

# Why Do Middle-Class Positions Matter? The Alignment of Short-Term Rental Suppliers to the Interests of Capital

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**Abstract:** Underlying the idea of the middle classes there is a contradictory positionality, the relations of which ultimately enhance capital accumulation. By opening Marxist critique to Weberian approaches to class, we explain how the self-ascription of short-term rental (STR) suppliers to the middle-class idea boosts exploitation and accumulation. Housing income, and recently that originating in STRs, has been used to maintain the symbolic and material status of the so-called middle classes in Spain, and specifically in Palma. Based on statistical data analysis and interviews with STR suppliers, managers and workers, we analyse the contradictory class positionality of STR suppliers in Palma (Majorca, Spain). First, we argue, that STR suppliers are part of the middle classes since they bear attributes of rent, labour and also capital, as they employ workers to produce a tourism commodity. Second, we contend that STR overnight stays should not only be considered as land rent payments, but also as the sale of a tourism commodity. Third, we claim that the contradictory positionality of the middle classes fuels self-exploitation, for STR suppliers misalign their interests with those of capital.

**Keywords:** middle classes, STR suppliers, short-term rentals, class positionality, exploitation, Palma

## Introduction

In recent years, the implications of tourist short-term rentals (STRs) for resident populations have been widely discussed (Cocola-Gant 2016; Cocola-Gant and Gago 2021; Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018). This issue has been studied within the

context of the shifting production and capital circulation re-arrangements platform capitalism has brought about (Sadowski 2020, 2021; Srnicek 2017). STR suppliers have become crucial in the development of platform capitalism and provide new matter for theorising on the recurrent concept of the so-called middle classes.

Wright's (1978, 1985) earliest work came to prominence arguing that class structure should allow for the existence of contradictory class locations. In such light, we contend that STR suppliers are a social group that can hardly be more contradictory in terms of their class "location". By looking into platform capitalism and specifically into STRs, Marxist theory fully acknowledges how the different capital-labour relations are often embodied by the same bearers, hence finding themselves in different contradictory class positions. Dissecting such contradictory positions of STR suppliers is key to illustrate how the interest of the so-called middle classes become aligned with those of capital rather than labour.

Based on the empirical evidence of STR suppliers in Palma (Majorca, Spain), we contribute to the Marxist critique in the theorisation of the middle classes. First, we do so by stressing how the Weberian self-ascriptive idea of the middle classes aids to unveil its contradictory positionality: distinction and status reinforces on the dynamics of an accumulation based not only on the exploitation of labour, but also on homeownership. Second, we develop Carchedi's (1975) approach to the middle classes by indicating how the classical categories of capitalist, rentier and labourers are manifested in one single social group: STR suppliers, who in a literal sense, represent the "middle" classes. Third, we dissect the nature of the income STRs generate by exploring the specific ways in which homeownership leads to a "commodity form", as Arboleda and Purcell (2021) have argued. We accordingly expand the empirical research on STRs by revealing the mechanisms through which owners create income from them, and the ways in which this helps to position themselves as part of the middle classes.

Section two introduces Weberian and Marxist understandings of the middle classes. We explore how the subjective construction of the "class-position" contradiction of the so-called middle classes keeps out of sight a critique of political economy, which helps to better understand how class happens from a Marxist perspective. Section three is the main empirical section. On the one hand, we focus on the establishment of homeownership in the Spanish middle-class imaginary. On the other hand, we look into how STRs are used to strengthen the very ideas and practices of the middle classes, by using data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (the Spanish national statistics institute), the Inside Airbnb and AirDNA websites, and 21 interviews (with STR owners, STR management companies, STR workers, and residents' associations belonging to neighbourhoods with large STR concentrations).

In the fourth section, we argue that the case of STRs illustrates the concealing relation that self-ascriptive approaches maintain with those arguments that view the so-called middle classes as the simultaneous embodiment of exploitative and exploited positions, not only of capital and labour, but also of rent. Hence, we claim that STR suppliers in their middle-class sensibilities and aspirations are also exploited-exploiters. Furthermore, we show how this "contradictory position" within the capital-labour relation contributes to accumulation by encouraging

workers to identify as capitalists-rentiers and how in misrecognising their true interests as exploited workers they reduce, if not annihilate, their chances for resisting their exploitation. To attain this, we hold that the income STRs suppliers receive should be conceptualised both as corporate profit and as land rent. The article concludes by specifying the usefulness of a Weberian understanding of the middle classes in the service of a Marxist relational approach and by highlighting how platform capitalism is a key driver in aligning the interests of the so-called middle classes with those of capital.

### **The Contention between the Weberian and Marxist Approaches to the “Middle Classes”: Why STRs Matter** *Short-Term Rentals and Platform Capitalism: The Missing Class Dimension*

Platform capitalism has impacted on housing markets via the emergence of apps that offer short-term lettings to city visitors. Besides the creation of advanced IT programmes (apps), platform capitalism also involves up to date techniques (overnight pricing software) and the use of one new type of raw material (big data), all of which have maximised the appropriation of surpluses by revolutionising, among others, the delivery of goods, the means of private transport and the uses of housing (Sadowski 2020; Srnicek 2017). By doing so, platform capitalism has deeply impacted on housing markets in variegated ways: it has changed long-term tenancy management practices, increased the volume and speed of the use of data in real-estate markets, and played a critical role in the materialisation of the touristic use of housing (Fields 2019; Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018).

If capitalist relations are altered by this use of techniques and programmes that transform big data and other raw materials into commodities, class relations are, by definition, also altered (Fields and Rogers 2021; Sadowski 2021). Nonetheless, the class implications, brought around by the rise of STRs platform capitalism, is a pivotal topic which is yet to be scrutinised. Whereas it has been argued that the blossoming of platform capitalism replaces the traditional industrial working class with the “cognitariat” and a heavily precarious workforce (Cañada and Izcarra-Conde 2021; Srnicek 2017), the contradictory class location of STR suppliers and its implications for the dynamics of exploitation is a topic that remains largely unexplored.

There have been occasional references that locate STR suppliers as belonging to the so-called middle classes. Take Semi and Tonetta who consider STRs’ middle-classness in terms of consumer improvement when claiming that “[h]oliday rental revenues may allow marginal suppliers, as they say, to be able to surf the crisis and afford mortgages, groceries, vacations, hanging out, paying for designer furniture or a new tattoo. In sum, they offer a way to preserve access to democratic luxuries that guarantee the right to a *middle-class* social citizenship, and wider social inclusion” (2021:1645, emphasis added). Other authors have linked the so-called middle classes on capital accumulation: “This model [investment in STRs] has created opportunities for capital accumulation”, which “are being discovered to a large extent by middle-class groups” (Del Castillo and Klaufus 2020:2550).

As the next section illustrates, what we find relevant here, is that such aspiration by STR suppliers to become middle class or to maintain their middle-class location is actually based on the opportunities STRs offer for capital accumulation.

### ***Marxist Takes on Weberian Approaches to (Middle) Class***

The term “class” has always generated vivid debates amongst social scientists. Underlying the concept of class, we find two main conceptual traditions; one owes itself to Weber and the other one to Marx. A “class”, Weber claims, “is any group of persons occupying the same class situation” (1978:302). He defined “situation” as “the same (or similar) interests which an individual shares with others. In principle, the various controls over consumer goods, means of production, assets, resources and skills each constitute a particular class situation” (Weber 1978:302). Weber’s emphasis on the individual, through “personal life experiences” and “life chances” is a critical aspect of a “class situation” (Gidwani 2009:89).

One decisive spin-off of Weber’s individual-based understanding of class is to be found in Bourdieu. According to him, class positionality is shaped by individuals who seek “distinction”, that is, to socially differentiate from “lower” classes (Joppke 1986:54). This “distinction” is what may grant “advantage” to an individual in relation with a bounded community (Savage et al. 2015). In the Bourdieusian framework, the “advantages” that shape “class distinction” are, thus, the symbolic practices of individuals, which are mainly centred on the consumption of assets (Goldthorpe 2000; Longhurst and Savage 1997). The ability to consume certain totemic products and experiences (such as housing, cars or holiday trips) symbolises the ascription of individuals to social groups, especially to the so-called middle classes (Savage et al. 2015). Weberian and Bourdieusian individualistic consumption-led approaches to class have been essentially dismissed by production-led Marxist scholarship because they do not acknowledge how classes are structurally shaped (and positioned) by the relations of production and exploitation (Callinicos 2004).

Accordingly, Marxist thinkers explain exploitation as the creation and appropriation of surplus value (Harvey 1982). The source of exploitation, which determines class, is to be found in the sale of labour power by a social group (workers) to another group (capitalists). It is the control of the means of production of capitalists that allows them to appropriate the surplus created by workers as they produce commodities (Harvey 1982). Following this, Wright offers a Marxist understanding of class that builds on the critique of Weber. Class, states Wright, is a “social position within the social relations of exploitation” (Wright 1981:150). However, since the relations of exploitation are precisely taken as the backbone for “positioning” class, we encounter certain class positions that express antagonistic interests: the middle classes (Wright 2000).

Notwithstanding his capital-labour class binary, Marx already signalled the position “in between” the middle classes hold when he criticised Ricardo: “What he forgets to emphasise is the constantly growing number of the middle classes, those who stand between the workman on the one hand and the capitalist and

landlord on the other" (Marx 1968:573). He further developed the idea of the middle classes in the third volume of *Capital*. According to Urry, Marx's argument there is that "as production expands, it is both more necessary to increase the number and diversity of unproductive service workers" (Urry 1973:177). Such kind of unproductive worker argued Marx, "creates no direct surplus-value but adds to the capitalist's income by helping him to reduce the cost of realising surplus-value, inasmuch as he performs partly unpaid labour" (1966:301). Although Urry reminds us that the middle class for Marx "neither owns productive property nor produces value" (Urry 1973:182), underlying the idea of the middle classes there is an exploitative nature that needs to be unveiled (Bensaïd 2009).

Carchedi (1975) and Wright (1978) developed Marx's approach to the middle classes by pointing out that the "contradictory" class locations of specific social groups signalled their involvement in the production process. Indeed, Carchedi (1975) claimed that some agents perform at the same time the global function of capital and the functions of the collective worker. For instance, company managers or HR employees are waged labour who nonetheless have coordinative production roles: managers are agents the income of whom "is only partly determined by the value of their labour power, the other parts being connected with a position of privilege vis-à-vis the working class" (Carchedi 1975:5). These managers with functions of capital and labour represent for Carchedi the very embodiment of the "middle class".

In such a light, STR suppliers provide a rather unique case to empirically nuance such an approach to class as, quite often, tourism rental suppliers are simultaneously employers and employees. Most STR suppliers we interviewed are waged labourers (teachers, lawyers, tourism workers, shop assistants, etc.) who from their wages and other sources of wealth (such as inheritances, rents) are able to produce STR commodities and/or services. At the same time, they often hire workers for cleaning and preparing their touristic-oriented properties so that they can receive their clients, in the form of guests. STR suppliers are, sometimes in a different time span, sometimes simultaneously, exploiting (e.g. through hiring workers that are used to maintain their STRs) and exploited (since they are employed elsewhere or self-exploited as self-employed workers). If STR suppliers are both employers and employees, do they not literally belong to the middle classes (à la Carchedi), both exploiting and being exploited?

However, this contradictory class positionality, based on being simultaneously exploitative and exploited, cannot be fully grasped without considering the motivations of individuals for self-ascribing to the middle classes, something Weberian and Bourdieusian scholarship does explore, even if not contemplating exploitation nor its ideological middle-class concealment. Thus, the subjective process by which such a middle-class self-ascription is attained, what Bourdieusians consider to be the "(dis)advantages" that shape class, is a very material process that has major implications for exploitation which, as the next section illustrates, is what positions class from a Marxist perspective. Indeed, the self-ascription to the idea of middle classes by STR suppliers not only obliterates their labour, but more importantly stimulates their own self-exploitation, as well as their exploitation of

other workers. In the next sections we take into consideration the ways in which land rents and the profits housing generates become a chief constituent of middle-class ideological self-ascription.

### ***Underlying STR Class Positionality: Exploitation and the Blurred Limits between Land Rents and Corporate Profits in Housing***

Savage et al. (2015) use Bourdieu's concept of economic advantage to incorporate the role of savings and investments housing ownership mobilises in the self-ascription of the middle classes. By doing so, they indirectly help to identify the mechanisms by which the extraction of surplus value from housing, either in the form of rent or profit, shapes class positionality. Nonetheless, something Savage et al. (2015) miss to recognise is that homeowners also suffer exploitation, which often pushes them to accrue the revenue they generate from the properties they own. According to Brenner (2006) and Weiss (2019), the tension homeowners experience via the devaluation of their ability to work, that is, an intensification in the burden of the exploitation they suffer, is compensated via the revaluation of their properties, therefore generating sources of income other than wages.

The role of housing in strengthening specific social groups by creating an income for them in the form of land rent has been widely studied (Jäger 2003; Smet 2016; Ward and Aalbers 2016). Major theorisations on land rent applied to housing clearly distinguish between the profits and land rent components. Value, they argue, is generated by labour (construction workers), which in turn transforms raw materials (brick and mortar) into housing. Yet the final price of housing also reflects land rent, that is, the price for housing also involves the land where the house is built, and which has been acquired in exchange for money (Smet 2016; Smith 1979; Ward and Aalbers 2016). Whereas the inner relations between profit and rent have been extensively analysed in the sphere of housing sale prices, this is not the case for rental agreements in what Smet (2016:500) defines as "places of consumption", which also include STRs.

Dissecting the relations between profit and rent in STR income is relevant because any production of commodities has important implications for class positionality. Moreover, even if the ownership of land, and the built environment that sits on it, is contingent to the existence of rent, the impact of ownership on the ways surplus is created has yet to be developed in the sphere of platform capitalism (Arboleda and Purcell 2021; Sadowski 2020). Indeed, properties under STR platform capitalism also take a commodity form (Arboleda and Purcell 2021:1604), which, as we later argue, also relies on labour exploitation. That is, STR suppliers hold a contradictory class relation because at the same time they embody both a rentier-labour relation (à la Brenner and Weiss) and a capital-labour relation (à la Carchedi).

In brief, STR suppliers share a contradictory middle-class location since they are in between capital, rent, and labour. That said, what is of interest is not so much who belongs to the middle classes *per se*, but how accumulation works. The fact that the middle classes occupy a contradictory position between capital, rent and labour becomes of critical relevance insofar as this contradictory position

encourages this social group to identify themselves as capitalist/rentiers, therefore aligning with the interests of capital and misrecognising their interests as workers, hence also failing to resist their own exploitation. To attain this point, the next section elaborates on how properties have consolidated the material wealth of the so-called middle classes in Palma, as well as their self-ascription to the aspirational idea this middle-classness endorses.

## **The “New” Middle Class Centred in STR Supply: The Case of Palma** *The Historical Role of Housing in the Production of the “Middle Classes”*

Since the 1960s, Palma has been a city which has based its growth on tourism and housing construction. With a current population of 422,587 inhabitants, most of its historical landmarks, retail stores, and nightlife have become the complementary offer of the different tourist resorts on the island, to the extent that the whole city has become a tourist attraction (Morell 2018). Although this growth began in the 1960s, it was not until the 1990s that new city-centre urban renewal programmes led to the expansion of the city’s tourist core, allowing even more tourism activities, encouraging widespread construction and the acquisition of dwellings as both primary and secondary residences by locals and non-locals alike (Vives-Miró 2013). In 2011, Palma had 159,316 properties, of which 38,026 (24%) were rented on a long-term basis. By 2018, it was estimated that more than 7,500 houses were rented as STRs (AirDNA 2018). As in the rest of Spain, the ownership of housing in Palma has historically played a salient role in creating a privileged status which has fuelled middle-class self-ascription.

From the 1950s onwards, Spain underwent a rapid economic transformation, in which migration from rural areas to cities turned the 19<sup>th</sup> century agrarian social structure on its head: because of the massive migration to cities, blue and white-collar jobs soared (Gayo 2013; Rey-Araújo 2020). The consolidation of an industrial working class threatened the Francoist regime as opposition elements, particularly communists found a fertile ground to grow in the shop-floor and in their neighbourhoods. The response by the Francoist regime was to boost as much as possible the middle classes by promoting homeownership via low-interest mortgage loans, and “social” (rental) public housing which could eventually be bought by the tenants (Gayo 2013; López and Rodríguez 2010; Murray 2012). Just as in other European countries, the ideological foundations of the middle-class idea, in a Weberian sense, were constructed around the “privilege” of becoming a homeowner (Kohl 2020; López and Rodríguez 2010). As a matter of fact, the middle-class self-ascription through homeownership was used by Francoism to misalign workers with the interests of capital and the dictatorship and in this manner break their working-class solidarities.

Yet even if the self-ascription to the middle classes throughout Francoism was mainly based on homeownership, it was not specialised on its potential rent extraction. In this regard, the protection of tenants in Francoism, the rents of whom were controlled via the automatic extension of social housing and

agreements that froze their prices rise, discouraged homeowners to use housing as an additional source of income (López and Rodríguez 2010; Rey-Araújo 2020). The middle classes were further reinforced with the interrelated economic and political changes following Franco's death. The rapid dismantling of the Spanish industry went hand in hand with a boom in civil service and other public sectors as the transition to democracy catapulted the social-democrat party, PSOE, to power (López and Rodríguez 2010; Murray 2012). At the same time, the shift towards a service-centred economy further strengthened the importance of tourism, especially in the Mediterranean and Insular regions (Armas-Díaz and Sabaté-Bel 2020; Murray 2012).

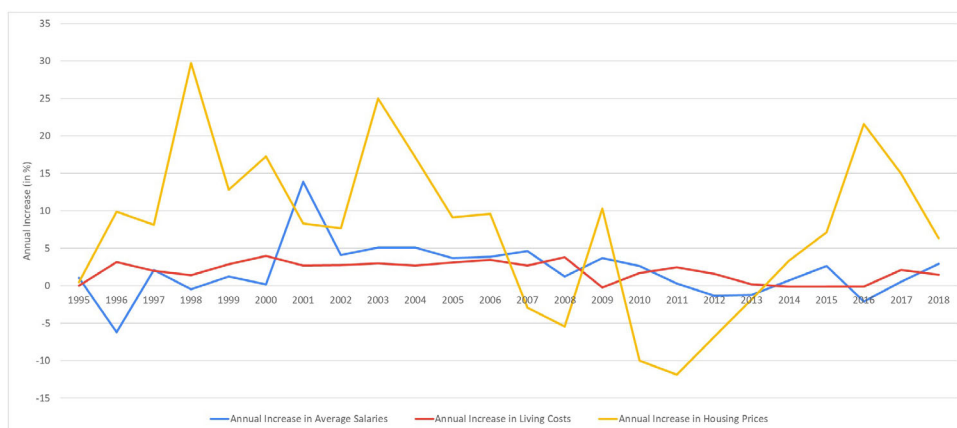
The Balearics, and particularly Palma, were a token example of this process: between the late 1950s and the late 1970s, a predominantly agrarian economy with a humble industrial activity transitioned towards an urban society based on tourism and public service (Murray 2012). Salaries from the public sector and tourism led to an increase in the number of homeowners in Palma and housing was envisaged as a central asset to instil the feeling of belonging to the middle classes (Murray 2012). From 1985 onwards, the liberalisation of rental prices, the high demand for housing by locals and Northern Europeans following Spain's accession to the EU (1986), led to a revitalisation of the housing market. While homeownership continued to be the main component, the extraction of land rents from housing (through sale, renting secondary residences or using owned housing as a collateral for credit) would become a second major element in the articulation of the self-ascription to the idea of the middle classes.

### ***The Symbolic and Material Double-Edged Role of Housing for the "Middle Classes" (1995–2015)***

Following the accession of Spain to the EU, the rise in housing prices consolidated the middle-class status of homeowners, as the price of their properties grew, so did their potential wealth. Housing prices in Palma rose from €661/m<sup>2</sup> in 1995 to €967/m<sup>2</sup> in 2000 to €2,237/m<sup>2</sup> in 2006 (Vives-Miró 2013:277). At the same time, although average monthly salaries in the Balearics augmented from €1,112 in 1995 to €1,178 in 2000 to €1,460 in 2005 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2021b), living costs escalated higher, at least for the 1995–1999 period (see Figure 1). Paradoxically, the average decrease in the purchasing power of large cohorts of the population threatened the middle-class self-ascription of homeowners, as symbolic consumption was increasingly unaffordable. However, housing kept the purchasing power of its owners because the increasing appreciation of ownership eased the borrowing of mortgage loans that were largely used to maintain or intensify consumption of goods.

As López and Rodríguez (2010:298) maintain, the credits awarded by banks to Spanish families between 1995 and 2007 were not only aimed at acquiring first and second homes but were also used to fuel consumption. Indeed, the total amount of loans used for private consumption grew in Spain from €29 billion in 1995 to €103 billion in 2007 (Banco de España 2021). From 2000 until 2007, the average salaries in the Balearics remained slightly above the growth in average





**Figure 1:** Annual growth in average salaries and living costs in the Balearics, and housing prices in Palma (1995–2018) (source: own elaboration from Instituto Nacional de Estadística [2021a, 2021b])

costs,<sup>1</sup> enhancing the purchasing power of large cohorts of the population. Still, until 2006, the rise in housing prices in Palma was much higher than the one in salaries and living costs. However, this leading predominance of housing in boosting the self-ascription and the purchasing power of the homeownership middle classes would be in their worst interest from 2008 until 2013.

In the context of the 2008 crisis there was a massive wave of housing disinvestment in Southern Europe, which together with the austerity policies implemented by national governments that were backed by the EU and the IMF, meant a decrease in the purchasing power of the so-called middle classes, and hence a threat to their self-ascription (Charnock et al. 2014; Rey-Araújo 2020). Except for 2009, from 2008 until 2013 not only did the average living costs increase more than the average salaries, but housing prices also decreased sharply (see Figure 1). This meant that, contrary to what happened in the 1995–2007 period, housing could not be used to maintain the rhythms of consumption and thus middle-class status. In fact, as stagnating salaries and widespread unemployment became an unbearable burden, large numbers of indebted homeowners were evicted from their properties in Palma and across Spain (Vives-Miró et al. 2015).

Housing was no longer backing consumption loans: by 2015, consumption credit shrank to €55 billion, from the €103 billion accounted for in 2007 (Banco de España 2021). As López and Rodríguez (2010:439) put it, “the paradise of a middle class enriched by the upgrade in their properties’ value ... [was] shattered at the first blow”. If prior to 2008 homeownership had masterpieced the consolidation of the purchasing power of the middle classes, after 2008 challenges around housing became the foremost element that triggered the middle-class decay. Still, a renewed appreciation of housing took place in Palma from 2015 onwards and new opportunities arose for the shrinking middle classes. Coastal cities such as Barcelona, Palma or Alacant would spearhead a process of housing

reevaluation that would be felt in the late 2010s in most of the urban areas across Spain (Yrigoy 2020a). In Palma, the 2008 price record was surpassed both in the rental and sale markets by 2017 (Yrigoy 2020a). A new period had started in which housing would play yet again a crucial role in strengthening the middle classes.

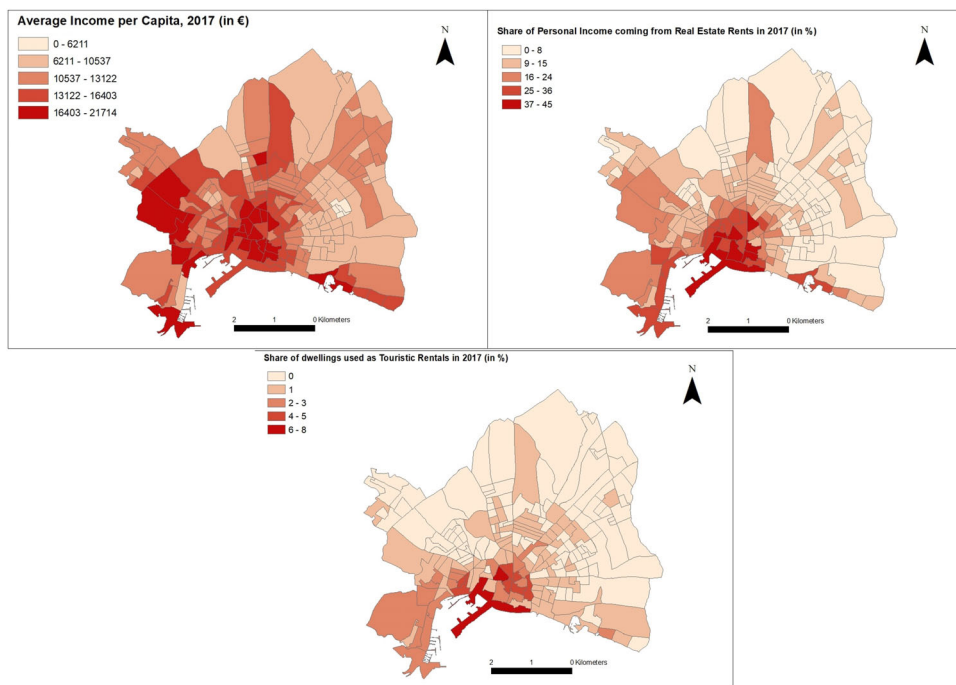
### ***The Emergence of Tourism Suppliers: Towards a Middle-Class Post-Crisis?***

For the so-called middle classes, the post-2015 housing appreciation was somewhat different than the one that took place in the 1990s and 2000s, especially in coastal touristic cities such as Palma. Contrary to pre-2008, as from 2015 housing appreciation in touristic cities was mainly linked with the proliferation of STRs (Cocola-Gant 2016; Morell 2020). Renting owned properties to tourists became the new housing-based strategy that enlarged the sources of income of homeowners, who after 2008 were on average losing purchasing power, and even faced a decrease in salaries (see Figure 1). The rise of STRs meant that homeowners had a new source of income coming from their properties: in 2018, STR suppliers in Palma had average gross revenues of €849/month coming from STRs, while the average gross salary in the Balearics was of €2,049/month (AirDNA 2018; Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2021b).<sup>2</sup>

In short, STRs represent an average of a + 50% rise in the income perceived by Palma's homeowners. Those areas in the city centre of Palma, where there is a higher average income per capita, correspond to the areas where there are larger shares of resident income per capita, which in large part does not originate from their salaries, but from rented property (see Figure 2). Indeed, there is a strong correlation (0.85 Pearson) between the areas where the income per capita is largest with the areas where the share of personal income is the largest too. There is also a correlation (0.65 Pearson) between the areas in Palma where there is a larger share of income coming from real estate and the areas where there is a larger share of housing units being used as STR rentals (see Figure 2).

STRs are starting to follow a very similar pattern to the one that led to the pre-2008 housing appreciation. They have become a source of liquidity that helps to "situate" the middle classes despite their loss in purchasing power (Rodríguez 2019). For instance, a homeowner told us that STRs are "30% more profitable" than residential rentals (ANPP2: 3). This profitability is based, first, on the possibility for STRs to be rented daily whereas residential contracts are rented yearly. Thus, in 2017 STRs in Palma were rented at €46/m<sup>2</sup> per day, whereas residential rentals would receive €9,77/m<sup>2</sup> per day (Yrigoy 2020b:14). Of course, such prices ought to be qualified under the actual occupancy rates. As more and more properties are rented to tourists, an oversupply pattern develops: In 2010, occupancy rates in STRs were at 75% and by 2018 average occupancy rates were at 59% (Yrigoy 2020b:16).

When homeowners were asked why they rent to tourists rather than to long-term residents, the overwhelming answer was that they did not trust the residential rental market, often stating bad past experiences with tenants. Furthermore,



**Figure 2:** Average income per capita, share of personal income coming from real estate and share of dwellings used as STRs in Palma (source: own elaboration from Instituto Nacional de Estadística [2021a, 2021b] and Inside Airbnb [2021])

homeowners also fear their properties will be squatted by long-term tenants, and therefore they prefer to rent to tourists. One homeowner told us: “I also rented [to a resident]. That was hell! We discovered what it is to have a person that knows that if he does not pay, nothing happens. The tenant was one year, and he re-hired all the rooms there ... What a mess! We sought to the law, the one the media always says will defend us ... but the law was done to protect the tenant. As a result, homeowners do not want to rent to long-term tenants ... Therefore, Airbnb was the solution to the problem of long-term stays” (ANPP4:6–7). As a result, most owners fear to have their property illegally occupied by long-term tenants.

Amongst homeowners, the alleged threat of illegal occupation has reinforced their middle-class self-ascription. Squatting is used as a scapegoat to access an extra source of income that strengthens their purchasing power and therefore their self-ascription to the middle-class idea (Alabao 2020). Another reason given to engage in STRs is to have a better control over their property since they can access it more often (GP1:3; GP3:5). Finally, cultural cross-fertilisation, a perceived symbol of middle-class status is waved as a major reason to rent to tourists: “I like it. I like to meet new people, I like the contact with the tourists, talk to them, and know things about their culture. It has helped me to take apart some myths” (ANPP3:3); and “I speak French, English and German ... If you speak languages, there is an exchange of how they live, the culture, the cuisine, there is mutual

enrichment" (ANPP2:3). Fending off the potential squatting of long-term tenants and the fostering potential cultural exchanges with tourists are important in how homeowners in Palma self-construct their middle-classness.

Nonetheless, underlying the way in which STR suppliers self-portray their reasons for renting to tourists, the purely material-economic motivation appears: "My dad was amazed: Man! How well this [STR business] is going! Compared to the price that [long-term residents] paid us for a month?" (ANPP4:1). Another property owner told us: "I already have my job. I can pay my bills. And I have this [STR income] extra, in case something extraordinary happens" (ANPP5:7). However, in establishing the conditions for accessing an extra source of income, STR suppliers are not only "class-situated", à la Weber, but also in Marxist terms. As a manager told us: "What the homeowners are looking for is either profit or paying off the house" (GP2:1). It is clear then, that middle-class self-ascription is backed by fundamental changes in the political economy of housing, and specifically, in its soaring touristic uses. But what does this touristic use of housing and middle-class self-ascription tell us about the exploitative nature of the so-called middle classes?

### **"Situating" STR Suppliers as a Middle Class: A Labour-Based Approach**

As seen, the use of STRs as a means for producing an extra source of income represents yet another dimension of how STR suppliers simultaneously embody the roles of capital and labour. Following Carchedi (1975), STR suppliers are a class in the "middle" insofar as they are at the same time exploited and they exploit others. They are exploited since most of them are labour, that is, they sell their ability to work in exchange for a salary, and they are exploiters because they often need to buy the labour, the ability to work, of others to successfully carry out the short-term lettings that gives them that extra income that allows them to aspire to maintain their middle-class situation. In so doing, the different uses STR suppliers make of labour contribute to the Marxist theorisation of the middle classes, and not least, has wider implications for rent and value theory.

### ***The Nature of STR Income as Land Rent and as Profit***

STR suppliers are rentiers insofar as they create an income from the property they own. In this sense, the income they generate through STRs is a land rent, "a payment made to landlords for the right to use land and its appurtenances" (Harvey 1982:331). The rentier-labour duality of homeowners halted by the post-2008 devaluation of housing is now being reinforced again. But this new form of income created through STRs not only originates in land rents. As interviewees implicitly told us, the income of STR suppliers which is contingent on ownership, shares attributes of both land rent and profit. This duality is embodied in the dilemma STR suppliers face when having to transfer or not the management of their properties to professional companies. STR suppliers told us how they try to resist this as much as they can: "even if they say that STRs mean living

on rents [for owners], it [STR letting] is a hard job: check-ins, check-outs, cleaning, merchandising, repairs ... This is a lot of work, isn't it? Lots of owners prefer to give up the tasks and get paid" (ANPP3:2).

As told by our interviewees, there is a share of the income that STR suppliers appropriate regardless of whether the management of STR properties is externalised or not. But there is another share of the income that depends on who employs the labour that manages the property. When we asked an STR supplier with externalised STR management how much of the income an STR generated was appropriated by a management company, the answer was up to 25% (ANPP3:2). In the case of Barcelona, it has been estimated that between 30% to 40% of the income created in STRs with externalised management is appropriated by management companies (Cañada and Izcarra Conde 2021:20). However, other companies arrange fixed prices with the owners and adapt their profit margin according to the season (GP1:2).

In STRs, as in other places of tourist consumption such as museums, art performances or hotels there is a spatial "simultaneity of production and consumption" (Savran and Tonak 1999:137). Beyond selling the right to use their property (which is a land-rent payment), what is being produced is a commodity which is consumed in the same spot where it is produced. This commodity in the case of STRs has a symbiotic relation with rentierism. What homeowners are selling, as in the case of hoteliers, is a commodity that also involves a touristic "experience", e.g. staying in Palma with its specific services and amenities. Indeed, homeowners not only receive payments from tourists for the right to use their properties, but embedded in the overnight price tourists pay, homeowners "sell" the experience of being a visitor in Palma, just as much as newcomers to gentrifying areas buy the right to become neighbours (Morell 2015).

As in the case of other commodities, a tourism commodity entails the transformation of raw materials. In this case the physical space of Palma, the specific property where the overnight stay takes place, the use of labour and the software that monitors key issues such as demand trends or prices, which Srnicek (2017) also considers as a raw material. This commodity which is the framing of the leisure experience of being in Palma is then sold in pieces to tourists, being the overnight stays those found in platforms such as Airbnb or HomeAway. As Gil (2019:351) has indicated, through STRs, individuals "transform elements of the field of social reproduction (such as their home) into productive elements". The key difference between a tourist commodity such as the "Palma experience" and other more typical commodities being sold in markets (such as cars and laptops) is the time span, complexity, and type of workers that are involved.

From the travel agency staff to the workers that built the transport networks that communicated Majorca with the European heartland, from restaurant workers to tour guides, and many more, all of these workers have relentlessly contributed with their labour to create a comprehensive touristic experience which was once only sold to tourists via international tour operators in alliance with local hoteliers and is now also being sold to them in part also through STR platforms (Murray 2012; Yrigoy 2019). This commodity is sold, and its value is realised in different forms: when a tourist pays in a restaurant, at a museum, for a hammock

on the beach, but also, for an overnight stay in a hotel or in a STR, the value of this broad tourism commodity is realised. Within the tourist industry, STR suppliers are not only opportunistic actors who capture the value of a commodified experience created by others, but they also contribute to the production of this commodity.

They do so by combining the many different tasks the creation and management of an STR requires. As different STR suppliers told us, houses must be refurbished and decorated to match the expectations tourists have towards their experience in an STR: “We bought a room in a house, and we refurbished it ... We created a studio ... with a big sofa-bed, its kitchen, and its bathroom ... and I said, we are going to rent it to tourists” (ANPP4:7). Houses must accomplish cleaning standards, and not least, must be a short distance to tourist attractions which are part of the commodified tourism experience (Teubner et al. 2017). Hosts provide self-made guides with information on what to do in the city, where to go to have dinner, where to buy local products, etc. Some STR suppliers prepare welcome gifts with typical Majorcan food like *ensaimades* (sweet lard pastries) or *cocarros* (vegetable pies).

The interviewees explain that they want to offer a more authentic experience. What is sold, thus, is the authenticity to “live like a local”. In the same way, the professional STR suppliers decorate STRs with a “Mediterranean Majorcan character” (APP2:6; APP1:36) and offer activities like boat trips (APP2:18). Hosts are also supposed to behave as such vis-à-vis tourists, often having to learn the skills that go with it and they are also supposed to match the requirements set by regulations, which tend to equate the requirements of STRs with those of hotels. At the end of the day, by selling the experience of staying in Palma that surrounds their own STRs, STR suppliers and managers are selling a tourism commodity that contains a surplus value laboured by others and, to a certain extent, by themselves, both in formal and informal ways (Morell 2015, 2018).

### ***Situating STR Suppliers as a Class in the “Middle” from a Marxist Perspective***

According to Carchedi (1975), the very same agent often embodies attributes of labour and capital. But STR suppliers add two interesting layers to Carchedi’s (1975) conceptualisation about the class “in the middle”. On the one hand, STR suppliers that manage their properties are capitalists and labourers at the same time. Some of our interviewees were high-school teachers and hotel workers who at the same time hired cleaners, gardeners, and construction workers. From a Marxist class perspective, these are not, as Carchedi (1975) points out, workers that in their job perform the role of capital (e.g. workers that manage production), but workers that own property and act with it as capitalists would. On the other hand, the relation the different roles STR suppliers bear (capitalists, labourers, and rentiers), is not only an entangled relation, but also an extremely fluid one. STR suppliers smoothly internalise and externalise STR tasks depending on the circumstances they encounter.

Depending on the touristic season, the same STR supplier can be, in a time span of four years: a rentier capitalist while a labourer in year one; a capitalist and a rentier in year two; a self-exploited worker in year three; and a rentier in year four. Gil (2019:354) has argued that the accumulation dynamics within STRs “are developed on top of the personal life” of suppliers, stressing that there is a personal conflict amongst STR suppliers between the desire to accumulate and their desire to enjoy a personal life. Yet our interviewees also show other significant reasons to internalise or externalise the STR-related work their properties require. Whereas in the low tourist season STR suppliers tend to carry out by themselves most of the tasks, if not all, in the peak season they tend to externalise more. For instance, check-in and cleaning are tasks that non-professional STR suppliers pass to other people during the high season (ANPP4).

Another decisive reason to internalise or externalise work is their personal experience in the job market: “Up until now, I worked in another place. I am now unemployed, so I work full time [in my own STRs]. I used to hire a company to carry out gardening. Now, I do it myself. You also must hang out the washing, and clean and fold clothing. You must host the client, manage the rates, observe competitiveness, pictures, webs ... I only hire cleaning now” (ANPP1:2). Interestingly, the exploitation (or not) of workers by STR suppliers is contingent on the exploitation that STR suppliers are subject to in their workplaces. Most of our interviewees are STR suppliers that receive a salary while directly hiring other workers to perform specific tasks on their STRs, cleaning being the most typical externalised job. The better the situation they have at their jobs, the more they tend to externalise specific tasks: after cleaning, gardening comes, then check-in/out. These are the prototypical rentier-capitalist-labourer STR suppliers. Sometimes, when working conditions are good, they externalise the whole management of their STRs.

When workers are unemployed or in a very precarious situation, they tend to fully manage their properties and they perform all the tasks. These suppliers not only perform all the tasks in their property, but they also start to carry out tasks in other properties. In this case, the divide between labour, rent and capital becomes extremely fuzzy. Whereas in their own properties they internalise the three roles at the same time, in the properties of others they perform the role of capitalists and labourers. This rather peculiar group of STR suppliers internalise in themselves exploiting and exploitative dynamics and, since they simultaneously become the bearers of both the creation and the appropriation of value, they become “self-exploiters” (Gabriel 1990:87). By aligning themselves with the interests of capital and rentierism, STR suppliers/workers fail to recognise their (self-)exploitation and, hence, fail to create the means to resist such exploitation.

In sum, STR suppliers are not only capitalists and labourers because they do a job and hire others to work in STRs, but also because they sometimes work full time in STRs while appropriating all the value they, themselves, generate. STR suppliers align therefore their interests with the profit-seeking that rent involves, even if they themselves remain exploited by these very mechanisms.

## Concluding Remarks

Erik Olin Wright (1978) and Guglielmo Carchedi (1975) came to prominence with their contribution to class theory when arguing there was a need to allow contradictory class locations. This article has substantiated the contradictory middle-class location of STR suppliers given that they often bear simultaneously the attributes of rentiers, capitalists, and labourers. Indeed, STR suppliers are rentiers, since they obtain gains from leasing their properties, in their case to tourists, even when externalising the management of their STRs to specialised companies. STR suppliers are also capitalists, in the sense that they may hire workers who produce a commodified tourism experience, and therefore partly appropriate the surplus value these generate. In the labourer condition, STR suppliers normally work elsewhere, in non-related STR jobs from where they receive a salary, work on STRs of their own and sometimes in the STRs of other suppliers.

Moreover, the way by which STR suppliers extract extra income from their properties illustrates wider points about the increasingly blurry relations between the categories of corporate profits and land rents. Vercellone (2008:3) has gone as far as claiming that there has been a “collapse of the distinction between rent and profit in the transition from industrial to cognitive capitalism”. Such a “collapse” of rent and profit is found in the case of the contradictory middle-class location of STRs. In fact, Marx himself questioned the terms of the opposition between profit and rent that limits the definition of the category of rent to ground rent by distinguishing between the profits being made by the ownership of capital and the profits being made by the active entrepreneur who manages the production process (Vercellone 2008:3). What Marx pointed at, and the case of our STR suppliers also illustrates, is that the ones who ultimately appropriate the surplus created by workers are those who own either the means of production or land, properties included.

In this regard, STR suppliers illustrate that ownership is not only contingent on land rent, but also corporate profits: “the essence of profit and ground rent emanates from and is interlinked with the institution of private property”, claim Sotiropoulos et al. (2013:10). Exploring how ownership is used by the so-called middle classes to create income is important to unveil further dynamics of exploitation that not longer only occur in “classical” productive spaces (e.g. production plants), but also in housing, an exploitation that the same middle-class contradictory location keeps out of sight. Because of their aspirational class mobility that is encouraged by their potential consumption capacity, STRs consciously self-ascribe to the middle classes. However, as argued throughout this article, they are guided by an underlying quest for profit that not only involves exploiting others while being exploited elsewhere as waged workers (sometimes working for other STR suppliers), but often also involves self-exploitation.

Our class analysis of STR suppliers suggests the ways in which a Marxist critique of the middle classes can make use of Weberian class approaches (and their Bourdieusian and Goldthorpean spinoffs) that place the limelight on distinction, status, and self-ascription. Whereas on the one hand the Weberian-inspired traditions fail to anchor all these aspects in their material preconditions to broader dynamics of



accumulation, on the other hand Marxist approaches to class gloss over them. Yet they are nevertheless relevant, since they illustrate how individuals pertaining to certain social groups (such as STR suppliers) come consciously to terms with their contradictory class location and thus stimulate exploitation. In the light of our findings in Palma, we contend that STRs allow harnessing of the Weberian analyses of middle-class self-understandings in the service of a Marxist relational approach. This is so because STRs demonstrate the very middle-classing processes by which an exploited class comes to identify itself with the interest of an exploiting one, thereby facilitating accumulation.

Just as under the Francoist dictatorship, the middle-class self-ascription served to align citizens with the interests of capital and break their solidarities as workers, in present-day Palma, STRs align their suppliers' interests with rent and profit-seeking, even as they themselves remain exploited by these very mechanisms. As STR suppliers line up with the interests of capital (e.g. profit, exploitation) and misrecognise their interests as exploited workers, their capacity to organise against their own exploitation remains hampered and, all in all, boosts accumulation further. This is the key novelty of platform capitalism that should be clearly identified by Marxist scholarship: the emergence of platforms, such as the ones used by STR suppliers, boosts the identification of workers with rentiers and capitalists, and therefore, the platform itself creates the necessary conditions through which labourers exploit themselves. An important turn is thus happening via platforms: by sharing part of the profits with workers (such as STR suppliers) capitalist agents can enforce workers' self-exploitation without any contestation whatsoever.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We are using data from the Balearics (regional scale) instead of Palma (local scale) because, unfortunately, data on salaries do not exist for Palma.

<sup>2</sup> Since it is forbidden to sublet full housing in Spain, full STR housing, unless illegally, is rented out by homeowners, not by tenants.

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