

LIVING THE MIDDLE CLASS DREAM: THE CASE OF SUV CONSUMPTION IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

This thesis is focused on the ways in which SUVs are evocative for their owners' politics of belonging to a middle class in Romania. Drawing on interviews conducted during February and March 2013, I argue that cars in general, and SUVs in particular, tell a story of middle class making among Romanian small entrepreneurs. I show that legitimization as a member of this category is claimed by the SUV owners interviewed by mobilizing narratives of morality, cultural knowledge, and practical competence. Stemming from recollections regarding their first cars, I portray how my interviewees' trajectories of car ownership, unfolding from faulty to better and newer automobiles, convey a process of learning and adaptation to the standards of a perceived legitimate lifestyle inspired by a Western European model. Moreover, I explore my interviewees' strategies of demonstrating belonging to a middle class, by connecting into their disenchanted accounts on the SUV purchase – a point where talk about cars becomes a matter of calculation of costs and benefits. Finally, I show that middle class is constituted through practices, at the level of SUV owners' work lives. I illustrate how their position as legitimate middle class professionals is delineated through the work of boundary drawing between “worthy” and “unworthy” SUV owners and defined through a series of contrasts such as the ones between proper and improper SUV use, or moral and immoral uses of money.

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I. Introduction

For Cristian, a construction business owner I interviewed, the thought that he could own an SUV thirty years ago was a way to define the unthinkable. For him, and allegedly for most Romanians as well, foreign cars – let alone expensive ones such as SUVs – were a dream during the socialist regime in Romania. At the time we met, a brand new Mitsubishi 4X4 bought as a Christmas present to himself stood parked in his backyard, next to his wife's sedan. This SUV, he said, was a regular car bought merely to serve his needs. With great regularity, my interviewees depicted their sentiments towards car ownership along similar opposites: while during socialism cars belonged to a realm of fantasy, now they were rendered rather trivial. Given that Romania's median income is among the lowest in the European Union, expressing disenchantment regarding expensive cars such as SUVs seems like a box waiting to be opened.

The question that guided me through the intricacies of SUV ownership in Romania was: what can SUVs reveal about the politics of belonging to a middle class from the part of Romanian owners? By life story interviews I followed through my informants' tales of car ownership, from their first personal automobiles until the current SUVs. While talking about the various cars owned, I broadened my questions on aspects related to the general context of the interviewees' lives at each point. As it turned out, the topic of cars in general, and especially of SUVs, was indeed a box to be opened. What followed was a cavalcade of dichotomies that, similarly with the statements of contrasting feelings about cars, made up to the SUV owners' visions of themselves and their worlds. More specifically, cars were starting points of stories that unfolded along a grander scheme of opposites: Western European/

Romanian lifestyles; control/ uncertainty in the economic sphere; fairness/ speculation within their professional lives; moral/ immoral uses of cars; correct/ faulty uses of money; worthy/ unworthy SUV owners; and the list could perhaps continue to the point of exhaustion.

This project relies on such dichotomies that surround the interviewees' experiences of car ownership to tell a story of middle class making. I argue that the narratives and practices employed by the SUV owners I talked with are illustrative of the active ways in which a middle class is delineated in Romania. The first chapter provides a theoretical framework that addresses four key analytical puzzles. I start from Weber's (1946) conceptualization on class and status and link in with more recent theories discussing the entanglement between the two in actors' struggle for attaining symbolic power. (Bourdieu 1984) Secondly, I draw on theories that refer to morality's role in the making of social order (Lamont 2000, 2001, Sayer 2010) to better illustrate how actors justify class by employing symbolic elements. Money and their deep social character (Zelizer 1995) provide a strong example regarding the transformation of class features in symbolic identities by being allotted a moral dimension. Further on, I link in with theories of practice (Bourdieu 1977, Swidler 1986) to frame the double dynamic between structural constraints and individuals' strategies, and the role of practices for actors' position in the social order. The last part of the chapter delineates several ethnographies of consumption in postsocialism and the role of objects in actors' processes of demonstrating belonging to the middle class.

The following sections of my thesis are centered on my research. After giving an account of the methodology used in Chapter 2, I continue with the analysis part (Chapter 3), which focuses on three dimensions. The first describes my interviewees' car ownership trajectories, conveying a story of gradual learning and adaptation (Goffman 1961) to perceived higher Western standards. Secondly, I discuss my interviewees' rationales involved

in the processes of buying SUVs and show how discourses of normalcy and safety suggest attempts to demonstrate belonging to the middle class from the part of my interviewees. Finally, the third section conveys my interviewees' practical ways to distinguish themselves from perceived lower categories of SUV owners. I show how such strategies of differentiation are considered vital by my interviewees, because such distinctions are perceived to have impacts on their professional pursuits.

II. Literature review

1. Class and Status Distinction

As a costly object and an object of “conspicuous consumption” signifying socio-economic standing, SUV ownership in Romania requires the mobilization of the notion of status. Weber (1946) first pointed out the difference between class and status in relation to individuals' struggle for attaining legitimacy and assertion of symbolic power. Class, for Weber, pertains to one's position in the social order according to his or her current as well as potential access to material possessions. Status, on the other hand, pertains to non-economic attributes such as “lifestyle” and “honor”--a key aspect of it being that “all groups having interests in the status order react with special sharpness precisely against the pretensions of purely economic acquisition” and that “[i]n most cases they react the more vigorously the more they feel themselves threatened.” (Weber 1946:192) One interesting aspect that Weber (1946) underlined is that, although not in correlation, class and status distinctions are often times connected in an individual's pursuit of achieving legitimacy and power. (1946:186)

Converging with Weber's view on the process of attaining legitimacy is Bourdieu's (1984) perspective that social order is constituted through conflict, namely on the basis of a

struggle for legitimation. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) puts forth the concept of habitus to provide understanding of how social order is constituted. Habitus represents a set of dispositions that people manifest, which are at the same time acquired through social intercourse and individually enacted through cultural practices; both a “structuring structure” and a “structured structure”. (Bourdieu 1984:171) Taste for instance is part of such “acquired disposition” and it resides in one’s ability to exert and recognize which practices and goods constitute as legitimate and appropriate for certain categories. Such ability is determinant for the consistency of social order and, at the level of individuals to know what is legitimate and be able to act as such is crucial for establishing their position in the social order.

Drawing on this idea, Mark Liechty (2002), in an analysis of Nepali middle class practices, observed that people in this category habitually appealed to status claims such as morality in order to consolidate their middle class position. He argued that middle class people “hide middle class privilege behind screens of seemingly ‘natural’ cultural practice in the realms of ‘status’” (15). This stance resonates well with the tensions within what I would call the category of Romanian SUV owners; belonging to class is claimed by means of status markers, as they de-emphasize the importance of material property, favoring status qualities, which also constitutes as “a second nature”, a feature of habitus. (Bourdieu 1984)

Status claims at times, differentiate between members of the same class. Weber (1946) offered that in times of relative economic stability more particularly (such as the ones in which Romania currently is as it accesses the European Union) “stratification by status is favored.” (194) In other words, when access to material goods is relatively easy, the members of a category mobilize status claims in order to distinguish themselves from perceived lower categories. Drawing on Weber, Liechty (2002) takes the argument further, holding that members of the middle class such as small entrepreneurs are more vested in making such

status claims as they must constantly demonstrate self-worth as part of their professional occupation which largely consists in marketing their own worth.

2. Morality as Mediation between Class and Status

When asking why social actors use status claims in order to establish their class position one is frequently confronted with the need to refer to “morality”. Discourses on morality serve middle class persons to naturalize their accomplishments and make them seem “second nature”. (Liechty 2002, Lamont 2000) Beyond the question of the middle class, morality plays an important role in the configuration of social order. (Lamont 2000, Savage et al. 2001, Sayer 2010) The labor of drawing boundaries between different classes appears to rest on a moral component that is, according to a number of studies, rather foundational. Morality enables individuals’ claims to high status positions or, if nothing else, claim “dignity” (Lamont 2000). More generally it permits people to draw boundaries between themselves and lower status “others”. As we will see, moral discourse is crucial for SUV owners to claim personal worth and merit when discussing class-related aspects such as money and material achievements.

Zelizer’s (1995) conceptualization of money helps us understand better how morality may contribute to the conversion of class features into status attributes, and consequently to distinction itself. Her concept of “social money” provides an insightful hint as to how morality acts, precisely, as mediation between class and status. Zelizer’s theoretical device questions the homogenizing and impersonal features of money as they are envisioned by classical theorists such as Marx, Weber and Simmel. Instead, she argues, “money is neither culturally neutral, nor socially anonymous”, but imbued with moral features that people assign to it, and “profoundly influenced by cultural and social structures.” (Zelizer 1995:18)

Moreover, money is “earmarked” (Zelizer 1995), meaning that people evaluate what the proper uses of money are according to different social relations, evaluations that are structurally inspired, in a sense, similarly with the taken for granted knowledge of the world implied by Bourdieu’s (1984) theorization of *habitus*. “Earmarking”, in this sense, may be defined as the construction of a legitimate use of money that reinforces social order.

Money, a marker of class, is thus allotted symbolic meanings. In my interviewees’ narratives these prove often moral in nature. This means that through money people express practical mastery and cultural knowledge, thus doing the labor of asserting distinction, and performing an established position in the social order which has been acquired through more than mere economic capital. The work of turning class identity into a symbolic one is especially made evident when, according to Zelizer (1995), people “respond with anger, shock, or ridicule to the ‘misuse’ of monies for the wrong circumstances or social relations.” (18) Such reactions reflect “boundary work” (Lamont and Molnar 2001) and the related struggle for legitimation. As my analysis demonstrates, this labor relies heavily on discourses of worth and morality. Morality is the overarching motif which reflects my interviewees’ emphasis on their practical mastery, a dimension of the *habitus* and a prerequisite for establishing their position in the social order -that is, their “middle-classness”.

3. The Cultural Practices of Belonging to a Middle Class

Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984) view of the double dynamic of *habitus* as both determined by social structures, and creatively maneuvered through use of the knowledge acquired, provided a fruitful starting point for several other theories of practice as a two-way relationship between structure and agency (Giddens 1984, Warde 2005, Swidler 1986, Schatzki 2001 et al.). Albeit with various attitudes regarding the degree of consciousness with which individuals carry out

practices, this theoretical body focuses on the ways in which agents negotiate their place in the social order. Furthermore, contemporary theories of practice tend to agree on the general idea that both knowledge and practical mastery – that is, both discourses and actions, ideas as well as doings - constitute social identity. As such both are prerequisites for demonstrating and performing a high position in the social and cultural hierarchy.

The first key feature of practices is that they are structurally generated. (Bourdieu 1977, 1990, Giddens 1984, Swidler 1986) Echoing Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, Swidler (1986) argues that culture endows individuals with repertoires of possible "strategies of action". Her theory refers to "strategies of action" that, while acquired by individuals through the frame of culture, imply use of symbols that have a great potential to become central in the organization of social order. This means that in order to achieve a perceived legitimate position in the social order, one needs the knowledge and ability to operate with the appropriate cultural tools. This is what Bourdieu (1990) calls a "feel of the game" and a "practical sense". Namely, one's social position is determined both by the ability to recognize and to exert proper practices, and by differentiation from what it stands in strong opposition with. To be more precise, one's position in the social order "is defined and asserted through difference" (172), a logic that according to Bourdieu makes the social order into a system of binary oppositions. Such oppositions as high/low became "fundamental structuring principles of practices" (172), thus shedding light upon the mechanisms of lifestyle differentiation.

An important aspect of strategies that express differentiation is that they are "perceived as not arbitrary" (Bourdieu 1977:166). This implies that individuals who possess the cultural tools correspondent to the perceived legitimate repertoires, i.e. the ones at the higher level of the social order, will receive recognition. The fact that the superiority of some practices – both in their narrative and embodied forms – over others are taken for granted, that

knowledge about the world is made to seem self-evident (“it goes without saying” Bourdieu 1977:167), implicitly reinforces the boundaries between perceived lower and upper categories, hence social order is reinforced. Drawing on this theoretical strain, I will show in the analysis chapter how my interviewees use their cars and practices related to the SUVs to differentiate themselves from the perceived unworthy SUV users, and assert their higher position in the social order. Notable here is that differentiations are made *within* the boundaries of what I would call the category of SUV owners; my interviewees are stressing on their distinction from other SUV owners, and not from non-owners or other types of cars users.

Swidler’s (1986) argument regarding the role of cultural repertoires in relation with social order is suggestively illustrated by describing how cultural tools are reconfigured in the context of “unsettled lives”, that is, during historical or social shifts. During such times, culture’s role in providing possibilities of action is most evident because the meanings people assign to practices are strongly emphasized. What otherwise was taken for granted becomes more consciously asserted in the case of “unsettled lives”. (Swidler 1986) This translates into reconfigurations of meanings assigned to practices and

ritual changes reorganize taken-for-granted-habits and modes of experience. People developing new strategies of action depend on cultural models to learn styles of self, relationship... Commitment to such an ideology... is more conscious than is the embeddedness of individuals in settled cultures representing a break with some alternative way of life. (279)

The theorization of how cultural repertoires are acted upon during unsettled lives provides a rich basis for discussing how the SUV owners I interviewed mobilize cultural “tools” in order to claim practical mastery and, consequently, their position in the middle class. Their

“unsettlement” can be related to the nature of their professions, as entrepreneurs who must deal with competition on the markets they activate, especially given Romania’s relatively recent conversion to market economy. This is a case where, as Swidler (1986) contended, the repertoires people dispose of are highly contested and the tools for differentiation are mobilized in a more explicit manner. In the case of my interviewees, discontent regarding the perceived unworthy and unskilled SUV owners can be thought as a symptom of dispute over a similar repertoire from the part of two different categories. SUVs are perceived by the owners I interviewed as “tools” belonging to a middle class repertoire, because these cars are strongly associated with their professions. The fact that non-entrepreneurs, or members perceived below the middle class make use of similar symbols such as SUVs triggered vehement reactions from my interviewees. I contend that a reason for such dismay becomes thinkable as a reaction from the part of my interviewees to reinforce the boundaries of the social order – or more specifically, the boundaries of a middle class.

Swidler’s (1986) theorization on the way people commit to learning and reconfiguring new repertoires resonates with Goffman’s (1963) concept of “moral career”. The two theories meet in the sense that both refer to processes of surpassing a lifestyle and learning a set of new rules that constitute as legitimate. To elaborate more on Goffman’s (1963) conceptualization, “moral careers” referred initially to the process of adaptation to the rules of what is considered “normal” in a given society. However, the term is aimed to describe wider matters, such as the experience of “those who are initially socialized in an alien community, whether inside or outside the geographical boundaries of the normal society, and who then must learn a second way of being...” (49) In this, the ways of learning included in one’s “moral career” can be thought of as similar with the cultural tools Swidler (1986) discusses. Moreover, “moral careers” are linked to Swidler’s (1986) notion of culture that generates

repertoires of individual action, also due to the fact that Goffman (1961) emphasizes his concept's analytical strength of "allowing one to move back and forth between the personal and the public, between the self and its significant society..." (119) Briefly, it can be argued that in their "moral careers" people also draw on perceived legitimate repertoires (Swidler 1986). In the case of my interviewees, as I will show in the analysis chapter, car ownership stories imply a similar process as the one conveyed by the pursuit of the "moral careers". The purchase of better and newer automobiles from abroad suggests that cars may be thought of as "tools" inspired from a repertoire that consists of Western Europe's perceived legitimate standards of living.

4. Theories of the Postsocialist World

In addition to specific concepts in general social theory, my work draws on substantive ethnographies of postsocialism in which objects demonstrably play an important role in distinguishing groups and classes in Central and Eastern European societies. Stemming from Bourdieu's (1984) argument according to which the social order is constituted on labor of classifications that follow a binary logic on the one hand, and drawing on the ethnographic work describing the use of "normalcy", on the other hand, I will discuss how the use of words such as "normalcy" and "safety" are symbolically charged.

Bourdieu (1984) refers to the use of words which are aimed at expressing distinction, as a result of the fact that "groups invest themselves totally, with everything that opposes them to other groups in the common words that express their identity i.e. their difference." (194). The term "normal" has in fact been identified as a marker of differentiation across wide areas in the postsocialist spaces of Central and Eastern Europe. Normalcy in this context has been identified by various ethnographies (Fehervary 2001, Humphrey 1998, Lankauskas 2002

et al.) as the expression of comfortable standards of living, associated with the Western lifestyles in opposition with socialist perceived backwardness. Such opposition is particularly evident in the case of automobile consumption in Romania, due to the enhanced shortages and deprivations entailed by cars during socialism. A historical inquiry on car consumption during socialism (Gatejel 2010) provides insights in this sense, showing how automobile ownership and usage proved highly problematic under socialist rule. Due to shortages, the waiting lists for purchasing a car would go for as long as several years, on top of other related difficulties such as finding the gas and even the mere act of making a Romanian car work.

The ethnographies on postsocialist consumption mentioned here are each centered on the use of certain objects, from vast ones such as grandiose villas in Humphrey's (1998) case, to very specific goods such as Coca Cola (Lankauskas 2002), and show how these objects are integrated within the owners' realms of signification. In this sense, Fehervary (2001) makes an interesting point, showing that Hungarians depict their newly acquired consumption habit, of designing American kitchens, as 'normal', although these open spaces are atypical to the Hungarian cultural context. Similarly, Lankauskas (2002) shows the disposition of a group of New Evangelical youths for defining their identity by means of up-to-date technologies and by consuming Coca Cola, as a sign of being on a par with the Western everyday life practices. Therefore, normalcy enters an equation which comprises the postsocialist self as a progressive one, which manages to keep up with the new system's norms, of market economy, as Drazin (2002) points out. Moreover, being normal also suggests knowledge and practical ability to use Western goods, hence these objects can be thought of as "tools" belonging to the repertoire of cultured individuals (Swidler 1986).

Additionally, the act of labeling "normal" objects that would generally be considered exquisite, such as luxurious villas (Humphrey 1998), expensive kitchens (Fehervary 2001), or

costly cars such as in the case of Romanian SUV owners, also show how elements of class are transformed into elements of status because they express cultural knowledge and mastery in that they align with standards of the West. In other words, talk of normalcy does the labor of transforming class attributes in symbolic identities, and expresses the work of naturalization of class position. In this sense, SUV consumption can be understood as way of practicing ‘normalcy’ in reference to the European space and its perceived lifestyles and using an SUV can be thought as part of a cultural repertoire. (Swidler 1986) Accordingly, normalcy represents a strategy of demonstrating belonging to a middle class category, from the part of the SUV owners, by simultaneously putting to work strategies that suggest cultural knowledge and practical mastery.

III. Methodology

I carried out thirteen interviews with Romanian SUV owners during February and March 2013. They were all men, ranging from 32 to 60 years old, living in several towns in Bacau County, situated in the Eastern side of Romania. Although I initially had in mind to select interviewees from a broader sample of SUV owners from the point of view of their socio-demographic characteristics, I then focused my inquiry on small business owners who drove both new and used SUVs. I reached this decision after conducting several pilot interviews during which the people I talked with strongly expressed a sense of differentiating themselves from perceived lower categories of SUV owners.

Ever since these first interviews, and later on in my research as well, there was one key aspect that the informants held against these perceived lower categories of SUV owners: that of not being entrepreneurs. Further on, this matter unfolded in a broad spectrum of

differences that my interviewees elaborated on – referring to education, income, skills, knowledge, and so forth – aspects that I will discuss in a more consistent manner in the analysis part of this paper. With this in mind, I decided to set my focus on small business owners, because the differences they drew *within* what I would call a category of SUV owners in Romania, allowed insights into the dynamics of social order. Namely, listening through the strategies my interviewees mobilized in order to differentiate themselves from perceived lower categories of SUV owners was fruitful for outlining how middle class sensibilities are delineated through car consumption in Romania. The thirteen SUV owners I spoke with managed small businesses in the fields of construction, farming, design, hospitality, and social work. At first, the SUV owners I met with were selected among acquaintances, and I later reached out to contacts they introduced me to.

The interviews lasted from around 40 minutes to two hours; they were organized in the form of life stories, and centered around cars – from the first memories related to cars (or lack thereof), to the following automobiles owned, up to present day. Talk about cars paralleled the interviewees' life stages, focusing on their narratives of personal and professional pursuits. Accordingly, the interview questions pertained to three main areas of concern. The first refers to the beginnings of car ownership, with a focus on stories from socialism and early postsocialism in the case of interviewees who owned, or sometimes had simply expressed desire for owning an automobile during that time. Thus, after some introductory questions, I began with exploring into how the interviewees decided to buy their first cars, under what circumstances and the experience and perceptions related to owning a car at that point in their lives. This strain of inquiry continued with aspects related to the interviewees' subsequent life stages along with their evaluations and experiences related to the following automobiles. Such accounts constituted a rich resource of information on the interviewees' social backgrounds. I

paid special attention to their recollections related to cars, due to these objects rich history during socialism. One of my key aims in this sense was to discover in which ways the socialist planning and economy of shortages had an impact in the configuration of meaning surrounding automobiles, a matter which allows richly explored through biographical accounts.

A second aspect I focused my questions on was related to the decision of buying an SUV, connecting as well into the perceived life stages the interviewees went through at the time. Questions such as “what kind of person is an SUV fit for?”, proved fruitful for learning about the SUV owners’ insights on their interpretations of success, processes of legitimation and assessments on their belonging to a middle class. Furthermore, the interviews pertained to matters of SUV use, which also cast light on the interviewees’ strategies of distinguishing themselves from perceived lower categories of SUV owners. This part of the conversation usually involved evaluations on proper uses of SUVs invoking work ethics, cultural competence and practical skill. Additionally, both the discussions about SUVs purchase decisions and use reached into talks related to the morality of owning an SUV as a member of a proper, hard-working, “middle strata” as the interviewees’ described themselves. Another topic I chose to pursue as a result to the wide degree it was prompted by the SUV owners was money. Following their lead on talking about money was a particularly fruitful endeavor which provided a great wealth of information on the SUV owners’ ideas of the morality of money and spending.

Finally, the fact that all the SUV owners I interviewed were men motivated me to ask if and in what ways masculinity is entangled with SUV ownership. To this purpose I aimed to look into the interviewees’ opinions regarding, for instance, to what extent an SUV is fit for a woman to drive. Their reflections on this matter, along with other statements pertaining to

perceived appropriate men conduit consists of, add up to a body of data for a future avenue of research, complementary with the discussion of middle class making.

IV.Results and Analysis

1. From Shortages to Success: The “Moral Career” of Car Owners in Postsocialist Romania

Most of the people I interviewed share a similar car ownership pattern. Car ownership trajectories are characterized by a sense of gradual progress, from non-ownership and depictions of early-life deprivations emerging from the need for automobiles, to the acquisition my interviewees’ first foreign or new cars. It is a narrative that unfolds as a process of constant learning to become a middle class member, reflected by a perceived evolution of cars my interviewees owned. Automobile consumption patterns from socialism, and the years following that, are evocative of the cultural shifts that took place in postsocialist Romania in terms of attaining lifestyles on a par with Western Europe. Today’s SUV owners reminisce about their or their families’ first car purchase with marvel. Using such vehicles usually implied much struggle due to the regime’s regulations, whereas words such as ‘myth’ and ‘dream’ came up in association with the perspective of owning a new or a foreign car. This chapter discusses the “moral careers” (Goffman 1963) drawn by my interviewees’ car consumption stages, a trajectory which they describe as an evolution from socialist shortages to decent lifestyles. In addition, such “moral careers” can be better illustrated here by connecting with a strain of ethnographic works on postsocialist people’s tendencies to overcome past deprivations through consumption (Humphrey 1998, Drazin 2002, et al.).

The interviewees' car ownership trajectories start with the very fact of not having a car. In the interviewees' recollections of the 1980s and early 1990s, there seems to be a sharp line between those who owned and those who did not own a personal automobile. The experience of not having a car comes up often during conversations as something impairing a smooth course of everyday life such as visiting relatives or travelling to work. Lack of a personal automobile is compared with how those that did have access to cars got by. George recalls having to hitchhike during his first years as a resident engineer, in the 1990s, and being "very pissed off" seeing people whom he had known to be "slackers" passing by in their cars. In a similar vein, Constantin told me of the harsh times he had during college when he had to depend on neighbors or acquaintances to give him rides from one town to another.

By contrast, those whose families did benefit of the privilege of having a car describe it as a matter related with owners' social position. Alexandru, now a bed and breakfast owner, told me that although during socialism in order to buy a car "one had to wait a long time – even a year or two". However, his family owned two Dacias in the 1980s, which he admits being a "very uncanny" occurrence for those times, and relates it to his mother's high position in a semi-private company. In the light of such anecdotes owning a car becomes thinkable as a marker of class during socialism. According to Cristian for instance, during the 1980s and shortly after, one could tell his company's organizational chart by the type of cars employees drove.

[...] our bosses used to joke that the smaller the boss, the bigger his assigned car was. The company had over a thousand employees. The managers had Dacias, there were about two in total. There were several ARO [4X4 cars produced during socialism in Romania], about 4 or 5 in total assigned to the superintendents. [...] And the others, such as myself at the time – the bascules, we had those big vans carrying the workers.

People at the lower end of status hierarchies were thus less likely to have outright access to consumer goods such as automobiles. Buying a car, and especially a new one, was no easy dealing in Romania during the socialist years and until well into the 1990s, even for the relatively well-off, because “the Dacia factory couldn’t keep up with the demand” (Constantin) Instead of going through the sometimes years-long waitlists and bureaucratic jungle for buying new cars, some of the interviewees settled for second hand cars. Constantin for instance remembers buying his from an elder acquaintance at a higher price than a new Dacia.

Ownership alone, however, was no guarantee for the much longed for freedom of movement that a personal car would ideally allow. Car ownership during socialism in Romania was closely dealt with in relation to the state regulations under which it fell. As a young priest in 1988, Constantin reminisces of the newfound struggles he had to face once his used shiny-blue Dacia made it to his backyard. Namely, the limited fuel ration allotted by the state and the restriction to travel by car every other weekend, depending on the odd or even number of one’s license plate. At the same time, having a car was no less constant subject of strategic attempts from the part of car owners to compensate for the imposed shortages. In order to cope with these draconic restrictions Constantin told me of the multiple go-arounds designed by him to procure the fuel necessary for his everyday travels. Among these strategies, for instance, was buying gasoline stolen from the pipes infrastructure in his town, or getting a solution used to dilute paint and mixing it with fuel, even at the expense of the engine’s durability.

In spite of hardships and the multiple repairs that owners of the old Romanian cars had to deal with, personal automobiles were seen as the accomplishment of what several interviewees called “a myth”, or the realization of a dream. “My father, I think, cared for his

car more than for us or his own wife”, Sebastian recalls in relation with the longings for a personal car in the 1980s. In a similar note, pertaining to the possibility of having a foreign car, Cristian says that during the 1990s “We couldn’t even dream of such things. . . We didn’t even conceive of it, we thought that [they’re] only in the magazines or at TV.”

A following stage of car ownership and also towards the accomplishment of such dream constituted, for most of the interviewees, the purchase of a foreign car, brought in most cases from Germany by the owners themselves. It is an experience predominantly described as a first contact with the West during the late 1990s and early 2000s. A foreign car was yet another step up, and a manner of differentiation from the mainstream Dacia owners, as Alexandru remarks a propos his used Opel brought from Germany. On a similar note, George tells the story of his first foreign car, also a second hand Opel, which he bought mainly because it looked good and because it was foreign.

These two stories are remarkable for one common trait, which denotes well the desire for Western goods in postsocialist Romania: both cars turned out to be money traps. Both George and Alexandru emphasized the bad deals their first foreign cars amounted to. For the former, the used Opel soon equaled the cost of a new apartment at the time, while the latter realized the mistake of trading a two year old Dacia for what turned out to be a heavily rusted, second hand, eight year old car. Such stories resonate with Berdahl’s (1999) on the former socialist people’s desire for Western goods. Desire for foreign goods was deployed as a concept that revealed the postsocialist subjects’ perception of their backwardness; consequently, it expressed an underlying wish from the part of people from the ex-socialist bloc to become on par with Western European standards of living. (Berdahl 1999, Fehervary 2001) In a similar line, the SUV owners’ readiness to buy foreign automobiles can be thought

of an attempt to overcome a perceived cultural lag that the socialist system of shortages casted upon them, and align to perceived superior lifestyles inspired by Western Europe.

Despite such experiences with buying first foreign cars going not without difficulties, my interviewees acknowledge this switch from Romanian brands to foreign ones as notable episodes. It seems a commonsensical idea that “a foreign car is clearly superior to a Dacia.” (Constantin) Car purchases represent the marking of a higher stage both in actors’ trajectories of ownership and, on a broader level, in their lives. In many respects, car upgrades paralleled important life changes such as professional success or the starting of a family. George associates one of his first major career successes with the purchase of his first brand new car, with great excitement: “in 2002, after a first contract – I built a house for some friends – I bought a Skoda Octavia, new! Brand new!” A similar expression of excitement vis-à-vis the superiority of new cars was stated with equal excitement; when I asked Constantin how he had decided to buy his first unused car, the answer came promptly: “well, anyone wishes for a new car, right? Any used car owner would like to have a new one”. Most often, as in George’s case, new cars came along with the interviewees’ first stages of professional prosperity. An important feature that a new car provided, according to the interviewees’ accounts, was the possibility to personalize it by one’s own taste. Such an option was viewed as a poignant step forward at the time, highly contrasting with the default configurations available in the used cars or even new Dacias.

By and large, my interviewees’ accounts on their car ownership tell a story of adaptation from socialist deprivation to the market economy. What is notable however, following the narratives about the different cars owned, conveys a process of gradual learning. The shifts from non-ownership, to used Dacias, and later to foreign and/or new cars signify a process of learning how to be middle class, inspired by following perceived Western life

styles by means of car consumption. In their own terms as well, my interviewees' succession of cars described a trajectory: "we all evolved from those newly wedded boys who had Dacias to having various cars: one, Nissan Qashqai, another, Mitsubishi, another, Audi Off-road and all sort of vagaries like these..." (David 2013) This line of argument resonates well with Goffman's idea of "moral career" (1963) for the road from the first rudimentary car to the first brand new one is marked by "similar sequence[s] of personal adjustment" (45) from the part of the people I interviewed. Such adjustment was in this respect pursued through consumption of what owners had thought to be progressively better cars. *Better* in the 1990s and early 2000s meant for them *Western European* and at a later stage it also meant *new* cars. Car purchases can be thought of, according to Goffman's (1963), as part of a trajectory which entailed a refashioning of the self by means of consumption, carried out by the interviewees.

The concept of "moral career" involves a process of learning and adaptation to a context of perceived normalcy. In Goffman's (1963) terms, normalcy as a point of reference may as well pertain to the boundaries of geographical areas in relation to which outsiders come to learn how to adapt. Likewise, I contend that, as postsocialist subjects, the Romanian car users I interviewed started to acquire Western brands of cars as part of a broader attempt to "learn a second way of being that is felt by those around them to be the real and valid one." (49) In this respect, my interviewees took on Western European models of consumption, as seminal indicators of proper standards of living. In a similar vein with other anthropological observations on postsocialist consumers' desire for Western goods (Merkel 1997, Berdahl 1999 et al.), the people I interviewed expressed a particular desire for cars brought from Germany in the years following the demise of socialism in Romania. Although these cars didn't always work better than some of the nationally produced vehicles, due to being at times

heavily used by previous owners, the interviewees revealed a propensity for their more refined aesthetic designs and the cars' sheer quality of being foreign.

Over and above, the stage constituted by the purchase of a new car is described by informants as "a big leap forward" (Constantin) due to them being able to personalize their automobiles. The degree of importance given to the opportunity to select one's own car features, as Adam Drazin (2002) previously observed in relation to the market of cleaning products is evocative for some of the postsocialist cultural shifts in Romania. His study hypothesized that the large increase in the variety of cleaning products on the Romanian market in the years following socialism's demise was a cultural symptom, evocative for Romanians' desire to overcome socialism's lack of options. According to my informants' accounts, their enchantment towards the opportunity to design one's car by their own taste is perceived as a matter of learning to be on par with the Western model. This is in contrast with the socialist years when buyers were not given the option – or being given very little choice – to personalize their cars in terms of color, equipment, or model. To a certain extent, I would argue that the elements which constituted my informants' "moral careers" – at first, a car in itself, then newer, better, more sophisticated ones – are at the same time "cultural tools" (Swidler 1986) that are envisioned by my interviewees as part of repertoires legitimated within the desired Western model.

To conclude, my informants' stories about their previously owned cars can be thought of as a constantly progressive trajectory that started in shortages, and reached the peak at the point of owning a brand new foreign automobile. In the background, there is another story unfolding at the same pace, with cars matching up their owners' successes, while ultimately it may be the completion of the learning process which consists in aligning owners' self-images to the perceived superior life standards of the West.

2. The Normalcy and Safety of the Middle Class Dream: a story of the SUV choice

Learning that we are going to talk about their SUVs, my interviewees prompted and then developed on two common lines of argument that can be summed up as: it came naturally because I needed it and it is safe. I dedicate this part to reflect on the implications of such patterns in my interviewees' replies. In the previous section I showed that my informants' car ownership histories are conveyed as a sequential process of adaptation to "normalcy" (Goffman 1963). The concept of normalcy has also been the focus of numerous ethnographies of postsocialism, particularly in relation with consumption experiences (Fehervary 2001, Rausing 2002, Kepplova 2012 et al.). Normalcy, in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) space, is fashioned through the pursuit of a set of living standards inspired by images of the West. In the light of this theoretical framework I argue that the way my interviewees account for their choice for SUVs marks the peak of their "moral careers". Meaning that owning an SUV can be thought of as a way of my informants' expressing successful adaptation to "normalcy" (Goffman 1963). If "moral careers" consist of a continuous process of adaptation to a desired standard through purchase of better and newer cars, the point of buying an SUV reaches past this point and links in with claims of naturalization into the desired European middle class. The purchase of an SUV is a much less enchanted story, conveyed by my interviewees as a calculative process of thinking about costs and financial resources. I will argue that the SUV owners' 'naturalization' of their expensive cars inscribes in a broader tendency to demonstrate belonging to a proper European middle class among Central and Eastern Europeans.

2.1. *“Don’t mention it”: the normalcy of SUVs*

One thing I learned in the first minutes of getting acquainted with my informants was that owning an SUV and talking about it are two matters that, by all means, need not converge. “I don’t think there’s much to be said about my SUV, really” was devotedly the follow-up line of being introduced to the topic of my research. If in the first part of the interviews, talking about previous automobiles gave space to story-telling by deeming these objects in the realm of dreams and aspirations, the same does not apply to the SUV purchase. Asking how they came to the decision of buying such car prompted a reaction that may as well be described as giving me the cold shoulder. The motivation seemed implicit: it was only natural to buy such car.

“Natural”, at first, seemed to refer strictly to instrumental needs. Without exception, my interviewees started the conversations by telling me that the roads they need to take for work can’t be properly accessed by any other car than a 4x4. For instance Constantin brought up the need to reach the deep rural homes of his NGO’s elderly beneficiaries: “I need it for my work activities, when I’m visiting the elderly.” Similarly, Cristian and Andrei, who are managing two construction businesses, tell me that the projects they are engaged in take place in remote areas, where there are no asphalt roads, so one can’t do without an SUV.

Another reason why an SUV had to be bought was family trips. These cars allow for extra comfort in the backseat for children as well as a larger luggage space.

There are people who can afford cars and buy them as a necessity; I think that this is a category I fit in because I bought it as a necessary thing. Neither for showing off, nor for anything else, it was just a thing, as I said; you can’t do without a car. And it was necessary for my family as well. (Cristian)

Cristian's remark is representative for my interviewees' initial emphasis on the functional purpose of their SUVs. While appreciating the car's increased level of comfort for his work and family needs, the SUV is discursively bounded to its functions to the point of almost being denigrated. For instance, Cristian confesses that his dream car would be a sports' BMW, but is reluctant that it would be a good fit. Cristi gets to the point of declaring that he doesn't like the SUV he bought for going on holidays with his family, while Alexandru also expresses his enchantment towards the experience of driving a friend's Porsche Cayenne at one point.

The element that all the answers have in common is thus a "demystification" of the car (Fehervary 2001). Cristian, who had earlier told me that as a young engineer in the 1980s, he couldn't so much as fathom owning an expensive foreign automobile, now accounts for buying his SUV in a much more mundane manner:

[It was] a necessity. I didn't want it in a way someone wants a toy. . . So I didn't perceive it as a dream, to get to have that kind of a car. It was a necessity and an accessory along with aging, financial potency, and along with climbing a certain hierarchy. It somewhat came naturally.

This quote is illuminating for understanding some deeper implications of the invoked natural need for an SUV. To need an SUV means, besides putting to use its technical features, a way to assert well-deserved success. In recalling the years when he craved for having a car as his "richer friends" had, George reckons to having set his mind to "make it (*de a ma realiza*)" and fight in life in order to have my own car". Consequently, when pondering upon buying an expensive car such as an SUV, he added: "I remember well the moment I bought an SUV and these were exactly my words, that it's time to move on to an SUV because we started from down low and now... I had accumulated some material successes..." (George) Success

for him and others is conceived as “the symbiosis between moral and material. . . meaning to have a house, a car... everybody refers to these as clear targets in life: to have a house, a car and who’s more down to earth must also take into account the moral part”. (George) Sebastian too envisions success in a similar fashion: “to be accomplished means that your child to have her own business. . . And materially – to have a house and a garden...”

Such definitions of success resonate with ethnographies in the postsocialist space (Fehervary 2001, Patiko 2005) that described people’s tendencies to delineate success in accordance with material belongings. In these instances of depicting success the entanglement between class and status becomes evident due to my interviewees mobilizing notions of morality to account for material achievements. This suggests a tendency from the part of the SUV owners to delineate their privileges in symbolic terms, this way translating their economic power in a matter of ethical worth.

The moment of acknowledging a practical need for an SUV is paralleled by what the owners I talked with refer to as a stage in life, a matter that comes with aging. Only that it is not a stage when they overtly displayed a desire to improve a state of the matter as in the case of previous car purchases constituted as “moral careers” (Goffman 1963). Instead, the purchase of an SUV is deemed as a point where potency is implicit, i.e. natural, a consequence of material and social growth. The lack of enchantment towards the SUV can be thought of as a sign of the SUV owners to demonstrate full-fledged insertion in a proper middle class, along with the desired status category comparable with the Western Europe. The fact is that the moment to buy an SUV is accounted as such a natural aspect that it goes without saying.

It’s an accomplishment because you’re offering yourself comfort and safety with money; with much money, not *very* much, just much. And it’s an accomplishment like any other, like when

you buy a house, I don't know, when you accomplish something in life. It's a life stage. . .
(Cristian)

Success and its naturalness are suggestively brought together here in the rather oxymoronic statement that the SUV is “an accomplishment like any other”. It is in statements such as this one, emphasizing at the same time the extraordinariness and triviality of expensive items such as SUVs that the claim of rightful belonging to middle-class pervades most. In her conversations with Hungarian consumers, Fehervary (2001) notices a similar symptom about status objects, in that “it was no longer appropriate to express delight with a commodity simply for its western origins or inventive design” (378). Disinterest towards status goods is further underlined by Alexandru: “I, for instance, don't really value phones. I use a phone until it stops working. I don't care about such things. Maybe when I keep it on the table people notice that it's all weary, but I really don't care. . .” Cristian too expresses a tendency to perform detachment towards his new Mitsubishi by bringing up a story about the instruction manual the SUV came with: “Generally almost all people, when they buy something new, read the technical guide. Even for a toaster, you still read it. Well, look, had this car for two months now and haven't even opened it yet.” Sebastian also describes his SUV purchase in a similar disengaged tone, explaining that he wasn't interested in cars, but that one of the employees convinced him to buy his Nissan Qashqai. Stated lack of interest in their expensive cars suggests the SUV owners' reference to these objects as “second nature” (Bourdieu 1984), that naturally correspond to their positions in the social order.

2.2. *A car is a car is a car: need and safety*

Most pervasive among the instrumental benefits of SUVs that the owners bring up is the matter of safety. It is a term that cuts through topics broader than the mere utility of cars,

reaching into aspects related to the interviewees' professional environment. I argue that normalcy and safety are two complementary concepts that shed light on the SUV owners' attempt to demonstrate belonging to a middle class. Along with normalcy, safety is a term that suggests a stage consequent to the car ownership trajectories marked by "moral careers" (Goffman 1963). While the "moral careers" constituted by car ownership were a matter of aspiration, safety talk no longer relates to learning and adaptation to the foreign standards of living. Instead, safety is connected by the owners with processes of rational calculations in the stage of choosing their SUVs, hinting that cars are no longer objects to dream at, but more likely, instrumental necessities. I contend that this is another strategy employed by SUV owners to demonstrate full-fledged integration in a properly European middle-class.

Central to owning an SUV, according to my interviewees, is the guarantees it confers for the long and bumpy roads. For starters, safety connects with the quality of the driving experience: "There's a sense of safety and you're sure it doesn't break down when you least expect it to." (Cristian) A notable aspect that begins to transpire from these evaluations of automobiles in terms of safety is a sense of polarization between SUVs and other cars. The safety of being in an SUV comes in opposition with the times characterized by driving more unpredictable vehicles such as Dacias, as David reckons: "Safety mattered very much for me. Wherever we went... if tomorrow we were to leave to Constanta, the car won't break down. I wasn't able to say the same when I had a Dacia." Dacias are envisioned as part of a different stage in the past, one that the better cars such as SUVs put an end to, due to their reliability feature.

Bringing up the memory of some long-distance trips with his Dacia, Cristian bitterly remembers the tedious tasks one had to pursue in preparation for the drive, consisting

ofhaving to “take the car to the service a day before to check it, to fix it.” Such times he perceives in strong opposition with the present time and self:

Eeeh, those times are gone and my activity doesn't allow me to have a car which makes me wonder whether I'll get where I need to or not. No. I need a car that allows me to be sure that I can get up, leave, and get where I need to be. For instance I have a meeting somewhere and I need to get there at 10 o'clock. And I know the road will take two hours. Well, I leave two and a half hours in advance, because I'm thinking maybe there's something happening on the road, I don't know. You feel sick and stop or whatever. You can't do the same thing with an old car; because you can't be sure if you will get where you need to or not. With this [SUV], you get in and go where you need to, when you need to. So that's why I'm saying it came as a necessity, and not as a dream.

Cristian's remark is compelling in that it illustrates the normalcy associated with one's position in an imagined middle class (Fehervary 2001 et al.) is achievable by controlling uncertainties. The career stage that Cristian has described as a natural evolution is maintained through calculations and risk control. A core aspect of life that an SUV allows its owner to exert control over is time. In this sense, safety doesn't only mean protection from breakdowns; according to the interviewees, SUVs provide the guarantee to control time and, consequently, work-related matters.

Furthermore, the need for control is also connected with broader aspects of the economic climate in Romania. George makes an evocative account indicating that safety, achieved through controlling uncertainties, is a concept highly embroiled in the processes of middle class making in Romania. Tracing back his steps with regard to the cars he had owned, George seems to reach a slightly bemusing realization in retrospect, that on average he has been buying a new car every year once the business started going well. “I was a fan of new cars... I must have had about 17 cars, including the company ones”, he reckons. Having

bought exclusively new cars in the past seems to him now “a big mistake” due to the high costs both of the objects themselves and the expenses resulted from use. George puts these past choices on account of a whim:

That was my way of thinking at the time and this is how I got to buying brand new cars. Well, now if I were to buy a car there's no way I would go to a dealership with so much money, no. Now I don't want new cars any longer . . . And actually I don't wish for any kind of car now. We're going through times of such uncertainties... related to our work, which make us refrain ourselves. And it's also the status I've achieved with my family... of settlement in many ways, so to speak.

George's change of heart regarding the rationales of car purchase indicates his dissatisfaction with the idea of letting emotions act out in the decision.

Car ownership, in the SUV's case is no longer deemed a matter of aspiration for better and newer, but a process of evaluation of costs, resources and external threats. It is thus a symptom of departure from what Berdahl (1999) and Merkel (1997) conceptualized as postsocialist people's desire for previously unavailable consumer goods. In this vein, the discourse of safety converges with the need to control economic uncertainties experienced by George in his professional life. Additionally, George's realization of poor car purchase decisions reveals a striking contrast between choice rationales in the past and present. While at the beginnings of car ownership the decision to buy a car is described as a rather emotionally-driven process, now such behavior is frowned upon, and a car purchase is depicted as a matter of calculative logic.

Safety is thus employed to suggest the need for control and reaches into the SUV owners' issues with uncertainties not solely on the road, but more broadly, in the economic environment they activate. Talk of safety suggests the SUV owners' need to control the

uncertainties that they describe as typical to Romania's current climate. Time and costs calculations, along with claims of rationality are associated with Western European ways of life, and contrasted to Romania's instability by the interviewees. In a similar manner with George's regrets for buying new cars, David regrets his decision to sign leasing contracts in order to buy cars in the past, instead of bringing barely used cars from Germany, as in the case of his SUV. Romanian dealers are considered charlatans who are set to "rip off" their customers off and unfoundedly inflate car prices and charge extra fees at their own will.

If I were to buy another car tomorrow, I would do the same [buy it from abroad]; from wherever in Europe. Not from Romania exactly because of this [Romanian dealers' schemes]. We have two leased cars bought in Romania. I can't even begin to tell how much these bastards are ripping us off, some shams. We are their slaves, this is a fact. (David)

David's vehement discontent with the Romanian automobiles market is complementary to George's dissatisfaction regarding the uncertainties he must deal with in his work life. Both express at the same time the desire to settle by devising ways of controlling uncertainty. For George control consists in saving and refraining, among others, from buying brand new cars as he had used to in the years of professional ascent. David avoids dealing with the perceived Romanian uncertainty by looking for cars in Germany.

Safety is encompassed in the interviewees' search for business stability and fairness, standing at the core of a proper life style in the SUV owners' point of view. One reason why the idea of admittedly displaying success through cars is frowned upon is its perceived flagrant "ephemeral" character, as David labeled it. This is why, I contend, the emphasis on the mere need for a car such as an SUV is so strongly held against representing cars as objects of aspiration and dream. In this sense, Sebastian conveys his distaste of what he qualifies as Romanians' speculative nature, a feature he considers of Balkan descent – "Romanian always

get stingy even for two lei. A single leu if they can bargain for, they will.” This came as a self-reproach of retorting to a similar “Balkanism” to use one of his terms. He refers to one of his attempts in Belgium to bargain for a set of porcelain elves which ended up in him getting banned from the store by the owner. Later, he evaluated this incident as a symptom of Belgians’ fairness in doing business: “they’re being very fair, and not trying to trick each other. If one sells elves for 40 euro, so does the shop next door. No one bargains.” This, Sebastian thinks, comes in opposition with Romanians’ speculative nature: “Stealing from our clients; this is one of the Balkan things we do to each other”.

Sebastian’s talk of Belgian fairness in doing business resonates with his resentment towards the insecure work environment he has to deal with in Romania. The climate in which his projection business activates is described by Sebastian as characterized by unfair competition and speculation – “if someone starts a business... they go ‘wow, I could do this as well, but cheaper’. That’s in bad taste, what we do.” In the same vein, David asserts uncertainty and the impossibility to be in control in Romania

I had the opportunity to experience success – I could say I had enough professional satisfactions as to realize that it’s something ephemeral... You know how it’s like today? Now you’re here, tomorrow you are no longer. And not because, let’s say, your individual decisions, but the context is extremely unfavorable.

Given the highly unpredictable climate in Romania, buying a car out of aesthetic or aspirational desires is deemed aberrant, especially when an SUV comes as the result of speculative gains. “I mean people who make sudden leaps, gains they haven’t worked for...by various speculations or activities that border illegality.” (George). The SUV owners’ I interviewed consider that buying an expensive car such as the SUV for the sole purpose of display is a distasteful strategy to cheat one’s way up the status scale, a tactic which they

perceive typical for Romania. Classifications between proper and improper SUV users arise in multiple instances of my interviews and I will address the matter in more detail in the further sections.

Nevertheless, regarding the concept of safety and need for controlling uncertainties, my interviewees' discourse on the right reasons to buy an SUV reaches into cultural politics of belonging to a properly European middle class. On the one hand to overtly acknowledge that the SUV is the accomplishment of what years ago my interviewees described as a dream is now a faux pas due to its speculative character. My respondents' focus on normalcy and safety becomes thinkable as an expression of their will to work against or at least minimize uncertainties and, therefore, exercise control primarily within their professional milieus. By seeking to gain control, my interviewees employ their desire to consolidate a middle class in Romania, due to its implicit aversion to risk and speculation associated with countries in transition from socialism to market economy.¹

On the other hand, rationality and calculability is associated with the practices of middle class individuals in Western Europe by the SUV owners I talked with. They speak of their cars accordingly, as matters of well thought calculations and consequently argue that SUVs are average automobiles, bought at a stage in life and career when such purchases came naturally. Amy Hanser (2010) portrays a similar picture in relation with attitudes towards uncertainty among lower, and then higher status consumers. She shows that while the first group embraces uncertainty in their regular shopping practices, the higher status individuals are more prone to control and predictability. The SUV owners' discourses of safety may be thought of as indicators for the consolidation of an imagined middle class in Romania. I contend that the talk about safety is a motif that reaches beyond the sole quality of SUVs due

¹A study that documents attitudes towards risk and speculation is Verdery's (1996) depiction of the Romanian pyramid scheme, and Romanian's enchantment related to it. Cosmin Radu (2009) conveys another account of doing contraband at the Romanian border.

to being a recurrent topic that is related by the owners with matters uncertainty in their work sphere.

3. Making Middle Class through Proper Use: Worthy vs. Unworthy SUV Owners

I contend that the middle class and implicitly its perceived constituent features of safety and normalcy, is contoured through claims of knowing how an SUV should be used properly. Defining proper use implies processes of evaluation and classification regarding who is worthy of an SUV and who is not. The boundaries between these categories are drawn by appeal to proper use of money and of the cars themselves.

3.1. Money

One way to claim competence for using an SUV is related to the concept of money. Being able to afford buying an SUV in Romania isn't even nearly sufficient for qualifying one as proper owner, my interviewees consistently explained. Gradually, the SUV owners I talked with guided me through the intricacies of spending and managing money. From rationales pertaining to costs and benefits implied by having an SUV, to the consequences that ownership projects on other segments of an SUV user's life, I gathered that such a car, via the money attached to it, cuts across my interviewees' interpretations of social hierarchies. I connect the various evaluations of spending and money use that were diligently set out by the SUV owners I interviewed with Viviana Zelizer's (1995) conceptualization of "social money", and continue to build on Hanser's (2010) theorization of value-making through spending.

The first and foremost condition for being a rightful owner of an SUV is to have financial resources. “You need to have money” was a unanimous answer to the question regarding what kind of people SUVs are fit for. But there is more to the matter of affording an SUV than being resourceful enough to buy it. That is, one needs to have *regular income*, “because an SUV requires expenses. And you need to be able to afford these costs. This means the purchase cost. But there are also maintenance and service costs which are also very high. And, in order to be able to afford all these, you need to have money.” (Constantin) All of my interviewees referred to the increased expenses an SUV entails, especially after the point of purchase due to the high costs of parts, inspections, and taxes.

In this sense, one of the prerequisites of being a proper SUV owner is “to be a well off person” (Cristian). This is because the costs of a car such as the SUV are thought to go well beyond the means of a regular person, “because you can’t own a 30-something, 40.000 euros car and be poor. So generally, when you see someone driving an SUV you think he’s a thriving person; let’s put it in a nicer way – a person who doesn’t live from hand to mouth.”² (Alexandru) Lines of thought such as Alexandru’s here are evocative for exploring the extent to which money is entangled with the way owners think of social hierarchies.

Saying on the one hand, that one needs to have money to own an expensive car and on the other hand, that the SUV is not for someone who “doesn’t live from hand to mouth” are two differently charged statements. The former may leave space for assuming that cash in and of itself could be enough to buy an SUV. The expression used by Alexandru, however, which in literal translation from Romanian is “someone who doesn’t struggle from one day to the next” suggests temporal continuity of the state of having money links with the matter of status claims. Money in this sense is used by the SUV owners to symbolically differentiate

²Living from hand to mouth (in Romanian, *a trăi de pe o zi pe alta*”), in literal translation “struggling to live from day to the next” means “living a tough, unpredictable life”.

themselves from categories of SUV owners that are perceived lower. This instance shows that money in itself is not enough to guarantee an SUV owner's acceptance within the middle class.

Constant income and spending skill are indicators that one is qualified to own an SUV. Constantin elaborated the point, saying that owning an SUV

implies having a good job, to have an income or a business that pays the maintenance work. I have heard of people who managed to buy an SUV, but use a "small" car. And they use the SUV only to go out and show off, because the gas to Bucharest is two or three times more expensive than for a small car... then they realize it's impossible for them to maintain it, given that the fuel is now more expensive, the taxes are higher... Everyone would probably like to drive an SUV if it weren't for this. So it's for someone who can afford both to buy an SUV and maintain it.

The urge for regular income that the SUV owners invoke links Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*. In order to be considered a legitimate SUV owner, one must have a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu 1990). Knowledge regarding correct choices of spending money should be implicit – "goes without saying" (Bourdieu 1977) in the case of perceived legitimate SUV owners.

Another similar account is compelling with regards to the knowledge claimed by interviewees regarding what it takes to own an SUV:

Firstly, one has to have a certain level of income before anything else; regardless of the car's age and of the acquisition cost that can be reasonable and could be sustained by anyone. You need to have a certain income for the SUV's maintenance... We could step out now and I'll show you tens of cars that don't have proper tires, and are poorly serviced. So this is what I think is the first and most essential condition – to be able to properly maintain a car. (Andrei)

The ability to sustain car ownership over time by means of money is reflective of the boundaries my interviewees attempt to draw between the perceived worthy and the unworthy SUV owners regarding the knowledge required to use such a car. In terms of money, an unworthy SUV owner is described as incapable of properly calculating the costs such a car implies and consequently, prone to use it improperly, as Andrei explained here.

Another prerequisite for proper SUV ownership consists of knowing how to prioritize spending money by taking into consideration one's social position. Assessing the right time to buy an expensive car subscribes largely to the discourse of normalcy my interviewees engaged with: the use of an SUV is justifiable firstly when it is necessary for work, and secondly, when its owner has achieved some degree of success in life – both materially and professionally. In this sense, George pursues an especially rich line of thought in explaining the calculations he made at the point of deciding he was fit to become an SUV user, by comparing himself with other owners of similar cars he looked up to. After saying he had considered buying an SUV before, but decided “he had not reached that point yet” for not being equally successful as the people he compared with, George went on saying that later,

in 2008 I figured my social position would require an SUV... As years went by, and along with professional experience, life knowledge and experiences, you start to settle, you look to settle – at what point am I now? Can I align myself with those guys? You look for some elements to compare with. You say, would I be well placed there? Would it look good? What do they have? My friends own this and that – have I reached their rank? Could I reach that point?

The success of the people he refers to as points of reference consist, according to George, in both “their material and moral achievements, in the sense of what you leave behind”. In this respect classifications regarding how money should be spent by people occupying different

positions in the imagined social hierarchy, are related to the discourse of safety the SUV owners mobilize. Safety is thus thought of in terms of proper evaluation of one's social position, and reflected through correct ways of spending one's money on cars in this case.

The normalcy and safety of the middle class are challenged, my interviewees indicate, when expensive cars are used erroneously by unworthy owners. Reportedly, this category encompasses other SUV owners who have proven unskilled in correctly assessing their financial resources and social position when decided to acquire such cars. The unworthy are generally car owners who had made a relatively short-term income, such as migrant workers, "those who are working abroad, they want to show-off, to show that they're making an particularly good living so they spend their one-two years savings on a car and then they have nothing left." (Cristian) Expressions of dissatisfaction such as below indicate a struggle for legitimization from the part of my interviewees.

the Germans are more practical... they use a car for years and then sell it. But in Romania for instance... people want to create a status for themselves, if they don't have it to simply make it up. And a car is the easiest way to achieve that. You just make it – you have some money or borrow money, buy a car and you already have a status. But to have a real status, a true one, you need to work for a lifetime. (Cristian)

Ultimately, the unworthy users are judged for attempting to trick their way up the social scale, by purchasing the symbols associated with perceived higher-worth categories, such as Western Europeans. The use of status features to justify one's class position are most evident in my interviewees' accounts related with the perceived unworthy users. Moreover, within the limits of this topic the work of delineating boundaries between themselves and lower categories become most visible.

Additionally, the owners I talked with engage in multiple evaluations pertaining to proper uses of money, as to differentiate themselves from the SUV owners who are perceived unworthy. For instance, in order to underline the polarization between worthy and unworthy SUV owners, David explained how such cars are appropriate for “a person who has an occupation that allows him to bear the costs of maintenance”, and on the other hand that “it seems aberrant to me how in countless cases in Romania it happens that people who live in a one room apartment or pay rent buy [BMW] X5.” (David) Another similar evaluation refers to people who buy SUVs and “can only afford gas for 20 lei (cca. 5 euros) to cruise along town twice and then are going back home to eat bread and potatoes.” (Cristi)

Claiming skill with regard to money spending is an instance in which my interviewees associate themselves with practices perceived typical to the middle class from Western Europe.

Abroad, it is only the people who can afford them, who buy expensive cars. While here [in Romania], anyone buys expensive cars. I mean you can meet people who have one of the most costly cars from the 2013 catalogues and at the same time lives in a one room apartment and pays rent. (Andrei)

Western Europe seems to be the one of the models that inspired the idea according to which constant money are an indicator for whether an SUV owner is deserving of such car or not. For the people I talked with the positive perceptions about Western Europe are inspired by anecdotes resulted from their or their peers’ trips abroad. Additionally, these images of the West surfaced through the media, I would argue, especially due to the often enthusiastic representation of the European Union in the context of Romania’s relatively recent accession. For instance, Cristian recalled a TV show he once viewed about the Belgian diamond industry, where he learned that the sellers could tell the nationality of clients by the size of the

diamond one looks for. That is, they were allegedly noticing a sensibly increased propensity for big shiny diamonds from the part of Eastern Europeans. In the light of this information, Cristian concluded that “the Westerners and, generally, the people who have been used to having money, educated in this respect buy discreet objects. While the Russians, Romanians, Bulgarians and all those from the Eastern Europe especially... the bigger the better.”

Subsequent to positively evaluating perceived Western spending habits, which they claim for themselves as well, the SUV owners manifest some degree of disapproval with how money is spent on cars in Romania. For instance, Andrei pleads for the right way to spend money on a car, by saying that “there [in Western Europe] people own the cars they can afford, period. When you see an expensive car, it means that person can really afford it... But here it’s not the same.” Such disapproval is essentially directed against the unworthy users lack of ethical sense, prevalently work-wise:

Such evaluations of correct and incorrect spending concerning SUV ownership connects well with Zelizer’s (1995) discussion on the practice “earmarking money”, referring to people’s evaluations of proper uses of money as indicative for their social positions, in this case, by distinguishing themselves from less worthy users. By differentiating between ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ uses of money, the SUV owners assert their position in a proper middle class, which they contour in relation with their perceptions of the West. They do so by claiming to be more knowledgeable users of money and consequently “responding with anger, shock or ridicule to the ‘misuse’ of monies” (19) from the part of the perceived unworthy SUV owners.

3.2. Work relations

Another aspect that led my interviewees to differentiate between worthy and unworthy SUV owners refers to the perceived correct use of such car. In this sense the naturalness of owning an SUV implies an ability to put the car to proper use. One of the perceived rationales of an SUV is the professional milieu, because “it probably makes an impression at meetings” (Alexandru), and “it can be used at any point for a business appointment” (George).

One reason why the SUV is perceived useful for professional encounters is that the car may represent a guarantee for the owners’ accountability. George reckoned that “a better car immediately indicates what kind of person you are. An SUV is some sort of guarantee”, while Lucian referred back to a particular conversation in this sense, also relating with the unpredictable business climate he observes:

At a business meeting the car too matters. It’s one thing to show up in a Dacia Papuc... and another to come with a jeep. It’s an image that precedes you... Now people don’t really trust each other anymore. I mean, who knows, maybe I’m being tricked. I also talked with some friends in this sense – I had a meeting with someone who came with a [BMW] X5, the 2013 model; then he must have a lot of money, I said. And since he came with a very powerful, very expensive, very new, very good car, it creates an impression of security... it makes you trust him, that he can provide the service I need.

Using an SUV thus contributes to my interviewees’ desire of control over life conditions and it suggests that SUVs are for “people who can afford them, who make a business and are growing... We don’t want too much, but neither too little.” (Sebastian)

Another proof that SUVs represent indicators of their owners’ reliable businesses is George’s scenario regarding what would happen had he started driving an old Dacia at this point:

It may have an impact and people may interpret it as “look, at this guy, his 4x4 backfired on him. One needs to be careful, to be very well covered if you are to come with a Dacia. I mean, to really not have any issue, to be safe, and your work to go well. Because if there is the smallest suspicion – “look, have you seen him with a Dacia? Ooh, he’s having issues; he is not able to pay anymore...” (George)

Demonstrating reliability is deemed important for the SUV owners’ work relations. Showing up at business meetings with an old or cheap car is thought to entail the risk of losing a contract altogether, “if I were a mayor and wanted to choose a contractor for a 10 million euros project, I would be suspicious, to say the least, to see a guy in a Dacia coming to claim it.” (Lucian)

Moreover, the SUV is meant by my interviewees to be on par with their business counterparts’ status, therefore demonstrating moderation is vital. Expressions such as “if you buy such car, it’s to use it for what it was designed for, you need to be discreet” (Cristian) are what David calls “recipes” of proper SUV use. Accordingly, discretion with regard to SUV use is part of my interviewees’ repertoires as small business owners and part of the “middle strata” (Cristian), that is, individuals who are “neither too high, nor too low” (Sebastian) individuals. In a practical sense, to be discreet means to align to one’s business partners’ style, namely, to be “suitable” (Liechty 2002):

No one told me that because I came with my Mitsubishi I got the contract... But I had some contract for a mall in Focsani... I had some beneficiaries for whom this mattered and I took it as a lesson: at each meeting they came with a different SUV... That’s when I realized a lot of people take such things into consideration and I’ve heard the same idea from various friends.

David concluded that the car he drives represents a standard used by business partners to evaluate his success. It is a system thought to apply especially for small business owners who

have to prove themselves, but at the same time a matter of general etiquette, as “you don’t see Angela Merkel going to Bruxelles in a Logan”. Such evaluations regarding the manner and context appropriate to use an SUV are “tools” (Swidler 1986) employed to demonstrate legitimacy within my interviewees’ work circles.

Suitability doesn’t only mean adapting to a higher standard through cars, but sometimes quite the other way around. Constantin reflected on the impact a car could have on potential sponsors for his retirement home:

If, for example, I go to raise awareness somewhere with an [expensive] SUV... I think it will lead to some skepticism. But if you go in a decent car, like this SUVie [diminutive, in Romanian “SUVulet”], which is the cheapest in its league... If you say it’s a 15,000 euro car, this means it’s maybe even cheaper than a Dacia. And then the person I meet knows that it’s a car I needed, and understands. But if you go with a 50,000 euro car, then maybe they’ll think twice whether to support your project or not.

Constantin’s reasoning indicates that the talk of SUVs naturalness also has a practical purpose, adapted to their work nature. Constantin expressed “suitability” by using a very plastic term: *SUVie*, meant to mitigate the alleged exquisiteness of cars such as SUVs. A similar sentiment is shared by Alexandru, who highlights the importance of choosing a rather modest SUV, as a consequence of the urge to have in mind the city hall clerks who, he would not want to stagger by showing up in luxury cars.

In strong opposition with their own uses of the SUVs, my interviewees criticized the unworthy SUV owners’ practices involving the cars. Such practices often refer to conspicuousness such as those of “the people who come from abroad and turn the music to the maximum, and leave the window low, cigarette in hand” (George), or “park in places they’re not allowed to and keep the doors open” (Cristian), or “use cars to pick up girls”

(Lucian). These kind of practices are strongly frowned upon and associated with either migrant workers or “interlopes” (David) who got involved in “borderline legal, or illegal businesses” (George), and generally “people who did not have money and then suddenly they earned money and bought the car to show it.” (Lucian) Overall, these are the kind of people who my interviewees judge for not being “entrepreneurs”: “they’re not business man, those who have businesses are concerned about their work, don’t buy jeeps to impress” and at the same time their desire to spend entirely their quickly earned incomes on cars is a sign that “they are not entrepreneurs, and don’t have a long term thinking.” (Lucian)

To conclude, practical knowledge (Bourdieu 1977, Schatzki 1996 et al) implies that people act in accordance to what it makes sense in their own point of view, which in this case is using SUVs for their professional legitimation and achievement. Being in the middle means practically demonstrating that SUV ownership ‘goes without saying’ (Bourdieu 1977), meaning that it contains an implicit knowledge of the cultural “repertoire” (Swidler 1986) appropriate for the small business owners I interviewed. In proving able to use SUVs properly, they rely on displaying “culturedness” (Patino 2005) to the purpose of being recognized by clients or work partners as trustworthy professionals. What the SUV owners deem to be correct uses of such cars are part of their repertoires (Swidler 1986) as middle class members. The correct ways and contexts in which to use an SUV, or money for a car such as an SUV, for that matter are part of a repertoire engaged by my interviewees prevalently in their work spheres.

The misuse of the symbols such as improper money spending or conspicuous SUV use, which are perceived by my interviewees as part of the middle class repertoires triggers harsh reactions from their part. Namely, for the SUV owners I talked with, the fact that lower categories make use (and misuse) similar “tools” compromise the predictability of a repertoire, and entails risks of not being recognized as capable professionals. In unsettled times the repertoires become more obvious (Swidler 1986) and, I argue, there is more dispute

over similar symbolic tools. The fact that the SUV owners' I talked with expressed such strong disapproval towards the misuses of cars by the ones perceived to be not entitled to them (Hanser 2010), and moreover, Andrei's performed dismay for not being able to tell the competence of a person by the car they drive (Andrei) are signs of a dispute over an established symbolic repertoire and position in the social order.

V. Conclusions

This thesis discussed the ways in which Romanian SUV owners assert their membership within the middle class. Drawing on life-story interviews I conveyed an image of SUVs role in the owners' active strategies of delineating the boundaries of a middle class in Romania. By means of life story interviews I followed the interviewees' car ownership stories and the instances in which cars are evocative for their owners' broader life stages.

My interviewees' trajectories of car ownership started with lacks and desires during socialism and the early years after, continued with the achievement of gradually better and newer cars, and culminated with the SUV purchases. Prior to owning an SUV, the interviewees portray a process of learning and adaptation to a perceived better lifestyle inspired by Western Europe. Namely, throughout the 1980s and often until the early 2000s, the people I talked with recalled their desire at the time to own newer and foreign automobiles.

At the point of talking about their SUV purchase, my interviewees' enchanted tone was replaced by a displayed nonchalance regarding cars. Instead of "dreamy" adjectives, words such as "normal" or "natural" were used by the SUV owners to describe their expensive cars. From objects of desire, purchased for the mere qualities of being foreign, or new, cars became subject to calculations of costs and benefits, according to the interviewees' accounts. I argued that claims of rationality in relation with SUVs car purchase express their

need to overcome economic instability and uncertainties associated with both the lower class categories and a feature associated with postsocialist subjects by ethnographies in the area. (e.g. Verdery 1996)

Moreover, I argued that SUVs are part of a middle class “repertoire” (Swidler 1986) as well as expressions of the interviewees’ habitus (Bourdieu 1984) and elaborated on the practices these cars are used in their work as small business owners. In this respect, SUVs are used the most by my interviewees to draw boundaries between themselves and perceived lower categories of SUV owners. A rich array of elements of distinction was employed by the SUV users I talked with to justify and consolidate their position in the middle class. In this sense, SUVs are used by my interviewees to differentiate between their worthiness of such cars and others’ unworthiness. Worth is evaluated on the grounds of multiple definitions of practical mastery. My interviewees’ repertoires include dichotomizations such as: their well-advised vs. others’ hasty choice of car; proper and improper uses of money; moral vs. immoral money’ skilled vs. unqualified uses of the SUVs. I argued that such claims of practical mastery were used by my interviewees due to a context of competing repertoires. Their wish to integrate SUVs in the repertoire of their entrepreneurial activities has a practical reason as well: that of cars acting as a guarantee of trustworthiness.

Therefore, I showed that SUV consumption is one avenue that illustrates the process of middle class making in Romania. Through talk of their SUVs, the owners’ I interviewed laid out a myriad of claims, ranging from those regarding material privilege to moral superiority, cultural knowledge and practical know-how. All these, I argued, add up to my interviewees’ description of how the middle class does and should look like in Romania.

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