contemporary decorative styles.

A final group notes the absence of decoration in their homes or their lack of taste. Ernesto, a financial analyst, and Deyda, a paralegal, comment: “We have a minimalist style, because we always have preferred to give our children the comfort and freedom to move around as they wish … When we were first married, we bought furniture and rugs. After Diego was born, he vomited on the rugs and spilled milk and so we had to throw them out”
Clau{}dia, an attorney from a provincial city, emphasizes her lack of refined taste:

\begin{quote}
I think my decorations are based more on the objects’ sentimental value than decorative style. I don’t have much style ... I have a piece of furniture in the dining room with shelves that many people tell me is kitsch ... My dad’s style is totally kitsch; my mom loves to fill her house with rugs, vases, artificial things, and stuffed animals – it’s a joke. My friends have a style ... that’s more elegant, more conservative, more chic ... I don’t feel comfortable sitting in my friend’s living room because I’m afraid if I sat in a comfortable position on her chair I could stain or wrinkle it.
\end{quote}

Professionals enjoy wider ranging styles than do intellectuals, but their tastes demonstrate clear trends. First, most, except those working in advertising and design, use their home decorations to remember and honor the family lineage or childhood experiences. This contrasts with intellectuals’ emphasis on cultivation or political affiliation. Further, some feel ashamed of their modest roots when they enter elegant homes, reflecting experiences of cultural exclusion. Finally, the role of children is important to these discussions. For some, children do not figure in living room decoration, others use the living room to teach children appropriate behavior, while a third group tailors living room decorations to children’s needs.

Like the intellectuals, many professionals disparage shopping malls, but from a different perspective. Jorge, a middle manager with provincial origins, identifies specific malls he finds distasteful: “We normally go to Almacenes Paris (department store) in Parque Arauco (an upscale mall) ... If you go to La Florida, the malls cater to the lower middle class. There are a ton of kids running around screaming, and dogs. If you go to malls in Eastern Santiago, you see a different class of people and they are kept very clean” (interview, November 8, 2008). In contrast to Paci, who complains about mall aesthetics, Jorge emphasizes his desire to avoid contact with the poor and to rub elbows with the well-to-do. His rural background may lead him to feel more threatened by association with the poor than does Paci (see Wilk, 2006).

Professionals value education and involve their children in enrichment activities focused on ensuring their academic success. Dany, a special education teacher who is a full-time housewife, comments, “Over the summer, we sent them to a seminar where they underwent hypnosis to help them learn more quickly” (interview, March 24, 2009). Several parents sent children to speed-reading and English language classes. Ernesto, a financial analyst, comments, “My wife had the good idea of buying them books, books, and more books to stimulate their desire to read” (interview, March 13, 2009).
This practical view of education also informs suspicion toward the intellectualism of coworkers. Marcelo, interviewed above, comments:

My coworkers emphasize one’s IQ and everything related to it – cognitive skills, studying, getting an engineering degree – rather than emotional intelligence ... They have serious difficulties socializing – their emotional side is very impoverished. You see that a lot at work – materialism – wanting to “have” rather than to “be.”... They are worried about climbing the ladder; using the logic that the end justifies the means ... These arrogant, aggressive people want to step on you. I can’t stand them – the lack of respect. (interview, March 23, 2009)

Lalo, also in pharmaceutical sales, but who holds a technical degree in engineering, admires intelligent people: “I could have a house worth 400,000 dollars, but if I don’t read, I don’t go to the movies, I don’t try to become more cultivated ... those $400,000 would be nothing because if you put me next to someone that didn’t have a big house, but had an impressive education and wide-ranging knowledge, I would be nothing” (interview, September 11, 2008). While intellectuals view materialistic, social climbers as lacking taste and intellectual curiosity, professionals see social climbers as either overly intellectual or as lacking intellectual development. Hence, professionals view intellectuals as suspect or deserving admiration; in either case, they are perceived as socially distant.

Professionals attempt to limit children’s media use, but for different reasons than do intellectuals. Ernesto, interviewed above, comments: “We have rules about what kinds of games they can play – Super Mario Brothers is ok – but no violent games where they shoot, kill – we don’t like those” (interview, March 13, 2009). The focus on violent video games likely reflects many parents’ religious orientation.

While some adults try to limit children’s media use, members of this group are more comfortable with information technology than are intellectuals. Ernesto continues, “I play strategy games against the computer. You can play at several different levels” (interview, March 13, 2009). Similarly, Marcela, a university reference librarian, comments: “I lost my taste for reading. The computer won the battle in that regard. I try to read and I force myself to read but I find the format boring” (interview, April 14, 2009). Finally, Nelson, an accountant, comments, “Our children’s intellectual capacity is more influenced by our relationship with them than by school. They can learn a lot more by making recordings with my iPhone than they learn in school” (interview, June 16, 2009). These adults’ comfort with electronic technology likely reflects their extensive use of these technologies in the workplace.
Professionals also have distinct musical tastes from intellectuals, favoring mainstream U.S. artists. Lalo, interviewed above, comments, “I got tickets to see Madonna. I never thought she’d come to Chile. I was 15 or 16 and she was already singing. Few artists of that caliber have survived over time” (interview, September 11, 2008).

The findings are similar for film. While intellectuals favor art and classic film to separate themselves from the “herd,” professionals prefer Hollywood films. Several couples point to gender differences in taste, with men preferring action, drama, history, and war films; and women preferring comedy and romance. Others prefer family films, as Marcelo notes: “We have seen films we all enjoy, like Wall-e, Madagascar, the animated version of Star Wars, and we went to see Harry Potter since we’d read all the books” (interview, March 23, 2009). Thus, in technology, music, and film, professionals’ tastes are more oriented toward the United States than Europe or Latin America, supporting Méndez’s (2006) observation about this group and García Canclini’s (2001) findings about the Latin American region.

Gender roles are more traditionally defined in this group than among intellectuals. It was more common for women – even those with technical or university degrees – to stay home with children. This pattern reflects traditional gender norms as well as the higher salaries paid to male spouses than to educators. Romina, a software engineer, comments: “It was hard for me to get pregnant, so to be able to dedicate time to having children, I had to give up my job” (interview, March 12, 2009). Many housewives are active in their school’s social action committee. As Dany notes, “we collect food and clothing for the poor” (interview, March 24, 2009). This activity reflects women’s traditional participation in volunteer and philanthropic work as well as support for the Catholic Church’s social doctrine in contrast to intellectuals’ explicit political engagement.

Divorce, single parenthood, and remarriage are also common in this group. Single mothers and remarried women seek to dissociate themselves from the house or furniture left from a failed marriage. Gladys, a designer, comments, “If I had the money, I would buy another house. It’s not that I don’t like my house; it’s just that with a new partner I would like to start fresh” (interview, May 13, 2009). Here, household goods become a medium through which past or present family conflicts are expressed.

Professionals feel less conflict with contemporary Chilean society than do intellectuals. They are more comfortable operating in the private
sector and seek to conserve childhood and family traditions. Nonetheless, they articulate different sources of tension with others. Many feel intimidated by peers who live in elegant homes. Additionally, they are suspicious of or admire intellectuals from afar, though they value their children’s education. Unlike intellectuals, they do not question economic success. Hence, they feel excluded when entering elegant homes. Further, their rejection of materialism draws on religious rather than partisan values.

Because many are upwardly mobile and hail from the provinces, they feel inferior to second-generation professionals from higher status families (see Lamont, 1992). Finally, as many come from families with modest educations, they question the value of education as an end in itself. They enjoy material success but face greater social barriers than do intellectuals due to their provincial origins or limited access to elite norms (see Contardo, 2008; Subercaseaux, 2009).

The Lower Middle Class

Members of the lower middle class interviewed come from working or lower middle-class families and their parents have modest educations. Interviewees have high school or technical certificates, and work in education, direct sales, events planning, and lower level clerical or technical jobs. They express discomfort with or hostility toward the poor and government programs that benefit them. Most favor saving and careful financial management like the working class. While intellectuals and professionals value family life, immediate and extended families are more central to this group’s leisure activities. Finally, members of the lower middle class are more relaxed regarding consumption and the use of electronic media than the other two groups, but share concerns about social climbing. Women occupy more traditional roles in this group, living as housewives or playing substantial caring roles.

Members of this group have sparse home decorations that focus on commemorating family relationships. Olga has an impoverished background but became a successful entrepreneur. When asked about her displays of artwork or visits to museums, she commented: “I have a real hippie style. My house has a lot of rugs, only one sofa, a lot of candles, bean bags for sitting on the floor, and candelabras …. I’m not really into museums and that kind of thing, but if there’s a concert with music my daughter likes, I go with her” (interview, June 8, 2009). In addition to the
absence of the visual arts in Olga’s daily life, she has difficulty with or resists explaining her distaste for museums (see Bennett et al., 2009).

Alejandra, a single mother and school paraprofessional, prefers rustic furniture: “I shared with my ex-husband (who did woodcarving/sculpture) a taste for fine hardwoods, which fit in with the house’s rustic style. My dad used to like carpentry, and when my parents separated, he left us a lot of hardwood scrap ... my ex-husband built that liquor cabinet after rescuing some of the wood, which has strong emotional connotations” (interview, May 15, 2009). Here we note the use of recycled hardwoods and their importance for evoking memories of her father and ex-husband. The use of recycled materials fits with the tradition of self-help housing among the Latin American urban poor (De Oliveira & Roberts, 1996).

Paola holds a secretarial certificate and is currently a housewife. She comments: “Everything in this apartment has to have my personal touch. If I hang up a painting, I’m not going to go buy it; it has to be something I painted ... All of the furniture is in a classic style because it needs to be
functional. It doesn’t make sense to have expensive furniture while my children are young because it won’t last” (interview, June 16, 2009). These interviews emphasize informal decorative styles that preserve family traditions or to meet practical constraints. Food-based celebrations rooted in extended kin groups are central to lower middle-class social life. Ivan, a physical education teacher now working in direct sales, comments: “I remember when I was a little kid we had barbecues every weekend in my house … My grandmother just turned 90 and a cousin and I organized a party in the country where seventy relatives showed up. Of course we had a barbecue” (interview, May 14, 2009). The focus on large gatherings and barbecues starkly diverges from the other groups’ emphasis on cultural consumption, outdoor activities, and smaller gatherings.

Members of this group did not articulate detailed tastes in film or music: they prefer U.S.-made films and programs and listen to Latin American popular music. Free time is mainly spent at home with family. Thus, Alejandra comments, “Our main entertainment is conversation – being together. My sister sews, my mother does crafts, and we hang out” (interview, May 15, 2009). These choices emerge from a popular culture where family ties are valued and the desire to avoid the expenses of going out (cf., Bourdieu, 1984; Bennett et al., 2009; Lareau, 2003).

Unlike most intellectuals and professionals, members of the lower middle class emphasize their contact with the poor and experiences of social exclusion. Alejandra comments, “In my neighborhood we used to all know each other. Now that many people have left, low income people have moved in …. youths hang out in the street, drink a lot, make a lot of noise and fight” (interview, May 15, 2009). Discomfort with the poor can also take political form. During a PTA meeting at a Catholic school in La Florida, a father approached me and said, “The middle class is like the ham in a sandwich. When gas prices go up five pesos, we feel the pinch. It doesn’t affect the rich because they can afford it; or the poor, because they don’t drive. So, we’re stuck in the middle” (Field notes, June 4, 2008). Alejandra expresses nostalgia for a simpler time when street activities did not disrupt neighborhood life. In contrast, the participant in the PTA meeting emphasizes the conflict over resources between the middle class and poor and asserts the latter’s superior virtue. The tendency to pit the middle class against the poor is common among members of the lower middle class who may fear being associated with the poor and espouse their superior virtue (Caldeira, 2000; Wilk, 2006).
Lower middle-class individuals also endure stigma. Rossana, a retail clerk, comments:

My ex-husband interacted with engineers while working at the University of Chile. When we were dating and we went out, I found myself in an environment where I didn’t open my mouth because I didn’t know how to open my mouth and I didn’t know what to say. I had to be so careful with my pronunciation, what I said, how I talked, how I ate, how I drank. So, I said to myself, “I don’t want this for my kids. I don’t want them to learn at 18 or 19 like I did how to talk to these people, how to start a conversation.” So, since they were little, I have been instilling in them the importance of being informed and trying to read because I’m not a reader; I just read medical until 4 AM. (interview, June 5, 2009)

This example points to the significant exclusions lower middle-class individuals face in everyday contexts stemming from their lack of familiarity with social skills valued in affluent settings. Rossana also notes that book reading is still an elite activity in Chile, as in Great Britain (Torche, 2007; Bennett et al., 2009). Social critics underscore the arbitrary manner through which the Chilean elite target elements of middle- and working-class speech and dress for derision, and how the latter emulate the elite to avoid stigma (Contardo, 2008; Subercaseaux, 2009).

Further, members of this group note their difficult encounters with more affluent parents. Alejandra, interviewed above, comments: “I have respectful, cordial relations with – two or three parents are close to me because we have certain affinities … I don’t interact much with the group in general … I’m comfortable in small groups; I get shy in large groups” (interview, May 15, 2009). Olga takes aim at other parents’ attitudes and behaviors:

My peers want to differentiate themselves from others and compete … They’re too overprotective of their kids and mark out territory – “I’m the parent; you’re the child.” I understand that parents are concerned that their children might be harmed, but when you force your children to live in a bubble and you don’t want anyone to touch them, tomorrow they’ll go out in the street and they’ll feel some harsh pain because they won’t have mommy and daddy to protect them. Or they say, “Oh I want my child to get one of the top scores on the college entrance exam.” (interview, June 8, 2009)

Alejandra notes the challenges lower middle-class parents face in gaining acceptance among upper middle-class peers. Further, more affluent parents’ desire to promote their children’s educational success through strict discipline meets with Olga’s derision because it heightens children’s competitiveness and prevents them from enjoying their childhood. Olga’s criticism suggests that she and others in the lower middle class feel excluded and ill-equipped to participate in the competition for success.
Lower middle-class Chileans, like intellectuals and professionals, criticize social climbers, but from a different perspective. Alejandra comments: “many of my peers have high technology products, like big stereo systems, but they’re never at home to listen to music or they watch TV instead ... They buy things that don’t fulfill their function because they spend so little time at home” (interview, May 15, 2009).

This focus on practicality also surfaces in criticisms of shopping malls. Rossana comments: “I can’t understand why people like to go to the mall. For me it seems like torture because if you go with your children, you need to walk around constantly saying, ‘no, no, no, no’” (interview, June 5, 2009). These comments are framed in terms of the contrast between needs and wants rather than the intellectual or spiritual limitations of social climbers. They draw on the value of practicality common to the working class (Bourdieu, 1984; Bennett et al., 2009).

There are significant gender differences within the lower middle class. In comments above, Alejandra highlights female spaces of sociability, and her discussion of interactions with other parents indicates that women may feel less at ease than men about speaking in public. Single mothers and housewives are more taken for granted in this fraction than in the other two. Finally, for most women, the extended family is a more central focus of daily life than for intellectuals and professionals.

The lower middle class offers an intriguing contrast to intellectuals and professionals. Members of this group do not see the display of artwork, home decorations, or cultural consumption as means of distinction. Their homes are more sparsely decorated than those of intellectuals and professionals and styles and materials reflect the working-class origins of many. Their social lives revolve more around food rituals enjoyed with extended family than do those of the other two groups. Finally, they note that more affluent Chileans stigmatize them and that they fear being associated with the poor.

CONCLUSION

This chapter develops a vision of the middle classes as occupying a contested field where distinct fractions vie for symbolic dominance. I have identified three fractions of the Chilean middle classes. Left-wing intellectuals are richest in cultural capital and gain their identities through seminal political experiences as college students; their occupational location in education, the arts, and the public sector; and in opposition to peers who are richer in
economic capital. They display distinction through a taste for European and Latin American fine art, Latin American crafts, as well as appreciation of European art film and diverse musical forms. They value education as an end in itself and restrict children’s electronic media use. Finally, they feel out of step with contemporary Chile’s embrace of a U.S.-centered cultural model.

Professionals are the richest in economic capital of the three groups. They appreciate original artworks produced by established friends or relatives with pastoral and religious themes. Their tastes in decoration vary between those favoring family history and others who prefer contemporary design. They see education as a means to success and feel intimidated by intellectualism and elite tastes (cf., Lamont, 1992). Finally, they prefer American popular music and Hollywood films.

The lower middle class, whose capital volume is lower than that of intellectuals or professionals, center their identities on the virtues of practicality, extended family life, and opposition to the affluent and poor. While intellectuals and professionals view social climbers as empty-headed and ill-mannered, members of the lower middle class see them as cruel and disruptive of collective identities. The latter also feel more distrust and hostility toward the poor than do the first two groups.

While the analysis thus far largely supports Bourdieu’s (1984, 2000) understanding of the operations of habitus, capital, and field, several scholars demonstrate how dimensions other than class shape taste, underscore the changing bases of status in cultural consumption fields, and highlight the role of globalization in shaping tastes and symbolic conflicts. In this light, following Bennett et al. (2009) and Gayo et al. (2009), I find that age and gender are significant dividing lines within each fraction. Single mothers have different experiences of class than do married women or men due to labor market discrimination and the enforcement of dominant gender norms. Men and women have distinct tastes in home decorations. Finally, adults and children diverge with regard to electronic media use, particularly among intellectuals and professionals. Many adults view television, internet, and video game use as threatening to children’s healthy development.

Bourdieu’s findings must be contextualized in analyses of developing countries like Chile. First, the legacies of Chile’s agrarian elite shape discussions of cultivation, social climbing, and taste. While Bourdieu, too, noted the centrality of aristocratic principles to the appreciation of high culture, these principles must be tied to the Chilean emphasis on speech, racial background, and aristocratic surnames (Contardo, 2008;
Subercaseaux, 2009). Prohibitions against social climbing traverse class divides, while possession of intellectual skills and cultivation become the source of pride and shame among different class fractions.

Second, conflicts across class fractions emerge in relation to Chile's history as well as contemporary globalization. Political and religious affiliations become markers of identity for intellectuals and professionals given Chile’s recent dictatorship and historic conflicts between Catholic and secular groups (cf., Lamont, 1992). Intellectuals seek to resist homogenization in retail, housing, and home decoration through recourse to “authentic” symbols of the Chilean and Latin American countryside. Nonetheless, this cultural move draws on a 1930s-era antioligarchic tradition (Barr Melej, 1998). Further, folk music and crafts are not purely local traditions today, as their production, circulation, and consumption are enmeshed in global circuits of migration, tourism, and commercialization. Thus, intellectuals’ ideological opposition to globalization is a hidden side of this same process (Wilk, 2006).

Additionally, not all fields of taste and/or cultural consumption are equally exclusionary. In Chile, as in the United Kingdom, knowledge and ownership of paintings (or reproductions of consecrated artworks) and book reading are elite activities. Home decoration and music are less discriminating in class terms (Bennett et al., 2009; Gayo et al., 2009). Hence, in contrast to Bourdieu (1984), high culture is not the standard of distinction across fields (see Méndez, 2006).

Chile’s middle class occupies a contested field of cultural conflict. Prosperity and upward mobility in the context of free market policies have disrupted familiar contours of class. Formerly stable middle-class identities rooted in the public sector were shattered, while upward mobility among private sector and own-account employees provokes hostility among members of different class fractions for different reasons. Globalization’s effects on the information, media, and housing industries have unsettled existing tastes. Emerging conflicts, however, are expressed in relation to preexisting aristocratic, religious, and political traditions. If Chile’s middle classes are becoming part of a “global middle class,” members of each fraction operate within different global commodity and image circuits while seeking to protect distinct identities.

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NOTES

1. Here, Méndez develops and extends the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 2000), who conceptualizes classes and class fractions relationally through the concepts of habitus, capital, and field. Habitus refers to the durable dispositions individuals acquire through class-specific processes of family socialization and schooling. Capitals – cultural, economic, social, and symbolic – are fungible resources that shape an individual’s social position and permit specific mobility strategies or investments. He deploys the concept of “field” to facilitate the understanding of material and symbolic conflicts across groups. He likens a field to a game with specific rules and stakes that includes players who occupy dominant and dominated positions based on their habitus and capitals. Examples of fields are occupations, education, or areas of cultural production and consumption. Finally, he argues that classes and class fractions are differentiated vertically (based on the total volume of their capital) and horizontally (based on the mix of economic and cultural capital their members possess). These differences correspond to distinct tastes, dispositions, mobility strategies, and symbolic conflicts.

2. In contrast to Bourdieu’s efforts to show a direct relationship between class position, taste, and symbolic conflicts, Lamont (1992) argues that cultural and economic inequalities are delinked, and that symbolic struggles are articulated in cultural, economic, and moral terms. Moreover, occupational groups in the public and private sector favor distinct status signals as do intellectuals and nonintelligencers (1992, p. 157).

3. Bennett et al. (2009) rethink and adapt Bourdieu’s original study in contemporary Britain. Relying on multiple correspondence analyses of survey data, focus groups, and interviews, they find four axes of difference in cultural practices: degree of engagement with cultural goods, taste for established or contemporary culture, inward- versus outward-oriented dispositions, and moderate versus voracious cultural participation. They conclude that class shapes taste alongside age and gender and that the key dividing line in society separates individuals and groups based on the quantity and range of their cultural consumption rather than their taste for high or popular culture.

4. Some intellectuals who live in La Florida, where there are few alternatives to shopping at the mall, emphasize visits to the mall bookstore, thereby highlighting their cultivation (interview with Ricardo and Gloria, May 5, 2009).

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