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## **Social Class Structure and Identity in Later Life**

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# **Social Class Structure and Identity in Later Life**

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## **Abstract**

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The purpose of this article is to discuss the elusive character of social class in ageing studies. Whilst for many gerontologists social class no longer represents a salient marker of social difference in later life, critical gerontologists continue to stress its crucial in determining how people experience retirement and the quality of lives they lead. This article reports upon an empirical study on class structures and identities in later life carried out in Malta. Qualitative data highlight three key classes inhabited by older people in Malta - namely the working class, the middle class, and the dominant class. Results also demonstrate clearly that subjects held distinct class identities, albeit more along 'cultural' lines of distinction rather than economic formations. This article demonstrates that although older persons no longer spontaneously and unambiguously use the language of class, they do not constitute thoroughly individualised beings who fly completely free of class relations.

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**Keywords:** social class, critical gerontology, social gerontology, Malta.

# **Clases Sociales e Identidad en Personas de Edad Avanzada**

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## **Resumen**

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El propósito de este artículo es discutir el carácter esquivo de la clase social en los estudios sobre envejecimiento. Mientras para la mayoría de las y los gerontólogos sociales la clase social no suele representar un elemento destacado de diferencia social en edades avanzadas, las y los gerontólogos críticos continúan señalando su centralidad en la determinación del modo en que las personas experimentan la jubilación y la calidad de vida consecuente. Este artículo parte de un estudio empírico sobre estructuras de clase e identidades en personas de edad avanzada llevado a cabo en Malta. Los datos cualitativos sugieren tres clases sociales principales entre las que se distribuyen las personas mayores en Malta, a saber, la clase trabajadora, la clase media, y la clase dominante. Los resultados muestran también claramente que las y los sujetos sostienen distintas identidades de clase, aunque más relacionadas con diferencias ‘culturales’ que económicas. Este artículo pone de manifiesto que, aunque las personas mayores no suelen utilizar un lenguaje de clase de forma espontánea y clara, no son seres estrictamente individualizados que viven completamente libres de relaciones de clase.

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**Palabras clave:** clase social, gerontología crítica, gerontología social, Malta.

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The concept of social class occupies an ambivalent position in ageing and gerontological studies. On one hand, whilst Woodward (1999) goes as far as to state that “along with race, gender and age are the most salient markers of social difference”, the recently published *Key Concepts in Social Gerontology* (Phillips et al., 2010) includes no mention of class neither in contents nor index. On the other hand, critical gerontologists continue to stress the crucial role of class in determining how people experience retirement and the quality of lives they lead (Walker & Foster, 2006). Although not all inequalities can be reduced to class, class background casts a long shadow over access to material resources in retirement, and their probability and timing of morbidity and death (Formosa & Higgs, 2013).

The goal of this article is to address the evanescent character of the class concept in social gerontology and ageing studies. It argues that empirical data demonstrate that funeral arrangements for the ‘death’ of class were untimely, and one should beware of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. In other words, class relations remain pervasive in later life so that older persons, despite their estrangement from the productive process, are still dynamically engaged in class structuring and action. The strategy pursued here is to discuss the travails of class in ageing studies, and subsequently, present the results of an empirical investigation that highlight how class structuring and identity formation are still alive and kicking in later life. These objectives are presented in five parts. The first part problematises the development of neo-liberal statements on social class in ageing studies, especially the claim that traditional ‘emancipatory politics’ have been superseded by a ‘politics of self-actualisation’. Drawing inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984, 1985, 1986) sociology of class, the second part forwards a class research programme that is sensitive to both the fluid character of late modernity and the life chances of persons in later life. A concise overview of the methodological issues in carrying out an empirical study in Malta is the focus of the third section. The fourth and fifth sections present a critical exposition of class relations amongst older persons by focusing on the class structure and identities respectively.

### **The Travails of Class in Ageing Studies**

Class has a long-standing tradition in social gerontology. However, most approaches oscillated between structural and subjective qualities of class. Subjective trends embedded class in a functionalist agenda, in terms of ‘prestige or rank’ which denote a hierarchical position in the social order based upon the disparity in status and prestige (e.g. [Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953](#); [Tissue, 1970](#)):

... by social class is meant two or more orders of people who are believed to be, and are accordingly ranked by the members of the community, in socially superior and inferior positions ... A class society distributes rights and privileges, duties and obligations, unequally among its inferior and superior grades ([Warner, 1963: 37-8](#))

Such research occurred during the 1950s and 1960s, a highly optimistic time when the major academic emphasis in social gerontology was on successful adaptation to the retirement transition. However, the 1980s witnessed a major twist to the conceptualisation of class as gerontologists turned to conflict theory to interpret and make sense of ageing lives. This occurred as the social and political scenario facing academics was poles apart to that of earlier decades. By the late 1970s age-related government policy became increasingly ‘commodified’ and ‘privatised’, with the development of a stable life course being brought up to an abrupt halt by the spread of unemployment and global financial crises ([Phillipson, 1999](#)). Such developments called into question the idea of reciprocity across generations, as industrialised countries began experiencing a succession of expenditure cuts from welfare budgets. This augmented the subaltern status of the most vulnerable retirees, whilst increasing the levels of poverty across all sectors of pensioners. In such scenarios, it is not surprising that the structured dependency and political economy of ageing perspectives became increasingly influential. Such standpoints favoured the embodiment of the class concept upon the basic tenets of Marxism:

Classes are defined not only by their place in the process of production, and by their position within the technical division of labor, but also by their position within political and ideological structures. Consequently, the traditional Marxist definition, which analyzes the class structure of the

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capitalist mode of production by basically contrasting the two antagonistic classes - capitalist and proletarian - must be upheld. (Guillemard, 1981: 228)

Ageing was thus perceived as the ‘social creation of dependent status’ where past positions in the labour market constitute the primary factor that determines how later life will be like (Walker, 1981; Phillipson, 1982). In contrast to status-oriented approaches, critical perspectives focused on class conflict and its hold on the lifelong and statutory effects of exploitation and suffering. Indeed, such views stressed how the analysis of class and age must concern itself with how older persons are made dependent upon an ageing enterprise that favours and encumbers the middle and working classes respectively (Estes, 1979).

In recent decades, functionalist and Marxist standpoints were both found to be inadequate to unravel how class dynamics arise in later life (Higgs & Formosa, 2013). On one hand, there is no doubt as how the former overlooks the ways that the interplay of status and political relations determine, in principle and practice, economic forms of inequalities. As Marshall & Tindale (1978/9) affirm, functionalist approached towards social differentiation in later life come across as if there is nothing more interesting to do than explain how different sectors of older people fit comfortably in an ordered social world. On the other hand, Marxist arguments ignore the effect of post-industrialisation and late modernity on the character of later life, class relations, and society in general. Moreover, the strength of the status perspective on class proved to be its weakness since an economic reductionist view ignores how classes are made and given value through cultural and symbolic processes. Thus, Marxist approaches are founded on the erroneous assumption that older persons occupy a ‘pensioner’ status defined by a confining dependence on state welfare when, in fact, many current retirees are taking an active part in the development of new later life identities. Unfortunately, rather than seeking novel ways to understand the changing nature of class dynamics in later life, such limitations had the opposite effect. Indeed, during the past two decades it became increasingly fashionable for gerontologists to shelve the concept of ‘social class’ on the grounds that class relations no longer determine the way that daily lives are experienced in contemporary societies. Noting the creation of a population of relatively affluent retirees

whose income and expenditure have come close to, and in some cases even exceeded, those of younger people of working age, Gilleard & Higgs (2006: 235) argued that nowadays it is no longer possible to “regard retirement as a residual component of the class structure” since “the collective identity ascribed to people in later life has been subverted”. For these authors, retirement has become an area so fragmented in its social, economic, and physical expression that the claim that class continues to shape the experience of later life no longer holds true. Indeed, it is argued that ageing in second modernity brings status-levelling effects: “age is a great equalizer...class differences - in health and well-being - are less marked later in life compared with early in life” (*ibid.*, 2000: 41).

Gilleard and Higgs’s argument that class should neither be a privileged category nor come to stand in for the ‘social’ in ageing studies is legitimate. However, their emphasis on the unprecedented engagement of older persons in cultural consumption goes to the other extreme by overstating the power of agency. Their vision of a world governed by a politics of self-actualisation, where retirees are successful in unshackling themselves from lifelong classed structures to exercise free choices upon their lifestyle and identity formations, stands awkward to research detailing the positive relationship that class position enjoys with better income in retirement, improved housing and up-market retirement communities, morbidity and mortality, social networking, and participation in learning and leisure activities (Formosa, 2009). Even if we accept the third age as a generational construct, it remains that in “any generation there can exist a number of differentiated, antagonistic generation-units” which “are oriented toward each other, even though only in the sense of fighting one another” (Mannheim, 1997: 47). Whilst Gilleard and Higgs (2000: 31) are spot on in asserting that “Marxist class divisions no longer represents points of fundamental rupture out of which individuals...develop their sense of collective class identity”, the assertion that “rather than class coming to serve as a cornerstone in people’s sense of self, that role increasingly is performed through consumption” is problematic. Indeed, the axis that most powerfully indicates the structure of cultural consumption is one that is directly associated with class position. As Bourdieu (quoted in Swartz, 1997) affirms, tastes in culture are indicators of class because their consumption trends correlate with an individual’s habitus in society.

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Lifestyles, in this respect, are not a “different kind of group form classes, but are rather dominated classes denied as such, or, so to speak, sublimated and thereby legitimated” (*ibid.*: 151). In other words, although traditional class demarcations may be relatively invisible in later life, it does not mean that older adults are “thoroughly individualized beings who fly completely free of class identities” (*Savage, 2000: 101*). Class relations may have hinged themselves away from strict economic relations. Nevertheless, class remains “something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your psyche, at the very core of your being” (*Kuhn, 1995: 98*). It is therefore opportune to challenge the established conceptualisations of social class in later life, as well as propose new methodologies for understanding class relations amongst an age-group whose leaps in complexity is showing no traces of slowing down.

### **Renewing Class Research in Later Life**

The most popular strategy to locate the class location of older persons is to derive it from subjects’ pre-retirement occupational positions. The ‘derivative’ rationale is based upon *Wright’s (1978: 93)* treatment of class locations as “parts of class-trajectories”, part of a life-time structure of positions through which an individual passes in the course of a work career. However, such a strategy is characterised by a number of lacunae. Whilst bundles of jobs are not ‘classes’ in a sociological sense, historicity generally induces a ‘mismatch’ between the level of power decreed by jobs in different time periods. One also uncovers hints of ‘intellectual ageism’ as class mobility is only possible through a change in one’s relationship to the means of production, something that will not occur unless retirees re-enter the labour market. Moreover, the location and interpretation of the class position of older women remains unclear. The derivative approach treats class as a strictly structural phenomenon, a line of reasoning that ultimately overlooks how social relations in late modernity are founded upon the structure-agency dialectic. Rather, gerontological class research must unfailingly focus on “what older people themselves make of who and what they are, as well as how they view their worlds” (*Gubrium & Holstein, 2000: 3*). This is warranted because, after all,



...class refers to much more than the individual's economic and social position. It implies an individual's self-concept and subjective understanding...it focuses on intraindividual linkages across time as a central mechanism producing a type of continuity...between work and retirement phases. (O'Rand & Henretta, 1999: 35)

One possible way forward, so as to remain sensitive to both the structural and agentic features of class relations in later life, is to draw inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's (1984, 1985, 1987) sociology of class. In Bourdieu's work, class is hinged upon the concepts of habitus and capital. The 'habitus' refers to a set of dispositions acquired through early socialisation that are, in turn, responsible for an individual's behaviour and the typical way he/she acts or interprets social reality. Classes are conceptualised as groups of people sharing a class-specific habitus:

...classes [are] sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in similar conditions and subjected to similar conditionings, have every likelihood of having similar dispositions and interests and therefore of producing similar practices and adopting similar stances...the conditions associated with a particular class of conditions produce conditions of existence, produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structuring structures predisposed to function as structuring structures. (Bourdieu, 1985: 198; 1990: 53)

Classes hold different types and volumes of 'capital', defined by Bourdieu (1986: 241-2), as "accumulated labour ... which, when appropriated on a private, i.e. exclusive basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour". As neither 'classes' nor 'class conflict' are strictly contingent on positions in the labour market, it enables the location of the class position of older adults who are generally not in employment (Savage, 2003). On one hand, Bourdieu's classes resemble more a Durkheimian category of groups sharing experiences and collective representations, rather than following Marx's emphasis on the specific historical development of capitalism or Weber's 'market situation'. For Bourdieu (1987: 6), a class is defined in terms of "similar positions of social space" that provides "similar conditions of existence and conditioning" and therefore create "similar

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dispositions” which generate “similar practices” amongst same-class subjects. Bourdieu offers a class-symbolisation model of status where cultural differences serve as markers of class differences which

...find expression in status distinctions that rank individuals and groups on scales of social honorability rather in terms of economic interest alone. They go unrecognized, however, since they are legitimated through the powerful ideology of individual qualities of talent, merit, and giftedness. (Swartz, 1997: 151-2)

On the other hand, Bourdieu (1985) argues that the nature of class mobility in late modernity increasingly takes the form of investments in one's type and volume of capital rather through a changing of roles in the labour market. The same is the case with respect to class conflict which now occurs largely through symbolic distinctions that convey classes the appearance of status groups. Bourdieu's (1984) most insightful demonstration of such patterns is to be found in *Distinction* where he explores how the practices of symbolic distinctions ranging from mundane everyday preferences in food and clothing to displays of the more refined aesthetic tastes embody an underlying logic of inclusion and exclusion. On the basis that tastes implies distaste, Bourdieu (1984: 56) sees lifestyle differences as “perhaps the strongest barriers between the classes”. Taken together, these two levels of research hold two advantages for gerontological class research. First, they enable the treatment of the life course as a pattern of sequentially linked positions and experiences, and secondly, the granting of biographical anticipations and reminiscences by which people define their social place in demographic class formation.

In conclusion, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital have key contributions to make towards a better understanding of class dynamics in later life, especially in the quest to reconfigure the ‘class’ notion in light of the foregrounding of ‘age’. First, they enable research to understand how retirement forces incumbents to face a life phase where the ‘official’ realms of everyday life become less prominent and get displaced by more ‘unofficial’ domains in which struggles for power take place. Secondly, the idea that the various forms of capital may also be of a ‘physical’ form sensitises the field to how the body in later life arises as the most indisputable materialisation of class taste. Since age is bounded by physical and

biological processes, the symbolic value attributed to bodily image and health becomes central to gerontological class relations. And finally, the intertwining of habitus and capital surpasses the fact that most older persons have no role in the labour market. Overcoming the traditional strategy to hinge class position on people's occupational status and resources, class becomes characterised by a coherent social and cultural existence, where members in similar class share a common lifestyle, educational background, kinship networks, consumption patterns, and beliefs. This standpoint is analytically appropriate for older people since, far from reflecting strict productive relations, it actually captures the complex character of class relations following the retirement transition.

### **The Empirical Universe**

The empirical study reported herein was carried out in Malta. The Maltese archipelago is made up of three islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino. It is located in the Mediterranean Sea with Sicily 93 km to the north, Africa 288 km to the south, Gibraltar 1,826 km to the west and Alexandria 1,510 km to the east. Comino is uninhabited, and with Gozo having a population of just 31,143 persons, leaves Malta with 384,912 inhabitants as the major island of this archipelago state (NSO, 2012a). Malta's population has evolved out of a traditional pyramidal shape to an even-shaped block distribution of equal numbers at each age cohort except at the top. Whilst in 1985 the percentage of persons aged in the 60- and 75-plus cohorts measured 14.3 and 3.8 percent, in 2011 these figures reached 22.8 and 6.5 percent respectively (ibid.). This occurred as the birth rate declined to 1.3 per family, whilst life expectancy at birth for men/women increased from 70.8/76.0 years in 1985 to 77.7/81.4 years in 2005 (NSO, 2011). Projections estimate that in the year 2025 the percentage of older persons aged 60+ will rise to 26.5 percent (ibid.). Women are over-represented in older cohorts, with the masculinity ratio for age cohorts in the 80-84, 85-89 and 90+ age brackets reaching 61, 54, and 42 respectively in the year 2010 (ibid.). The Household Budgetary Survey 2008 (NSO, 2010) reported that in the year 2008 the average annual household net income received by persons aged 55-64 and 65-plus was €22,549 and €13,076 respectively (national average: €20,685). In 2010, the average annual net income

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according to household composition types, without dependent children, was €8,707 for ‘one-person household, 65 and over’ and €13,291 for ‘2 adults, at least one adult 65 and over’ (national average = €20,035). Recent statistics also point out that whilst in 2011 as much as 18.1 per cent of the Maltese population aged 65+ were experiencing at-risk-of-poverty lifestyles, the number of employed older persons is relatively low as only about ten and one percent of the 55-64 and 65+ cohorts were respectively in paid employment (NSO, 2012b, 2012c).

The empirical study consisted of a case-study of class structuring amongst older persons in Malta. Despite its small size, Maltese society is no exception to social class relations. As the renowned sociologist Anthony Giddens pointed out,

...the class map of Malta is changing, in ways roughly similar to those found in other comparable societies. Class structure has today become complex and various tensions exist between the old and new middle classes as well as within elite groups. (Giddens, 1994 : xxxi)

Definitions of case studies vary but, in essence, all promote the notion that the researcher aims at knowing a single entity or phenomenon - that is, the case - through the collection of data through various procedures (Stake, 1995). Data was collected through life story interviews, with subjects chosen through convenience sampling, and with interviews ceasing when data saturation was reached. Life-story interviews involve any retrospective account by the individual of his/her life in whole or in part that has been elicited or prompted by another person. Following five pilot studies, 49 life-story interviews were carried out in the period April - June 2009. Respondents were recruited from within Malta’s Inner and Outer Harbour Regions which, according to local Censuses, include the largest concentration of older persons on the Islands. Life-story interviews were conducted through a semi-structured interview guide so as to facilitate discussion and accord primacy to the relation between the interviewee and myself, and through a ‘funnel’ approach’ whereby interviews commenced with a clarification of the purpose of the study before then asking subjects to relate their life story. All interviews took place in informants’ homes, sometimes at the kitchen and at other times in living rooms, ran between 1.5 to 2 hours, and were audio-recorded with the permission of the

informants. Data analysis followed [Strauss & Corbin's \(1998\)](#) advice to assign codes, annotations, and memos to data, together with 'pattern-matching' and 'analytical induction'. Whilst the former compares an empirically based pattern with a predicted one if the patterns coincide where the results can help a case study strengthen its internal validity, analytical induction excludes any negative cases by hypothesis reformulation or phenomenon redefinition until a universal relationship that fits the observed facts is established.

### **Drawing Boundaries: The Maltese Class Structure and Later Life**

#### **The Culture of Necessity: The Working Class Grows Old**

The working-class is found at the powerless end of the class continuum. The life course of working-class elders was characterised by two key factors. First, they experienced an 'early' timing with respect to central familial transitions. Many married and had children very early in life, before they had established themselves at work, and found a long-term and suitable residence. Secondly, they were badly served by, and not successful in, the educational system. When younger they found it difficult to draw any connection between their familial and neighbourhood background, the academic and analytical demands of the school, and future job opportunities. Members in this class were not prepared by their parents to cope at school and were easily labeled as 'educational failures' by teachers, something which transformed into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Both factors had lasting aversive effects on their economic situation. The life course of women in this class was firmly located in 'domesticity'. Wives did not perceive themselves as 'retired', or that their present life was much different from that experienced during late adulthood. They were socialised, both by their families and secondary agents of socialisation (most notably, the Church) in the role of a 'housewife' who is primarily responsible for the running of the household and family care. As a result, working-class families were characterised by a firmly established division of labour between wife and husband.

The principal and recurrent characteristic highlighting the lives of working-class elders was a strong awareness of relative, and sometimes

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absolute, poverty. Many highlighted how their pension was insufficient to enable them to lead a satisfactory quality of life. They bought cheaper food, made do with old clothes and shoes, were ever-ready to pick up abandoned furniture and electric appliances, delayed going to a doctor when sick, avoided turning on the lights and electrical appliances during winter, and could not afford a car (or more than a minimum amount of fuel per month). Many of working-class elders were able to engage in cultural consumption only if they economised on more necessary items such as in their consumption of electricity/water, washing of clothes, and eating of meat, fish and fresh vegetables. Members in this class inhabited a culture of ‘necessity’ as their lifestyle was characterised by an inescapable deprivation of necessary goods, with many approaching their everyday lives as a resignation to the inevitable. In Bourdieu’s (1984: 178) terms, the “taste of necessity can only be the basis of a life-style in itself which is defined as such only negatively, by an absence, by the relationship of privation between itself and other lifestyles”. It is noteworthy that the concept of ‘necessity’ has a wider meaning in consumer societies, and implies the ability to have access to whatever passes for a ‘normal’ and ‘happy’ life rather than being able to hold on to simply basic material prerequisites. Lives were characterised by a tension of having to juggle one’s life’s necessities with consumerist expectations, a situation which led to social suffering as they struggled to change their aspirations and accommodate their increasing frustrations. The general feeling amongst working-class elders was that powers beyond their control put them in a seemingly unending amount of free-time coupled with an inability to make use of it. This situation inculcated endless boredom: “I stay indoors a lot to save money...but there is nothing to do...I never have enough money to do anything much...it get tiring staying indoors on Sundays” (Jules). As Bauman (1998: 38) argued, “desiring comes free, but to...experience desire as a pleasurable state, requires resources”.

### **The Culture of Reflexivity: The Middle Class**

The middle class consisted of individuals whose life course revolved around attempts to legitimate their composition of cultural capital. This relatively higher level of cultural capital imbued them with a culture of

reflexivity. In contrast to the working-class lifestyle, where the good life was cast in terms of having an abundance of the things one likes and popularly understood as luxurious, the middle class valued the metaphysical aspects of life. Subjects orientated their consumption around objects that gave them intrinsic rather than extrinsic satisfaction. Although they were willing to engage in spending money for material acquisitions, this was only done so far as these purchases could be rationalised as being in line with their cultural aspirations. Interviews elicited an earnest pursuit to reflect on topics by contemplating matters such as context, assumptions, cultural biases, and political influences. Subjects engaged in both personal and epistemological forms of reflexivity. They took the opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which persons' values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have contributed to contemporary Maltese and international social formations. Subjects' culture of reflexivity arose from two main factors. First, their relatively high levels of cultural capital. Members in this class held very high levels of both educational attainment and qualification, with the majority finishing secondary school and a significant percentage holding tertiary level qualifications. Moreover, many were trained in the right (polite) bodily dispositions and were knowledgeable as which items - ranging from wine products to computer hardware to fashion designs - are valuable and worthy. Secondly, their relatively low level of economic capital which left them with no alternative but to emphasise their cultural capital in constructing their social and personal identity. In a level of frankness that exceeded my expectations, one informant claimed:

“Looking back at my life I feel both proud and disillusioned. I am proud of my educational achievements and promotions at work. Yet, I am disillusioned that I did not make much money. In life money is as important as brains. Mind you, I will never utter this in public. It is best to blow one's own trumpet.”

Married women in the middle class were not as firmly located in 'domesticity' as their working-class peers. A substantial number held rewarding careers in teaching, nursing or in clerical work so that the division of labour in most households was organised in a more symmetrical manner. Middle-class women, similar to their working-class peers, also

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strove to present their house as ‘modern’. However, this was not performed simply by purchasing low-priced items which advertising defined as the essence of ‘modernity’, but by acquiring only those items which displayed a ‘refined modernity’ and ‘professional femininity’. Thus, middle-class wives did not rush to buy the latest juice-blender or micro-oven which included - as a local advert promises - ‘a million-and-one functions at even a cheaper price’ but were more preoccupied for example as how they can have more sunlight in their living-room and whether the latest fuss about Jamie Oliver made sense. This is not the same as saying that middle-class women did not experience patriarchal subordination. Husbands and wider society never allowed them to prioritise their careers or other individual interests at the expense of either the running of the household or motherhood. One consistent feature of middle-class households was the role played by wives in supporting their husbands’ occupations by holding long-term employment in clerical or lower-professional jobs which enabled them to meet their domestic duties.

### **The Culture of Elitism: The Dominant Class**

The ‘dominant’ class included subjects with high levels of social, cultural, and economic capital. Subjects in the dominant class were born in affluent families so that their childhood was experienced at opposite ends from a taste for necessity. Typical residences of members in this class had three bedrooms, spacious garages, two to three bathrooms, large yards, as well as swimming pools. Recreation and leisure patterns revolved around exclusive activities such as collecting jazz records, eating at fashionable restaurants, going for weekend breaks in a range of European capital cities, playing golf, and joining restricted sports clubs. Many spent their secondary education at private schools renowned for prioritising personality development over academic accreditation, and a result, found it easy to adopt leadership and extrovert roles. Even their parents used various strategies to instil above-average levels of self-assurance and -confidence, as they monitored for any traits of timidity and insecurity. Members were affiliated within various organisations which operated on a closed membership policy, “meaning that new members must be ‘put up’ for membership by existing members, go through a rigorous process in which



they are voted on by a membership committee” (Kendall, 2002: 2). By growing up in exclusive neighbourhoods, having a ‘select’ group of friends and acquaintances, and attending the most prestigious schools, elite elders were successful in gaining social and cultural capital that is more difficult, if not impossible, for women in other classes to obtain. Wives in the dominant class held a high share of individual power and mentioned how they had personal bank accounts. Yet, they also expressed dissatisfaction with their domestic role as they held an unequal voice in major family decisions, sole responsibility for home and family, and no alternative but to support the public position of their husbands who were perceived to be the principal foundation underlying the family’s dominant class position. Despite being free of mundane household chores, they still felt taken-for-granted by their husbands.

Dominant-class subjects were embodied in a culture of elitism, manifested by disposition pushing for exclusivity. Although members did not discuss their everyday actions in class terms they were unequivocal about their desire to hold social interaction only with people within their social circle. They recounted various instances throughout their lives when they chose to change house location, leisure pursuits, and club membership so as to interact closer with others who are our ‘type’. This pursuit for privilege and exclusivity was apparent in their sponsoring of the ‘debutante presentation’ of their grandchildren through ‘invitation-only’ parties. As the invitation included many peers in their same class whom they wanted to impress, and others to whom they wanted to communicate their superiority, no expense was spared in organisation. This was very evident from the family photographs captured in these events which subjects displayed on their mantelpieces. This practice had the obvious objective of establishing their family’s reputation as part of the dominant class since it provided evidence vis-à-vis their volumes of social capital (the ability to have the guest-list), economic capital (the ability to pay the costs of the festivity), and cultural capital (refinement, good manners and taste displayed at the event). Since the older subject is credited as a major sponsor, this ritual functioned to enhance his/her elite status in the eyes of the Maltese community. Subjects in this class also chose their friends carefully, showing a preference for individuals owning high levels of class capital.

When subjects mentioned relatives, friends, or acquaintances, they always informed me of their social position.

### **Personifying Boundaries: Older Persons and Class Identity**

Data analysis revealed two opposing analytical models that older adults utilised to make sense of the class system. Whilst the middle class perceived the class system from a ‘status hierarchy’ outlook, the working and dominant classes adopted a ‘power’ model type of imagery. The class system, according to middle-class interviewees, operated in a gradational manner as their standard image of the class system was of rungs on a ladder where each is slightly better-off and more powerful than the one below it. Far from acknowledging the major divisions and antagonisms characterising different classes, middle-class subjects related to class according to the rule of functional interdependence as if all classes contributed cordially to the whole social system. Their class imagery was akin to people’s experience of class in pre-enlightenment times where inequality was not thought to result from either conflict or contestations for scarce resources but as divinely ordained. The need for hierarchy, class differentiation, and inequality were frequent points of discussion:

“I was never was jealous of more powerful people. I believe that everyone is the same in God’s eyes. Who am I to change the world? I say that we need different people with different skills. If everyone was rich or intelligent then who will bake our bread or farm our lands.”

In contrast, the working and dominant classes adopted a ‘power model’ imagery of the class system that incorporated an ‘us and them’ standpoint. In taking such a position, subjects embraced two key assumptions. First, those diverse classes are in competition for key resources so that it is in their interest to draw positive evaluations about ‘themselves’ and ‘others’ respectively. Secondly, that it is valuable and normal to make a case about the injustices of their own social situation. Indeed, subjects deploying ‘us and them’ attitudes were very emotional about class. They were not only aware of the mechanisms that generated class inequalities but also deemed the ‘class system’ to be the primary cause of inequality and unfairness. Working-class persons utilised ‘us’ to refer to the honourable, hard-working

common people, exploited by the fraudulent ‘them’. The latter term was also used to refer to subjects in the lower class - that is, individuals lacking both ‘shame’ or ‘honour’ such as criminals, single mothers, long-term unemployed, and drug addicts - whom they perceived to be living off their hard-earned taxes. As one working-class informant highlighted,

“The lower classes make a mess of their lives but then are in receipt of various welfare benefits paid directly from my taxes. On the other hand, old people who are much richer than me are entitled to almost the same welfare services as myself since the government means-tests only our income rather than our assets.”

The dominant class viewed ‘us’ as industrious and diligent persons who valued competence, work-ethic virtues (such as competitiveness, dynamism, self-direction, resilience, and long-term planning), and who were involved in religious and volunteering organisations. ‘Them’, on the other hand, was utilised to refer to trouble-rousing and vulgar workers who squandered their money in cigarettes, alcohol and lotto. The determinants of the ‘power’ model amongst the working and dominant classes are found in their respective life course and class trajectories. Industrial and organisational cultures demarcate a collar divide as they engender perceptions of class as oppositional; thus, weaving a determination to symbolically mark off manual from non-manual work and to emphasise the distance between the two forms of employment. Whilst working-class subjects held much experience in manual occupational cultures so that their habitus was deeply marked by antagonistic feelings towards both ‘exploiters’ and ‘free-riders’, their dominant-class peers were conscious that their material feats, social prestige and symbolic power were threatened by individuals and groups with low moral standards and character who valued egoism in favour of altruism.

In line with contemporary research on mainstream class dynamics, the interviews revealed that the processes of hierarchical differentiation rarely gave rise to either collectivised ‘class’ or explicit ‘class’ identities. Indeed, older cohorts do not constitute an exception towards the increasing documentation supporting the individualisation of class identities. When subjects were asked in which class position they perceived themselves, most replied that they saw themselves as being part of the ‘middling sort’ -

that is, honest, hard-working, sober, industrious, thrifty persons in contrast to a selfish, arrogant, dishonest and decadent upper class on one hand, and an undisciplined, debauched, and ignoble lower class on the other. Interviews also investigated subjects' awareness with respect to 'class opposition' and 'class totality', and whether they yearned for an 'alternative society'. Working-class subjects were conscious of other individuals having opposing class interests and of the pervasiveness of class relations in everyday life. They perceived the greatest threat to their quality of life as coming from 'upper' class individuals whose comfortable levels of economic capital protected them from inflation and the downsizing of the welfare state. They also interpreted their lives from a classed lens so that they always blamed the state and strong capitalist companies as the major causes underlying their failure to improve their class position. However, such feelings amongst working class members did not - to paraphrase Marx - result in an 'explosion of consciousness', as many made use of consumption to strengthen their sense of purpose and identity in the hope of moving closer to the middle class. Consumer products, the advertisements for them, and their representations in numerous television programmes and movies, tap into unconscious desires and help to justify the presence of capitalism. Consumption nowadays can be equated to an active ideology positing that the meaning of life is to be found in buying things and pre-packaged experiences, and accessing mundane and repetitive services and understandings.

In contrast, middle-class subjects held a weak awareness of 'class opposition' and 'class totality', and no aspiration for an 'alternative society'. Middle-class persons perceived class differences to have decreased in recent decades, and despite holding class conflict as inevitable, claimed that class differences are not insurmountable. Perceiving their everyday life as 'comfortable', they resisted any departure from the existing social system. It was only when the interview touched upon their political attitudes that middle-class subjects showed the strongest levels of 'class opposition' and 'class totality'. As [Devine \(1992\)](#) maintained, it is when people talk of political conflict that they emphasise most strongly competing forms of class ethos. Whilst the middle class was very vociferous and spoke unsympathetically of the nouveaux riches whom they held responsible for Malta's socio-economic difficulties, the dominant class

also had harsh words regarding the working class and some sectors within the middle class whose conservative attitudes slowed down Malta's economic progress.

Various studies demonstrate how class relations have a significant effect on personal and social emotions. Later life is, again, no exception to such trends. Class relations in later life were intimately entwined with positive characteristics such as satisfaction, pride and happiness, as well as more negative emotions such as resentment, defensiveness, guilt, shame, envy, deference, contempt, arrogance, pride, rage, satisfaction, embarrassment and pity. However, it is amongst working-class subjects that one locates the strongest levels of emotional sentiments. Members in the working-class felt embarrassed for their low levels of capital. They tended to reconcile such negative feelings with various defence mechanisms, but especially, social avoidance. Their lives were also fraught by feelings of anxiety and dejection as they were aware that subjects in more powerful class positions considered them inferior. Another source of disappointment emerged from their experiences of social exclusion. Of course, 'social exclusion' is relative and is experienced by all class subjects, irrespective of class position. Nevertheless, the combination of low levels of class capital together with a relatively high aspiration to escape or, at least, improve their class position meant that it was working-class subjects who experienced the most intense psychological pain from social exclusion. Suburban blues were very upset by their inability to access material, social, and spatial resources. Although it was positive to note that all had access to basic utilities such as electricity, water, and telephone, they cut back on using these services for otherwise the bill would be too high. In this respect, one working-class older woman claimed, in embarrassing tones, her quest to keep household expenses as limited as possible:

“When my daughter leaves my grandchildren for a day I am really anxious. They are too young to understand that lights must be kept off as much as late in the evening as possible... I make sure that the television is switched off if they are not watching it. My husband scolds them.”

Women held unique emotional experiences. Working-class subjects professed much malcontent with their present situation. Most held poor and

insecure backgrounds so that their perception of marriage as a secure escape-route from a past characterised by lack of achievement and direction and towards a more successful future did not materialise. To their irritation many found such aspirations difficult to achieve. Their husbands' tended to be locked in vulnerable and low-income occupations with the bulk of family caring being their sole responsibility. This generated, in their own words, a "stressful and frustrating life where you never achieve both your short-term and long-term goals...always counting your expenses, always on the verge of a mental breakdown". Moreover, many were upset by the fact that their quality of life took a turn for the worse following their husbands' retirement, as their income and health expenditure decreased and increased respectively. In contrast, middle- and dominant-class women experienced the highest levels of emotional satisfaction. They held the best combination of psychological and social factors to achieve what is generally defined as 'successful ageing'. This is because these women were highly flexible and open to learning new coping skills which are necessary to the onset of later life. They boasted strong and healthy levels of social relationships, wellbeing, self-efficacy, socio-economic status, and coping skills. Interestingly, such positive emotions even extended themselves to middle-class widows since their high endowment of cultural and physical capital put them in a favourable position to learn those tasks that were previously the role of their husbands as well as to make new connections to 'fill' the interpersonal void arising from widowhood. Their mastery and success in these tasks led to an enhanced level self-confidence.

### **Conclusion**

This article confirms that modern conceptualisations of class, especially those championed by the political economy standpoint, are no longer relevant on their own to understand diversity and inequality in later life. On one hand, the social and demographic landscape has changed in such a way that the old notions of class no longer hold. On the other hand, the decoupling of a clear relationship between social class and collective action is often taken to wrongly imply that social classes have disappeared. The study of class structure and identity in later is no exception, with older persons no longer spontaneously and unambiguously using the language of

class as obvious (Savage et al., 2011). Class in late modernity has renewed itself from a heroic collective agency to an implicit category encoded in people's sense of self-worth, and in their attitudes to and awareness of others. This is not, however, the same as saying that older persons in contemporary times constitute thoroughly individualised beings who fly completely free of class relations (Savage, 2000). The fact that class relations have become increasingly 'fragmented', 'attenuated', and 'minimalist', warrants a 'renewal' of the gerontological class project rather than its uncritical disposal. Although it is no longer possible to "regard retirement as a residual component of the class structure" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2006: 235), class structures and identities in later life have not melted in the thin air. Gilleard and Higgs are right in announcing the fading away of the 'collective', 'explicit', and 'oppositional' character of class relations, but they overlook how class relations continue subsisting in 'cultural', 'individualised', and 'implicit' ways. In other words, the fact that the structural importance of class to people's lives appears not to be recognised by the people themselves does not imply its negation (Savage, 2005). Of course, one limitation of this approach is that although Bourdieu's sociology permits the avoidance of 'derivative rationales' based solely on labour market trajectories, it falls short in overcoming other life-course 'derivative rationales' based on social, financial and cultural forms of capital.

In the Maltese context, older persons were found to be located in a multi-dimensional and hierarchical class space where position was contingent on their volume, composition, and trajectory of class capital. Although the class habitus was in some ways related to one's occupational career, class positions result from more a complex interplay of subjective and objective factors. This article demonstrates that the key to understanding class relations in later life lies in the mutuality of the links between external constraint and individual agency, economic and social elements, and inequality and difference. Data demonstrated that in line with Bourdieu's (1984: 57) sociology of class, the hierarchy of lifestyles constitute the "strongest barriers between the classes" with "aesthetic stances... like cosmetics, clothing and home decoration [utilised as] opportunities to experience and assert one's position in social space". Indeed, the key differentiation between the working, middle, and dominant

classes was not economic capital as such, but their aesthetic preferences, consumer behaviour, and lifestyles. As regards class identities in contemporary later life, it is also clear that these are embedded in specific kind of socio-economic practices whereby class becomes embedded in cultural outlooks that implicated in modes of exclusion and/or domination. Undoubtedly, more research is warranted in the area of class dynamics in later life, and it is hoped that this article acts as a catalyst for further theoretical discussion and empirical investigations.

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