

Representations of the upper class in Chile: The construction of the “*cuicos/as*” category

Representaciones de la clase alta en Chile: La construcción de la categoría “*cuicos/as*”

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Background

In Chile, persistent social inequality and the economic wealth concentration have led many researchers to wonder about the dominant class's character and transformations. Less attention has been given to the vision that the rest of society has about the economic elite. This aspect is extremely relevant if we think about the possibilities of articulating critical discourses regarding inequality and the socioeconomic power concentration. This article delves into the upper class' representations in Chile from the construction of the category “*cuicos*”¹, a pejorative name used in the country to refer to members of this class. Based on the theoretical contributions of Bourdieu and the cultural sociology of Lamont (1992; 2009), we analyse how through the use of this category social and cultural boundaries are drawn, but also racial and above all moral, with respect to the members of the upper class.

Aims

The main objective is to understand who are the *cuicos* in Chile, specifically, what it means to be identified and catalogued as *cuico*. Considering previous studies have not addressed this goal, this article aims at two levels. First, it identifies the various meanings associated with *cuico*. Second, it approaches the *cuico*' significance considering the symbolic boundaries drawing between the socioeconomic strata.

Method & procedures

This article's analysis methodology is qualitative. The collecting data includes 64 in-depth interviews and six discussion groups, comprising men and women from different socioeconomic strata and belonging to age groups between 18 and 68 years old in Santiago city.

Results & discussion

One of the main findings is that the category *cuico* has diverse meanings. *Cuico* can refer to class membership -the upper class, or an alleged superiority attitude- the *cuico* attitude. In that sense, one can speak of “*cuicos* very *cuicos*” or “*cuicos* less *cuicos*”. The distinction between these two meanings is not always clear in the interviewees' discourses, accounting for the category's pre-reflective nature.

According to the respondents' belonging strata, one observes different discourses around the *cuico* category. The upper and middle-upper strata members constantly try to distinguish themselves from the nickname *cuico* in their speeches. Although sometimes they may recognise as belonging to this category, they keep a certain reserve- pointing out the “real *cuico*” is someone else, or “there are other *cuicos* more *cuicos*.” Their discourse seeks to establish a clear differentiation between class membership and attitude. The “real despicable *cuico*” is the one with a *cuico* attitude, who flaunts wealth and shows superiority. Here ostentation acquires particular importance, becoming the axis of these strata' discourse.

¹ Spanish speaking designates *cuico* for male and *cuica* for female.

On the other hand, the middle and lower strata discourse about *cuico* establishes differentiation and distance boundaries concerning the upper class, not just in economic but also in social, cultural and even racial terms. Moreover, the most relevant dimension in constructing the *cuico* in their discourses is not the ostentation, but the treatment: the *cuicos* behave in a derogatory manner towards those “lower down” social scale. Although the respondents recognise some exceptions at the individual level, they perceive the *cuicos* as a “class” that despises other social classes through indifference and distancing. This is where both definitions of *cuico* meet: class matches attitude.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals the different meanings associated with the *cuico* category among the different socioeconomic strata. However, it also highlights that the description of the *cuico* always develops from moral elements. Whether they emphasise in their ostentation or their treatment, respondents constantly tend to overlap a supposedly neutral description of these groups with an analysis of their moral behaviors and attitudes.

However, this moral dimension has very different practical consequences in both cases. If in one case the description of the *cuico* attitude serves to draw a boundary within the upper class, in another case the *cuico* category is mobilised to draw a boundary between the upper class and the rest of society. Thus, for the upper strata, the most important thing is to distance oneself from the “new rich”, identified with the *cuico* attitude. For the middle and lower strata, the word *cuico* establishes a break between the “upper class” and “us”, in which the moral element serves to revalue certain aspects of one's identity in the face of the moral “poverty” of “the rich”.

Keywords: social categorization, social class, social inequality, upper class

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