

DEBATE



## (Middle-) Class analysis in Africa: does it work?

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### SUMMARY

Recent interest in the growth of middle classes in Africa (and elsewhere) has been characterised by immense theoretical diversity. While this diversity indicates the complexity (and limitations) of class analysis, it remains important for the latter to be guided by the classic concerns around power, wealth and inequality which characterise radical debate.

Class analysis – of one sort or another – succeeded modernisation theory as the major prism through which ‘development’ in Africa was analysed once the glamour of political independence began to lose its shine. Carola Lentz (2016) has recently explored this by demonstrating how the study of African elites, which were regarded as the agents of progress during the 1950s and 1960s, had by the 1970s and 1980s transmogrified into the study of various forms of African ‘bourgeoisie’, who were regarded as oppressive and regressive. Yet at the end of the Cold War, class analysis also lost its gloss, and went into retreat as other frameworks such as ‘democratisation’ took centre stage. However, in recent years, class analysis has appeared to be making something of a comeback.

This has been demonstrated most fulsomely by the growth of interest in the ‘African middle class’ (or classes) alongside, or as part of, a much wider embrace of the perceived growth and greater significance of other middle classes in the global south (notably in India and China). Yet ironically, whereas the earlier wave of class analysis was heavily influenced by Marxian thinking, the revival of interest in middle classes has been sparked by orthodox neo-classical economists aligned to the international development agencies such as the World Bank and associated continental bodies (such as the African Development Bank). Broadly speaking, such economists now fete the growth in size of middle classes in ‘emerging economies’, celebrating them for being urban-based, highly educated, future-oriented, highly aspirational, attuned to changing technology, and politically assertive (even ‘democratic’).

In its turn, this new orthodoxy has been subject to extensive critique, although in relation to Africa, this has evinced a marked ambivalence. As demonstrated by various contributions to the recently published volume on *The rise of Africa’s middle class* edited by Henning Melber (Melber 2016a, 2016b; Stoffel 2016; Hellsten 2016), the development economists are accused by radical scholars of exhibiting an almost total lack of grounding in social theory alongside a dubious empiricism (so that their definitions are

unrealistically inclusive, with such absurdities as those earning US\$2 dollars a day having been promoted into the middle class). On the other hand, whilst denouncing the global institutions for exaggerating the size of the African middle classes, the self-same scholars seem themselves to want to acknowledge that something significant is happening: that African middle classes are in fact ‘rising’, and that hence there is a need to acknowledge their potential or actual importance. Consequently, recent years have seen a surge of analyses of middle classes in different countries – from Angola (Schubert 2016) and Mozambique (Sumich 2016) through to Kenya (Spronk 2014; Neubert 2016a, 2016b) and Ghana (Lee 2012) and so on, all with their divergent definitions, motivations and conclusions. Most notably, there are widely differing assessments of the relationships between African middle classes and democracy: broadly, the development economists are optimistic, while the scholars are more sceptical about whether social groupings becoming middle class will render them more politically progressive.

The present author sought to contribute to these debates in a recent book on *The new black middle class in South Africa* (Southall 2016) by returning to some of the classic literature on the middle class. It was recognised explicitly, albeit in the conclusion, that South Africa exhibits a degree of exceptionality in this regard – notably because the African middle class of South Africa identifies as ‘black’ (to distinguish itself from the country’s substantial white middle class) in a way that does not make sense in say, Nigeria. Nonetheless, the argument of the book is that if the middle class in Africa is to be taken seriously, then there is need to go back to ‘the grand traditions’ of sociology. At considerable risk of imputing an importance to my work which others are likely to dispute (or, more galling, simply ignore!) I suggest that this raises questions of importance which go well beyond the qualities (good or bad) of my own book. I make this argument as follows.

### **Conceptualising the new black middle class in South Africa – and emerging critiques**

*The new black middle class in South Africa* (BMC) kicks off with overviews of the characteristics of, and roles ascribed to, the middle class by Karl Marx and Max Weber. The former proposed that, as capitalism developed, the middle class would be progressively squeezed between capitalists and the proletariat, yet also predicted that it was destined to grow and hence blur the boundaries between the two great classes of capitalist society. In contrast, the latter argued that the middle class in industrial society was based upon ‘market situation’ rather than upon the ownership of property, and upon politics as much as economics.

Suffice it to say here that the book outlines how later scholars were to build upon the ideas of the two founders of sociology’s two grand traditions to further analyse the middle class (inter alia, by developing notions of the ‘service class’ and the ‘deskilling’ of labour, differentiating ‘new’ from ‘old’ middle classes, explaining ‘contradictory class locations’, drawing distinctions between ‘class’ and ‘status’, and so on). In so doing, BMC swings through a list of ‘great names’ – including Karl Renner, Harry Braverman, Nicos Poulantzas, Erik Olin Wright, John H. Goldthorpe and even Thomas Piketty – before touching upon particular contributions which are taken to speak importantly to the conception of the African ‘middle class’. These latter include discussion of Milovan Djilas’s writing

about the rise of the ‘new class’ (based on the privileging of the party in Soviet-style Communist societies), of Guy Standings’ arguments about how contemporary trends in capitalism are rendering broad swathes of the global middle class more precarious, and how a range of scholars, inclusive of Barrington Moore, Seymour Martin Lipset and Dietrich Rueschemeyer have grappled, albeit inconclusively, with the political role played by the middle class.

Following on from all this, BMC outlines in a later chapter how it will seek to explore the emergence and development of ‘the black middle class’ within an overall South African class structure. It indicates that it will do this by drawing upon both the grand traditions, centring its conception of the class structure around occupation, income and wealth, these variously related to the state and capital (the market). It also argues strongly that discussions of class cannot, and should not, be divorced from discussions of power and the way it is deployed. Accordingly, it proposes that different classes in South Africa possess different amounts of power, these drawn differentially from the state and the market. It follows on from this that different strata amongst the middle class similarly possess different degrees of power (the upper middle class being more powerful than the lower middle class) and source their power differently (whereas the white middle class today draws its power principally from the market, the black middle class draws it from the ‘party-state’).

Based on its presumption that this approach is useful for exploring the characteristics of the black middle class in South Africa, BMC further suggests that it could be used with profit to illuminate the nature and role of the middle class in other African countries.

As an author, I stood braced for explicit criticisms that the proposed framework was Eurocentric. Yet surprisingly, to my mind, this is a criticism which the book has not yet received (although it may well come). What I have found interesting, therefore, are the critiques that have been made (albeit at conferences as much as in formal reviews). Basically, these boil down to the following. These are:

- First, the framework appears to work for South Africa because the history of apartheid and industrialisation has seen the formation of clearly identifiable classes – yet ultimately South Africa remains something of a special case in Africa.
- Accordingly, second, the framework is not appropriate for the analysis of class in (the large majority of?) other African countries where class formation in classical style has not developed, and where the identities and behaviour of so-called middle-class people are shaped by a wider range of factors than those identified as structuring class in South Africa (notably ethnicity and their dependence upon a variety of sources of income). In other words, ‘occupation’ (with income as its derivative) as a marker of middle-class position either does not work, or if it does, then only very partially.
- Third, the subtext of criticisms is that, for all that the proffered approach claims to straddle the grand traditions, its structuralist basis is manifestly outdated and a hang-over from Marxism.<sup>1</sup>

These criticisms are of particular interest for two reasons:

- As it happens, the thrust of the critique has come (albeit in the most friendly and collegial fashion) from two distinguished scholars (Dieter Neubert and Rachel Spronk) who have both done major work on the middle class in Kenya, the country which

served as the tramping ground for some of the most important debates about the 'African Bourgeoisie' in the 1970s and 1980s (essentially this revolved around not merely the historical development of the Kenyan bourgeoisie but the extent to which it was allied to international capital or had independent foundations and a relatively autonomous existence). I shall come back to this later.

- The critique has strong echoes of the discussions about the provenance and appropriateness of class analysis in Africa which took place from the 1960s. It is to these earlier discussions that I now turn.

### Key aspects of the debate on class in Africa

Two issues predominated in early rounds of debate about the validity of class analysis in Africa.

- Is class analysis as based upon European experience applicable to Africa?
- Are African 'elites' and African 'middle classes' one and the same?

Early scholarship, looking at post-independence African societies in the 1960s, noted that major nationalist leaders (e.g. Senghor and Nyerere) argued that classes did not exist in Africa, or certainly not in the way that classes were conceived of in Europe. It was not just that Africa had not industrialised but that there were no classes in traditional African society, which were much more communitarian. Hence nationalist 'modernisers' either denied the existence of classes (because this implied conflict between classes) or argued that if classes did exist within African society they were 'non-antagonistic'. As Ken Grundy (1964) and Robert Miller (1974) observed, this line of argument was politically useful, as it implied that the nation should unite behind the political elite or political party – and was to become a major theoretical justification of the one-party state.

Important scholars (Kilson 1958; Hodgkin 1961; Wallerstein 1967) identified an emergent 'middle class' as a major force behind African nationalism, yet were equally prone to argue (following the nationalist leaders) that class systems as seen in Europe had not (yet) emerged in Africa, nor the class consciousness to go with them. They also pointed to the lack of industrialisation, and hence the lack of an African capitalist class. Simultaneously, however, they were struggling to come to terms with the increasing visibility of African elites/middle classes. This latter factor led to the major question: what were the sources of rapid class (or status) formation?

The approach to class was essentially occupation based. Because nowhere in Africa (except in the tiny handful of white settler-based economies) was there much of a private sector in which a middle class or elite might grow, their post-independence expansion was premised upon the rapid growth and 'Africanisation' of public services at different levels of the state. Understandably, there was major interest in how such positions were accessed – and the answer tended to boil down to (i) education (with much attention to divergent access), with a subtext of intergenerational and/or ethnic advantage or disadvantage (e.g. Goldthorpe 1965; Clignet and Foster 1964; Samoff 1979); (ii) politics (with individuals' relationship to the political party running the state being key) (Markowitz 1977). A common response of scholars to such arguments was that while something like class was happening in Africa, a mode of analysis was required which

was less rigid than Marxism (which was rooted in modes and relations of production) and more pluralistic, with emphasis being laid upon how Weber insisted that the means of administration might be an alternative to economic power as the foundation for class.

One of the more sophisticated of such approaches was developed by Dick Sklar (1979). He identified political parties as the driving forces of class formation in Africa, creating elaborate systems of administrative and commercial patronage, based on public money, to promote indigenous private enterprise, while many of their leading members headed off to a comparatively grand manner of life in parliamentary office. He proceeded to identify an emergent or new ruling class in Nigeria (and by implication in other African countries) as based on high status occupation, high income, superior education, and ownership or control of business enterprise. This, he argued, laid the basis for class dominance, yet he proceeded to leave it unclear whether such a dominant class was a ruling elite or a middle class. This reflects what Lentz (2016) has highlighted as the widespread failure and reluctance to engage with the problem of differentiating between ruling elites and African middle classes.

Once modernisation theory began to give way to underdevelopment theory (at least amongst a large body of scholars) it was followed by more sophisticated approaches with their roots in Marxism. The principal concerns were:

- To identify the foundations of class in Africa, usually through the study of emergent classes – particularly those identified as a proto-bourgeoisie. Some scholars were at pains to distinguish between social stratification (seen as social layers) and social classes, defined by their role in the processes of production. Another key concern was to assert that so-called traditional African societies were not classless, and that African societies had themselves evolved indigenous class systems of domination and subordination (varying according to levels of political and social organisation and modes of production).
- To identify the different classes emerging in Africa – bourgeoisies, proletariats and peasantries – and to somehow fit ‘awkward’ categories such as chiefs and the youth into them. (At this stage, gender tended to be overlooked.)
- To elaborate the basis and role of emergent African bourgeoisies and the foundations upon which they had been built. This gave rise to the appearance of a plethora of national, organisational, bureaucratic, managerial and party-based bourgeoisies. The problem then was that, following Djilas, ‘Marxist theory’ had to accommodate the fact that the foundations of class power seemed to lie in the political or organisational dimensions of society, rather than in production. Consequently, to square the circle, the tendency was to argue that such bourgeoisies used access to state power to gain control over the means of production. (It was not fashionable in such circumstances to pay tribute to Weber.)
- To locate the emergent African bourgeoisies in the context of imperialism and the global expansion of capitalism: in terms of origin (e.g. in colonial trade or a colonial capitalist mode of production) or in terms of relationships to multinational capital and the large corporations which continued to dominate post-independence Africa.
- To interpret African history and African politics and political economy in terms of class struggle – notably in terms of working-class resistance to capitalist exploitation or ruling class domination.<sup>2</sup>

But all this still left gaping holes when it came to discussing the ‘African middle class’. Was it part of or separate from the African bourgeoisie? This raises the important issue of what is meant by ‘middle’?

### What do we mean by ‘middle’ in ‘African middle class’?

There is enormous confusion and diversity around what is meant by ‘middle’ in ‘African middle class’. I want to highlight four major areas of debate (or perhaps, lack of it).

*First*, there is extensive debate about how the global institutions and the scholars whose work is associated with them, having placed the contemporary African middle class(es) on the map, define what they mean. Because they are manipulating large data sets, such analyses tend to identify middle classes by income levels or ‘Living Standards Measure’ (LMS). In response, we get extensive debate about the appropriateness of such definitions (Melber 2013; 2015; 2016a). Key issues are: does middle literally mean ‘in the middle of income bands’ or does it mean ‘the median’? Critics often berate such analysis for arriving at very different understandings of what is meant by middle class in the global north and global south. ‘Middle class’ means different things in the UK, the USA, Nigeria and South Sudan, with middle classes in the south enjoying a lower standard of living than their counterparts in the north. Inevitably, there is extensive discussion and explications of methodology. Inevitably, too, variations in definition of ‘middle class’ abound, to the extent that, at times, one is left to wonder whether the different institutions and analysts are referring to similar groupings at all!

Virtually all such definitions avoid grappling with ‘wealth’. Apart any reluctance economists may have to pay any attention to sociological theory, this is probably rather more because data relating to wealth is so difficult to get at. However, this poses the question of whether methodologies are shaping theory (income is easier to get at, ergo class is income based), when it should be the reverse (Piketty, alongside others, would argue that class theory must necessarily pay very special attention to wealth). To put it more simply, whereas income differentials may *reflect* class power, wealth differences *dictate* power!

*Second*, there is the approach which – while often paying tribute to ‘hard’ definitions of class – revolves around whether and why people identify as ‘middle class’. A case in point is the valuable work done by Peter Alexander and his associates in Soweto (Alexander et al. 2013) which explores how even in a context where unemployment and poverty are rampant, many if not most people identify as ‘middle class’ – their markers being whether they are richer than the very poor but poorer than the rich. In this context, there is a strong tendency to identify as being ‘middle class’ within black society, but as having a very different class position relative to white society – even though both ‘societies’ live in one country. Two issues are raised here. First, *why* is it that people identify as, and more particularly, aspire to being, middle class? Is such aspiration merely materially based? What about the long-established tradition that many working class or poor people want to ‘better themselves’ (and why should they not?). What forces, global or local, fashion such identities? Furthermore, to what extent is such identification historically determined? Would Sowetans have been more likely to identify as working class during the years of struggle against apartheid – when showing up as middle class might have been more dangerous? Second, does identifying as middle class make one middle

class? Many would say: 'obviously not'. Even so, the whole issue of how and why middle class identities are shaped remains particularly treacherous ground.

*Third*, there is a related approach which argues that the term 'middle class' does not do justice to the complexity of real-life situations in many African countries. If 'middle' means anything, it means that 'middle-class' Africans are pulled this way and that way by different social forces. Let me refer to the work of Dieter Neubert on 'middle-income groups in Kenya' (Neubert 2016a, 2016b).

The thrust of Neubert's work that it is easy enough to identify 'middle-income groups' but to then go on to say that they are 'middle class' in traditional sociological terms is problematic for two main reasons. First, they survive via combined modes of production: many professionals, white-collar workers and urban entrepreneurs still invest in a farm and livestock, with the work in the rural setting being done by family members; sometimes such persons may combine being salaried employees and employers of labour in farms or small enterprises; some may have 'jobs' as well as running businesses; and they may or may not own 'property'. Second, their class position is characterised by uncertainty and instability: they are under enormous pressure to provide for family and relatives, yet if they lose their jobs, these same families may provide security; small businesses face inherent risks; and there is the further factor that parents and children may have very different class positions. Third, middle 'stratum' Kenyans display very different forms of political consciousness (not least because voting in Kenya is so strongly reflective of ethnicity), so much so that it can be concluded that they do not constitute a politically conscious or active class. A key point which follows is that being in the middle class or stratum-wise (and the expectation this is often burdened with of being progressive and pro-democracy) is just one option for members of middle-income groups in the global south.

Overall, Neubert concludes that rather than using class terminology it is better to use the concept of 'milieus', an approach which has made strong ground in German sociology since the 1980s. Milieus constitute the societal result of different choices concerning consumption and investment, sub-cultural entities inside a society that are composed of people with similar values and views of life (so that there can be different milieus within the same socio-economic stratum and some milieus reach across different socio-economic strata). Society can thus be described as a set of distinctive milieus which may overlap but which describe distinctive social groups. In Kenya, for instance, Neubert identifies 'social climbers', 'stability oriented pragmatics', Christian and Muslim religious milieus, 'neo-traditionalists', 'liberal cosmopolitans' and 'young professionals'. He goes on to introduce the term 'glocal': such groupings relate to global consumption patterns yet remain plugged into local patterns of consumption and production.

This approach clearly goes well beyond any crudely materialist notion of class and contributes much to unravelling complex linkages between economic position and social and political identities. It therefore demands serious attention. However, Neubert admits that he leaves issues of power (regarded here as central to understanding the dynamics of class), on one side. This explains why he does not relate his work to the 'Kenyan debate' which was so crucially concerned with the relationships between the Kenyan 'bourgeoisie' and multinational capital. Yet If we are concerned with 'class', can we allow such a fundamental omission?

*Fourth*, a major concern is that the present obsession with the African middle class tends to ignore the implication that a class in the middle implies that there are classes at the top and the bottom in whatever social structure – whether global, national or local – is being analysed. In fact, this article would argue that the most notable issue, largely avoided by the global institutions and far too many scholars of the African middle classes, is whether those at the top represent a ‘ruling class’ or a ‘dominant class’. How is it possible to analyse the material basis for any middle class (let alone its real or potential class ‘consciousness’), without attempting to relate it to means whereby those at the top of the social structure maintain their rule or dominance? Is this done through private capital, access to public wealth, party or state position, naked coercion or what? Is such a ruling/dominant class ‘national’ – or is it interlocked with other such elements internationally or globally? Isn’t this crucial to understanding the class location of those in the middle (recall the copious ink spent in the 1970s and 1980s debating whether the Kenyan bourgeoisie was a dependent of multinational capital or whether it possessed a substantial degree of autonomy)? Meanwhile, what are the relationships between middle classes and those at the bottom – in an era where ‘traditional working classes’ are dissolving in a sea of informality? What happened to the African working classes and peasantries that were so readily identifiable in the 1970s? Ultimately, we must ask, with Melber (2016b), ‘whose side are the middle classes on?’

All this reminds us that class analysis is highly complex. It also suggests that we cannot and should not seek to analyse African middle classes in splendid isolation from those other classes around them.

### **So, does class analysis work? And what do we want it for?**

Class analysis of African societies is now returning to some reasonable prominence after having gone into retreat following the end of the Cold War. Yet it is returning in an arena where it promises to be less dominant than it previously was, and as having to compete with rival (or, some would say, complement) approaches which revolve around, or stress, ‘culture’ as much as structure. ‘Class’ may be important, it is said, but gender, ethnicity, region, religion and age and so on may shape group perspectives just as much in a blended outcome of ‘intersectionality’. However, while such an approach can be an important counter to dogmatism, it is suggested here that we need to continue to grapple with two important questions.

Against the background of the recent surge in interest in ‘Africa’s new middle class’, it may be argued that – contrary to its past radical motivation – much contemporary ‘class analysis’ in Africa is more a way of legitimising changing contours of inequality than challenging them. Elsewhere this has been termed ‘the middle-classing of development’ (Southall 2017), driven by a conviction that the more people become ‘middle class’, the more ‘developed’ a society can be said to be. To be sure, there are aspects of such an approach which demand respect (for ultimately notions of ‘development’ must be constructed around the improvement of the material conditions of ordinary people’s lives). Nonetheless, this approach – notably as it is embedded in the work of major global institutions – embraces major ideological assumptions about, for instance, the supposed long-term benefits of present global patterns of development. Above all, by focusing attention

upon an expanding 'middle', it would seem to be delegitimising notions of class struggle (Therborn 2012).

The second issue is whether class analysis may lead to the imposition of a representation of reality which does not seem to 'fit' or explain the social dynamics of contemporary African societies. As Neubert and others insist, there may be more insightful modes of explanation in many circumstances. However, the response to this must surely be to argue that the most important virtue of class analysis is the vital questions it poses.

In these days of growing (and obscene levels of) global inequality, we need class analysis precisely because of the challenges it poses to entrenched wealth and privilege. What is the distribution of power and wealth in a society, and the principles upon which it is based? How does political relate to economic power, and the state to the market? How do inequalities of power and wealth intersect with inequalities of ethnicity, gender and region etc., and how are these reproduced across generations? How does this intersect with and reflect the dynamics of global inequality? What are the relationships between rich and poor, and where do these locate the middling sort of people in society, politically as well as economically?

The enthusiasm to understand the 'rising middle class' in Africa is welcome – but it is only by posing the sort of questions traditionally asked by radical class analysis that their social significance can be properly assessed.

## Notes

1. I partially conceded this point at a session at the European African Studies Conference in Basel when I admitted that my framework draws upon what I termed 'my 1970s Marxism', to a gust of laughter around the room which seemed to imply the absurdity of my position!
2. The literature on all this is too vast to detail. For its relationship to present debates on the 'middle class', see Lentz 2016.

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## Note on contributor

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