

## Middle Classes Undergoing Transformation in a Digitizing World

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This article proposes a new approach to understanding the middle class by considering the role it plays in the creation of life chances. Several ideal types are developed to better understand the transformations that middle classes have undergone in the digitizing sociality. When digital technologies are applied in the innovative process of fusing global market-related opportunities and individual resources, the middle classes set in motion a complex interplay of action and reverse action between contextual and personal potentials, thus digitally creating new life chances.

*Keywords: middle class, life chances, digital society, social transformation*

### Introduction

A decade ago, the "digital divide" concept was likened to "a container concept carrying too many meanings" (van Dijk, 2006, p. 222). The issue has been further complicated as the digital divide debate within the social sciences has inevitably been marked by the diversity of their subject matters, paradigms, and methodologies. Indeed, the formulation of research questions that specify and focus on the scientific endeavor dealing with the digital divide depends on whether one considers contemporary societies in terms of a postindustrial (information) society (Bell, 1973), a global/globalizing society (McGrew, 1992), or a network society (Castells, 1996). The challenge of comprehending this heterogeneity is to consider every notion (including digitization) that claims to reveal *the* underlying principle of the increasingly dynamic sociality as representing just one of its important aspects. It is possible, then, to understand contemporary societies as undergoing substantial yet multiple and omnifarious transformations related to the ways digital technologies intersect with historically and culturally diverse institutional and value frameworks. It is the (international) comparative perspective in the digital divide debate that holds the potential for overcoming this heterogeneity (see Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013).

Significantly, a comparison across the field, on the other hand, reveals behind the diversity a shared concern about the effects of digitization on social inequalities (summarized by Witte & Mannon, 2010). The studies of the "digital reproduction of inequalities" (Hargittai, 2008; Wessels, 2013) represent an important trend in understanding these effects. A particular emphasis of this trend is on digitization's far-reaching consequences for the life chances of different classes/strata in countries at different levels of

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social and economic development (Wessels, 2013). Another emphasis is on the extent to which “different patterns of media usage influence life chances” (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009, p. 275). The crucial question to be asked here is *how* digitization and class and life chances are interrelated. This question is left open in the digital divide debate mostly because there is an underestimation of the importance of a deeper understanding of class transformations driven by expanding digitization. I aim in this article to develop an answer to this question by focusing particularly on the middle class; on the process of the production of life chances; and on the Internet as a powerful mediator of an intensifying creation of life chances. I argue that, in our quest for relevant answers, we need to rethink the concepts of middle class and of life chances in terms of one important—but as yet omitted—aspect of the former that is related to the process of social construction of the latter.

In this article, the rethinking partly relies on Max Weber’s approach to classes and life chances, because Weber introduced the term *life chances* and initiated the study of life chances in the context of class analysis. Moreover, during his study of modern capitalist (formal) rationality, Weber inevitably became involved in analysis of the broader institutional, value-related, and mental preconditions of capitalist entrepreneurship (Weber, 1992), the mass spread of which led to the emergence of the bourgeoisie/middle class. Therefore, an understanding of the relationship between class and life chances needs to rest partially on Weber’s analytical work in order to make a new departure in the field.<sup>1</sup> But does the study of this relationship have the potential to go beyond existing knowledge? How can this relationship be rethought in the context of a digitizing social world that has the characteristics of a network society (Castells, 1996) yet also seems increasingly individualized, turbulent, and growing in multiplicity in the economic aspect<sup>2</sup> and other aspects?<sup>3</sup> Weber’s methodology of ideal types appears to be a fruitful means for developing an analytical mapping of relations between middle class and life chances, and between middle class and opportunities, digitally mediated via the Internet. It is necessary, however, to first conceptually pave the way for this analytical undertaking and to overcome some of its stumbling blocks.

We need to clarify the foundations on which Weber understood class, middle class, and life chances; then hypothesize how his understanding could be juxtaposed to their sociohistorical changes (particularly in the last several decades); and, finally, create a sociologically meaningful analytical framework in which to extract Weberian insights about the phenomena in question in order to build useful and applicable ideal types designed to better understand digitization’s impact on middle-class transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> A reason for the necessity of a new departure is that, although “Weber asked many of the crucial questions; . . . many of his answers are no longer tenable and . . . today we must ask many questions that he could not possibly have asked” (Berger, 1986, p. 7).

<sup>2</sup> As evident from the debates on the varieties of capitalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, “contrasting institutional configurations in different societies” (Mayer, 2005, p. 19) or “increased institutional variability” (Svallfors, 2005, p. 14).

**The Relationship Between Class and Life Chances:  
The Process of Life Chances Creation**

In his analysis of the economic, social, and legal order, Weber (1946) understood classes, status groups, and parties as "phenomena of the distribution of power within a [political] community" (p. 181). Originally Weber's ideal type of class consisted of the following elements:

(1) a number of people [who] have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, insofar as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets. (p. 181)

This causal component of life chances is the class situation. In his later work *Status Groups and Classes*, Weber (1978) sketched the ideal type of a "class situation" (which is a prerequisite for a class to emerge):

the typical probability of (1) procuring goods, (2) gaining a position in life, and (3) finding inner satisfaction, a probability which derives from the relative control over goods and skills and from their income-producing uses within a given economic order. (p. 302)

To summarize, class presupposes a particular economic order framing various market conditions for the pursuit of economic interests, which in a specific way causes the life chances of those who share a common class situation. The distribution of economic power within a particular political community creates the framework of possibilities for the generation of typical life chances. What is important here is the analytical emphasis on the relationship between class and life chances.

Specifically, according to what Weber implies through these two ideal types, and as he explicitly argues in *Economy and Society* (1946), "life chances" do not coincide with "opportunities." Indeed, they both have in common a positive connotation, implying a possible improvement (positive change)—in economic and noneconomic terms. Life chances may be perceived as individual-specific and cover much broader social phenomena than purely economic ones, although they are thought to be economically caused; while opportunities are context-specific and are predominantly confined to economy-related phenomena. Both the life chances and the opportunities imply a *probability* as a constituent feature of their existence, which is a projection of Weber's probabilistic approach to social causality (cf. Turner & Factor, 1994); life chances are caused insofar as there are individual interests in opportunities for income. Although Weber constantly used the term *opportunities* in his works, he rarely discussed *life chances*, and they subsequently remained untouched by sociology for decades. The term began to reappear in the middle of the 20th century and gained focused sociological attention in Giddens' (1973) discussion of Weber's approach to life chances, and particularly after Dahrendorf's (1979) book on them. The sociological approaches dealing with life chances have been mainly Marxist-biased or structuralist-biased, and therefore dominated by a higher level of determinism with regard to what makes chances possible;

that is different from Weber's causality. All these approaches have led to more questions than answers about how life chances actually emerge.

How are life chances (which all these perspectives take as given) created? How are changes in life chances brought about? A neo-Weberian perspective on the relationship between class and life chances (Breen, 2005) might provide some conceptual arguments in support of the construction of ideal types that would help answer these questions.

In Breen's (2005) interpretation of Weber, it is the market that distributes life chances "according to the resources that individuals bring to it" (p. 32); these resources vary in a number of ways. Differences in the possession of market-relevant assets are the grounds from which variations in market position arise; what is of crucial importance is not the mere possession of assets but their use in market exchanges. Importantly, the individual resources invested in the market do not necessarily determine the outcomes of one's participation in it (p. 35).

In light of this brief discussion, one may venture to incorporate probability, opportunities, and individual interest in opportunities, as well as personal resources and assets, to build up ideal types of life chances and class situation—and such an attempt is presented below.

Individual life chances represent the typical probability of achieving desired positive difference in one's life, a probability that derives from the way in which contextual opportunities are fulfilled through individual resources. Here, opportunities represent the probability that the potentials of a social environment will be favorable to one's possible purpose for implementation of a particular action or activity oriented toward this specific environment.<sup>4</sup> That is, opportunities are latent (and not factual or fixed possibilities), and they emerge only in the presence of a purposive stance of an individual mind-set (or of a number of mindsets) toward this particular social environment or its constituents. Accordingly, individual social resources represent the probability of personal potentials (or capabilities) to be favorable to one's purpose for fulfillment of an opportunity in a social environment.<sup>5</sup> That is, individual social resources are latent and emerge only in the process of realization of an opportunity through the use of personal capabilities. Both the opportunities and the individual resources mutually reinforce—and thus mutually generate—each other, or they neutralize—and thus erode—each other, in situations when individuals direct themselves toward potentials of a concrete social environment, with this direction being backed up by a purpose-oriented attitude. In the process of realizing opportunities, there is a typical probability of reproduction of both the existing potentials of the social milieu and the individual capabilities of those involved in this process. There is also a probability that new potentials will be produced, which is related to the degree of autonomy, innovativeness, and flexibility in an individual's action oriented toward the environment; the greater the extent of availability of these characteristics, the higher the probability that new personal and contextual potentials will be created. Therefore, in the course of the emergence of

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<sup>4</sup> Social environment potentials may include local, regional, and national economic, educational, and health care infrastructures; institutional composition, including legal framework arrangements; community values and culture; demographic structure; welfare services; and socialized natural resources.

<sup>5</sup> Personal potentials may include abilities, skills, qualifications, values, assets, and personal networks.

life chances there is a probability that the space of practiced freedom will expand (in economic activity as well as in identities, lifestyle, consumption, and leisure, among others).

Departing from Weber's understanding of class situation as a causal component of life chances, class situation may be viewed as the typical probability of implementation of market-related opportunities (as potential objects of one's economic interest) through individual resources.<sup>6</sup> The constellation of these opportunities and resources may be considered impregnated with specific potentials for life chances, and it is the anticipation of these chances that, in most cases, justifies the individual's participation in market exchanges. It is only the fulfilling of market-related opportunities that (re)generates life chances, depending on how the merge of resources and opportunities evolves; class emerges when a number of people share similar typical class situations, which imply specific life chances—that is, the latter are created depending on the probability of the fulfillment of market opportunities.<sup>7</sup> Life chances, then, are both a precondition for and an outcome of the positive *stratification potentials* contained in class situations; the scope and variety of life chances are related to the scope and variety of these potentials.

In this frame of reference there is a higher probability in some class situations of one's productive involvement in the process of *creation* (or development) of market-related contextual potentials and/or of individual potentials, which constantly (re)produces conditions of the possibility of class situations (one's own and those of other individuals) in the framework of a politically organized community, thus *producing* life chances. On the contrary, there is a lower probability in other class situations for individual participation in this process; this may be regarded as *consumption* of life chances. The ratio between the production and consumption of life chances may vary with an individual's current class situation and during his or her lifetime.

### **The Middle Class and Its Role in the Production of Life Chances**

If we turn again to Weber in an attempt to apply the perspective discussed above to the middle class, we will face a challenge: There is some ambiguity in Weber's understanding of middle class. On one hand, according to his ideal type of class, the middle classes are situated *between* the positively privileged and negatively privileged property and commercial classes as they slip out of the typology based on privilege of class position. These middle classes vary substantially: from those who "make a living from their property or their acquired skills," to "self-employed farmers and craftsmen," and frequently to the broad range of "public and private officials," the "liberal professions," and "the labor groups with exceptional qualifications" (Weber, 1978, pp. 303–304).

On the other hand, in an early short essay entitled "Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism," Weber (1946) uses the term *middle classes* as synonymous with *bourgeoisie* (pp. 307–309),

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<sup>6</sup> Among all available and socially valuable opportunities constitutive of class situations are only those that are market related.

<sup>7</sup> That is, class is one of the "vehicles" of forming and distributing life chances, along with Weberian "status" and "party" (cf. Breen, 2005).

or he mixes the logic of "middle position" and the quality of "capitalist entrepreneur," as in the case of "entrepreneurial middle class." Also, he uses the term *bourgeoisie* in different ways as a stratification reference: as "mass" ("petty bourgeois masses"), as "strata" ("entrepreneurial bourgeois strata" or "bourgeois" stratum of entrepreneurs), and as class ("bourgeois class" or "petty bourgeoisie"). These differences in the use of the terms *middle class* and *bourgeoisie* are probably a result of concrete, not coinciding, ideal types used for different analytic purposes. Another possible cause may be found in the diverse national contexts in which the middle-class phenomenon and its sociological understanding have developed.

The contextuality of both the middle class and its scientific reflection deserves particular attention, apart from Weber, in the development of my argument in this article. As Scott (1996) has shown, the mutual influences, reverse impact, and mutual diffusion between public, everyday, political, intellectual, and official discourses proved to be formative for the scientific discourse on social stratification. That is why the "genetic markers" of these discourses in the middle-class conceptualization should not be overlooked in the process of constructing an ideal type for the middle class. On one hand, the emergence and growth of the bourgeoisie (the middle class), although happening in seemingly very different ways in different societies, have one common feature, at least in most Western European societies: The emergence and growth took place at an "evolutionary" pace, in a "piecemeal fashion" over two centuries (de Tocqueville, 1998/2001; Earle, 1989; Scott, 1996), during which the middle class "made itself"—that is, created the conditions for becoming possible as a class by a mutually strengthening creation of markets and capitalist entrepreneurship.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, since the middle of the 20th century, as the economic sector of services and the public importance of knowledge began to grow, sociologists started to extend the concept of middle class toward new occupational groups possessing special competencies, skills, and expertise. The condition for adding such groups was that they should have at least a certain degree of autonomy, ensured by the opportunities within the free market. Furthermore, in recent decades, an intensifying process of disappearance of the conditions for collective (class) identities has taken place at the expense of the flourishing of individual and group lifestyles in an increasingly dynamic and heterogeneous social structure. Due to the rising subjective importance of consumption and lifestyle, unfolding at all levels in an increasingly fragmented social stratification, the boundaries of the middle class, as conventionally understood, have blurred.

Therefore, we need to consider the middle class as a socially constructed phenomenon with regard to social, economic, political, and value contexts, and subjected to ongoing transformations. In an attempt to overcome the changeability-related difficulties in understanding and studying this phenomenon, we should look for a recurrent specific set of conditions that make middle class possible. Such a set of conditions could be derived from concrete features in social space-time by reflecting on the relation between class and life chances using the ideal types constructed above.

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<sup>8</sup> Unlike these cases, in the emerging sociality in North America in the 18th and 19th centuries, governmental interventionism repeatedly created social conditions (legislative as well as related to infrastructure, among others) that deliberately stimulated the expansion of the middle class.

In the early capitalist age, the emerging bourgeoisie invented life chances in the process of its capitalist endeavor, creating a growing variety of opportunities in its social and economic contexts and stimulating an increasing diversity of individual social resources as well as mediating contextual opportunities and personal resources, which constituted the social innovation of its entrepreneurial pursuit outside the market exchanges themselves. What made possible this outburst of innovative potential were the emerging *autonomous social forces*, constituted by “the opportunities open to profit-making enterprise” (Weber, 1978, p. 202). The quantitative growth of economic means and resources is correlated with the development and qualitative differentiation of abilities and wants; this mutual reinforcement brought about a multiplication of life chances and opportunities, thus powering an “autonomization process” (p. 375).

We may think of three typologically distinct ways of life chances creation by the middle class. First, by inventing—intentionally or as a by-product of its entrepreneurship—hitherto nonexistent potentials in the social environment; these potentials create a “force field” with a probability of stimulating latent individual potentials. Second, by creating hitherto nonexistent individual potentials or further developing those that already exist (one’s own or those of others), which contain a probability of stimulating latent contextual potentials. Third, by active mediating between available scarce opportunities and scarce individual capacities that would otherwise have remained latent. These three ways may overlap and enhance one another, and they all ultimately produce new life chances; the autonomizing effect of this process, in turn, opens the floodgates of additional innovative potential inside and outside the market.

Therefore, all those who create “added value” to life chances can be analytically identified as middle class, instead of using workplace, consumption, occupation, position in the management system, or income as a differentiating trait. Apart from those engaged in an entrepreneurial endeavor, the middle class may be all those who innovate in their activity related to the production and dissemination of structural preconditions for life chances—for example, people employed in the public or private sector who enjoy autonomy and flexibility in decision making related to their institutional duties. These typological characteristics develop in a changing sociohistorical context, as explained below.

Originally, the middle class invented life chances in the framework of its market activity. The more organized and institutionalized capitalism became, however, the fewer possibilities the middle class had to produce life chances. In economy, the capitalist corporation has increasingly ousted the middle class from its role of creator of life chances, with the corporation playing an ambivalent role of “destructive creator”: It has created previously nonexistent life chances through technological development, yet meanwhile it has destroyed life chances that existed earlier. In this context, the middle class (small and medium entrepreneurs, for example) has become part of the chain of client relationships with larger corporations and has brought the logic of its market existence under the sway of those relations (Hancké, 1998). Thus, those who have previously participated in middle-class situations have moved away from their major role in the production of life chances and have become increasingly consumers of life chances engendered in the context of relations with the higher units of the organizational chain of market dependence.

Simultaneously, the nation-state in the 19th century began to monopolize and institutionalize the creation of life chances outside the market (due to the enlargement of bureaucracy and the creation of modern national armies) through the system of public education and general military service, thus creating contextual opportunities (institutions and infrastructure) and stimulating the development of diverse resources across growing numbers of individuals and groups (Berger, 1986).

After the mid-20th century, through the public health care system and various social services, the welfare state has enlarged the scope of the institutionally created preconditions of life chances (cf. Baldwin, 1990). Thus, the state has turned into the major producer of life chances at the expense of the classical middle class, which has become increasingly focused on consumption as an intrinsic feature of its lifestyle. As a consequence, the middle class has become increasingly committed to the consumption rather than creation of life chances.

Regardless of the specific structure and the type of welfare state regimes (varying over time), the middle class and the welfare state came to form a peculiar, unintended joint venture for the production of life chances after the 1950s. The middle class has created a smaller part of the contextual opportunities in the economy, most of which have been created in the capitalist corporation, while the welfare state has created various infrastructural and institutional contextual opportunities (both economic and noneconomic) and, therefore, preconditions for individual capacities. The transformation of the welfare state into a "welfare pluralism" or a "welfare mix"<sup>9</sup> (Powell & Barrientos, 2004), even within the public-oriented types of welfare regimes, and then into a "social investment welfare state" (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012), has been changing the public-private composition of that once-monolithic and primarily public producer of life chances. Together with the welfare state's activity for the production of life chances, the expanding and autonomizing sector of nongovernmental or civil society organizations has increasingly participated in the creation of preconditions for life chances (opportunities and/or capabilities). This trend is evolving against the background of the growing donation market (which particularly supports nongovernmental, nonprofit, and civil society organizations), the enlarging social investments made by private companies, and social/environmental entrepreneurship.

This process of the creation of life chances in the predigital modern society serves as a precondition framework for the emergence of a dynamic middle class that is undergoing constant and intense transformations. Before discussing the course of these transformations in the increasingly digitizing world, it is necessary to make a few notes.

Classes that are, to some extent, involved in the creation of life chances can be regarded as middle classes on the grounds of an inner composition of a continuum of class typology, where the differentiating criterion is not hierarchy based on quantity but is the degree of the quality of creating life chances in the framework of class situations. At one end of this continuum are classes that are not related to the creation of life chances and rely only on the chances they find ready-made in their class situation (they only consume chances). At the other end are classes whose life chances based on their class

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<sup>9</sup> The process of increasing the outsourcing of welfare services from the public sector to the private and voluntary sectors.



situation are relatively less significant than their chances resulting from their positions in the other Weberian stratification dimensions—status (social honor/prestige) and party (political power/influence). In that case, all classes that participate in the creation of life chances by (re)producing their class situations will be located in the relative middle of this continuum; hence, they will be middle classes. In the framework of this typology, which uses as a differentiating trait the production and consumption of life chances, there is a particular case—that of “prosumption” (Toffler, 1980) of life chances. Typologically, self-employed and freelancers create life chances that they themselves consume, and are therefore “prosumers” of life chances. Small and medium entrepreneurs, when operating innovatively in a concrete market niche, are simultaneously producers and “prosumers” of life chances.

Finally, the plural in the middle classes (introduced by Weber, for whom class differences result from differences in class *situations*) would be analytically justified if we can prove that there are essential differences between two main class situations of the middle class—one in which middle-class individuals increasingly consume life chances created by others and, another in which they primarily create life chances. Then we may consider the parallel existence of two different middle classes, regardless of their concrete national and cultural circumstances.

### **Digital Middle Classes?**

Understanding the conditions for the possibility of digital middle classes is challenging given that the existing discussions in digital divide studies within the social sciences’ frame of reference have focused primarily on digitally generated *inequalities* rather than on *classes*; on a digital *gap* rather than on digitally changing *class foundations* (and consequently the digital differentiations/divides *within* a particular class). The challenge is even more compelling when it comes to the application of a Weberian approach to understanding class and/or life chances, because the digital divide studies using such an approach are scarce. Besides, there is more to life chances than a mere residuum of a socioeconomic position, as mentioned above, although a similar reductionism could be traced in some recent discussions (Wessels, 2013; Witte & Mannon, 2010; Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). Finally, when referring to Weber’s approach to class, it is sometimes forgotten that he understood classes as phenomena of the distribution of power within a political community; the latter, however, has been increasingly eroded during the last several decades. The question is whether, and how, the lack of a spatially organized community influences the possibility of the emergence of digital class situations. Therefore, there is a need to at least typologically frame the most important conditions for the possibility of digital middle classes, and such an attempt is presented below.

First, the following interrelated social processes have profoundly changed the local, regional, and national political communities during the last quarter of a century: accelerating globalization and the dramatic rise in spatial mobility it has brought about (Nederveen Pieterse, 2003) as well as the mediatization of social relations (Hjarvard, 2013; Thompson, 1995) and the digitization of this mediatization (Schulz, 2014). In this context, the relationship between *class* and *politically organized community* is changing as a result of the ongoing transformation in the way economic power is distributed (a change from vertical hierarchical to horizontal nonhierarchical distribution) and in the core of the political community and its structure (a change from a spatially organized and localized community to

multiple, globally dispersed nonpolitical networks connecting mobile individuals and/or virtual communities). Hence, how the class situations framed by such changing communities are formed will also be subject to transformation. The degree of sustainability of (re)production of these new globalizing and digitizing class situations depends on whether, and to what degree, they occur in the context of an economic order that is framed/regulated by this new type of communities/networks. In this process, digital communication plays a key role (especially in the framework of virtual communities/networks) for the creation of life chances.

Second, both economic globalization and globalized digital technologies (including, but not limited to, the Internet) commenced in the late 20th century a process of unshackling life chances from their local/national embeddedness; a process that has been increasingly taking place since the beginning of the 21st century. The contextual embeddedness of economic actions, and therefore of life chances, is diminishing in parallel with the growing intensity of digitally mediated market exchanges. In the digitizing sociality, life chances represent not *spatially limited* but rather *globally dispersed* potentials for class situations, not confined to any locality. These digitized class situations represent the probability of meeting, intersection, and interference between sets of different opportunities generated across different social milieus *and* a vast diversity of individualized or networked social resources outside these milieus. These social resources materialize the opportunities in the course of digital (institutionalized) mediating between the individual capacities and the globally accessible variety of countless (local) economic potentials, thus digitally creating life chances.

Third, digitized market exchanges in general, and digitized market institutions in particular, do not act by themselves but obtain their reality only through the diverse, yet typologically similar, mostly Internet-based, practices of myriad social actors. The opportunities arising from the global Internet are unlimited,<sup>10</sup> because the Internet is not confined to a concrete social environment, and the two extremes of the social time–social space continuum actually coincide in it, not being confined to any particular moment or place. There is nothing to be envired here, for, at every relative point of Internet usage, *here* fuses with *there* simultaneously with the fusion of *now* and *then*, thus surmounting, as far as the opportunities are concerned, the confinement of predigital types of social milieu.

Last but not least, the Internet as a social institution generates new possibilities that may, with a much greater probability than in the predigital age, precondition the creation of life chances, because it fosters and intensifies the interplay between globally dispersed individual potentials, whatever their origins and qualities may be, and market potentials dispersed across different societies, whatever their stage of development may be. Digitally operating market institutions create a flexible and fluid social infrastructure in the framework of which there is a probability precisely for the middle class to mediate between opportunities and individual resources. To put it differently, digitally mediated market exchanges increase the probability of numerous middle-class situations to emerge in terms of life chances creation. And it is not the Internet access itself that expands the opportunities for the creation of life chances by the middle class, but rather the implementation, in market-relevant interactions, of the possibilities the Internet holds for creating and reproducing structural potentials and individual capacities. In practice, this may lead to

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<sup>10</sup> Except in authoritarian societies that restrict various uses of the Internet for their members.

even greater diversification of the middle classes, given two mutually determining trends: the globalizing of market (and social) relationships and the digitizing mediation of these relationships. Since globalization and digitization inject each other with social dynamics, this diversification is complemented by an accelerated change in the way middle-class situations, and therefore middle classes, emerge.

Several recent trends in middle-class analyses are part of these developments. One trend is backed up by the idea that globalizing processes within the middle class result in the formation and sharing of a common global lifestyle (Polson, 2011), and this tends to reduce the middle class to its consumer dimensions. This trend effaces the essential differences in class situations and subsumes under the title of *middle class* phenomena that are incompatible.<sup>11</sup>

Another trend is backed up by a realized or felt analytical impossibility to encompass the growing diversity of changing forms of the middle-class phenomenon in contemporary "fluid modernity," and then the scholarly interest is redirected to more encompassable local social spaces—for instance, a particular city whose middle class "thinks global but acts local" (Butler, 2002). This, however, considerably reduces our capacity to understand the globalization of the phenomenon of the digitizing of the process of creation of life chances by the middle class.

The issue is that the multiple and omnifarious transformations of contemporary reality liberate the innovative digital mediating/linking of contextual (local/national) opportunities with individual resources dispersed across the globalizing world, thus enabling the emergence of middle classes producing life chances "glocally."<sup>12</sup> Glocality, with regard to these digital middle classes, implies either *living local and acting global* or *living global and acting local*. In the first instance, these are class situations in which individuals reside primarily in their local social environments. One typical possibility is that there they activate their contextual potentials through someone else's personal resources, found outside their local milieus via the Internet, and mediated by it. An example<sup>13</sup> is an entrepreneur in a developed country who offers customers hand-knitted traditional socks or gloves made by several craftspeople in a developing country, found through the use of the entrepreneur's social networks' potentials via the Internet. The entrepreneur organizes the work based on special orders reflecting particular personal designs chosen by customers as well as sells the items via an online shopping website. In so doing, the entrepreneur is not just "creating jobs digitally" (Moore, 2013), but is producing new life chances for both him- or herself and the craftspeople. It is important that Internet use is "a skill that confers some market advantage" (Witte &

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<sup>11</sup> The recent global economic and financial crisis denounced the implications of this approach, because it revealed the economic growth dependency (and variability, and thus instability) of numerous consumer practices that weave the web of this pattern of consumer lifestyles.

<sup>12</sup> I use this term as a derivative from the neologism of "glocalization" (Robertson, 1995), indicating the ambivalent nature of globalization as integrating both globalizing and localizing processes.

<sup>13</sup> All the examples here are not results from particular research but are drawn from observed real-world cases found in online media. They are presented typologically rather than in detail in order not to conflict with article's conceptual design.

Mannon, 2010, p. 162); however, it is the individual capability for turning this use into a powerful source for the realization of opportunities that is of crucial importance for the creation of life chances.<sup>14</sup>

Another typical possibility is that of individuals using their own resources for materializing market opportunities derived from other social environments' potentials that are attainable mainly through the Internet. Examples of this possibility may include a website designer working remotely on projects for customers all over the world; a Web administrator maintaining online servers of small companies outside his or her locality; and an architect participating in online discussions about the construction of municipal community centers in foreign countries and supervising online the implementation of the projects that successfully have passed the competition. These examples qualify as digital middle class on condition that they autonomously and proactively take part (using digital technologies) both in the search for latent potentials or available opportunities outside their own social environments and in their fulfillment (thus creating life chances digitally).

In the second instance—that is, living global and acting local—these are all those class situations in which spatially mobile individuals often change their local habitats. One typical possibility is that they create new local opportunities by investing their specific capacities in their current social environments. An example is a social entrepreneur who takes part in finding innovative (including business) solutions for issues of local communities where he has chosen to temporarily live, and does so by using online crowdfunding platforms to fulfill the local potentials for development. Thus, the entrepreneur is possibly “seeding and growing significant new markets where none existed before” (Elkington & Hartigan, 2008, p. 118). Another typical possibility is to apply one’s personal resources to realize market opportunities stemming from the potentials of local milieus. An example of this possibility is an English language teacher who travels the globe for personal satisfaction but who holds language courses in places where she happens to be living temporarily, using the Internet to attract students to fulfill her life chances.

Typologically, these examples represent digital middle-class situations on condition that the use of digital technologies is related to a constant actualization of local and personal potentials in the course of the merge between opportunities and individual resources.

The institutional flexibility and freedom of action provided by the Internet is what ensures the overall framework of probabilities for the digital creation of life chances by the middle classes. We may hypothesize that the degree of institutionalization and availability of the community/network contexts of market opportunities for digital production and/or prosumption of life chances is related to the degree of sustainability of the conditions for digital middle-class situations. In this regard, it is possible to analytically distinguish four basic typical ways of creating life chances by connecting personal resources and potentials via the Internet; under the respective different types, the connection: (1) is not mediated by a digital institution or by virtual communities/networks; (2) involves institutionalized mediating (but outside any specific community); (3) is in the context of communities/networks (but without a specific

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<sup>14</sup> The less exotic example is the much more banal and widespread practice of small outsourcing involving local engineers living around the globe.

mediating online institution); or (4) is mediated by a digital (business) institution *and* occurs in the framework of virtual communities/networks.

Most of the relevant life chances prosumption examples described above fall under the first type. Cases of the second type of creation of life chances—via digital connection of globally dispersed personal resources and potentials—occur through the institutional mediation of online platforms such as oDesk ([www.odesk.com](http://www.odesk.com)) or Elance ([www.elance.com](http://www.elance.com)), where individuals and businesses connect and collaborate digitally with professional freelancers all over the world. Such platforms provide institutionalized virtual spaces for fusing personal potentials/capabilities with globally dispersed economic opportunities. Importantly, the probability of (re)production of middle-class situations, and hence of life chances, is mostly dependent on autonomy, innovativeness, and competitive capacity in carrying out interpersonal digital communication between subjects participating in these concrete digitized economic interactions.

An example of the third type (creation of life chances in the context of virtual communities/networks) is a model plane enthusiast who becomes cofounder of a commercial enterprise for the production of drones.<sup>15</sup> He begins by communicating online with other drone enthusiasts on a do-it-yourself website while he works on his first drone design. Their ongoing mutual virtual assistance and feedback in the context of shared values and attitudes, by means of exchange of ideas and of technical, construction-related, and software solutions, fosters his progress in building a drone prototype. The persistent support provided by this concrete do-it-yourself community culminates in the provision of a small sum of money by one of the community members, which makes possible the start of production of several drone prototypes. This opens the floodgates to intensified and sustained communication between the young inventor and the other hobbyist, with the first result of this communication being the online sale of drone prototypes, followed by the launching of a joint company for drone production. Thus, the mutual reinforcement of diverse individual potentials occurring in the framework of a virtual hobby community creates new life chances outside that community by engendering a class situation in the context of inventing previously nonexistent opportunities.

Finally, the fourth typical way of creating life chances can be analyzed by considering how they are both created within, and utilized through, a virtual community; here the conditions that make the existence of such communities possible are mostly dependent on the functioning of online business spaces. Examples are crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter ([www.kickstarter.com](http://www.kickstarter.com)), which create institutionalized prerequisites for life chances production on the condition that individuals can be part of communities arising around the projects to be crowdfunded, as long as they respect the community values as well as the norms and rules of respective mediating digital institutions. As new research has shown, Kickstarter communities (specifically, project-centered ad hoc communities, category-centered communities of interest, and platform-centered community of innovators) “play a significant part in the crowdfunding process” (Inbar & Barzilay, 2014, p. 28). Apart from their innovative role in alternative funding, crowdfunding platforms create structural conditions for the digital production of life chances by

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<sup>15</sup> As in the case of an immigrant to the United States who had neither a university education in technology nor a clear business idea nor financial resources.

means of the institutionalization of possibilities for mediation between globally dispersed market potentials and the personal potentials of myriad innovative individuals.

In sum, although this discussion lacks sufficient empirical evidence that digital middle classes do indeed exist, there is good reason to conclude that the existing middle classes are significantly transforming by the increasingly digitizing social relations in contemporary sociality.

### Conclusion

This article puts forth an understanding of middle class not in terms of its role in production and distribution of material goods and services or symbolic knowledge but in terms of production and distribution of life chances. The sociological significance of the social innovativeness of the middle class, specifically in contemporary sociality, should be emphasized: As far as life chances in the digitizing world represent *globally dispersed* potentials for class situations not confined to any locality, there is a probability for digital middle classes to emerge. When digital technologies are applied in the innovative process of the fusing of global opportunities and individual resources, which set in motion the intricate interplay of action and reverse action between these potentials, middle classes create new life chances, for them and for others, by activating their own potentials to obtain a concrete advantage in digitally mediated market situations.

Is there a danger that the institutions of digital communication might oust the emerging digital middle classes from their role of producer of life chances by way of the analogy of how the life chances creation role of the classical middle class has been diminished by the corporation, the nation-state, and the welfare state in predigital sociality? More likely, digital middle classes would remain autonomous due to the flexible and democratic nature of digital (particularly decentralized, peer-to-peer) communication. The latter continually engenders social mechanisms for the reproduction of autonomy, which carry a defensive potential against the stifling embrace of the six principles of the "Second Wave civilization" (cf. Toffler, 1980, pp. 46–58) that have led to monopoly (in the economic sphere) and to authoritarianism (in politics), and to restricted possibilities for free choice between different market potentials, lifestyles, and life strategies (in everyday life).<sup>16</sup> The degree of autonomy depends on the degree of sustainability of the diverse digital communities that are favorable to, and maintain, that autonomy.

The issue is that, unlike in a predigital social environment, there is no spatially defined community in the Internet that might frame the digitized market relations and their consequential class situations. Because no political community in the classical Weberian sense can serve this function, the emergence of specific Internet communities of a fluid composition (examples of which are given in this article) is a vital socially significant and relatively enduring guarantee of the conditions for the possibility of class situations arising from digital mediation performed by the digital middle classes between opportunities and resources. These new middle-class situations are no longer hierarchic, at least not in the way typical for predigital stratification; hence, the "middleness" of classes, which arise out of these

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<sup>16</sup> It is precisely the reduction of these possibilities that boosted the economic and political ousting of the middle class from its role of producer of life chances in predigital modern societies.

situations, cannot adequately reflect the distinctions in the digitizing world and should be rethought. The overall picture is rather complex, because there is a multiplicity of different middle classes according to a variety of cross-sections of two typological differentiations—one that runs along the continuum from creators of life chances to consumers of life chances and one that is based on the dichotomy of users and nonusers of digital technologies.

Thus, the digital divide as related to the middle classes may be defined not in terms of access or non-access to the Internet of people involved in middle-class situations but in terms of the use (or nonuse) of digital technologies, especially the Internet, for entrepreneurial efforts culminating in the creation of life chances.

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