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Book Reviews

Lena Kroeker, David O’Keane, and Tabea Scharrer (eds) (2018), *Middle Classes in Africa: Changing Lives and Conceptual Challenges*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan published by Springer Nature, ISBN 978-3-319-62147-0, xiii+376 pp.

A meteoric rise of interest – initially within the Development Studies community – in the burgeoning “African middle class” has taken place over the past several years, thanks mainly to protagonists in international institutions praising the phenomenon as evidence that trickle-down effects have finally arrived on the continent. More recently, scholars in African Studies have responded more seriously to the challenge imposed and set the record straight by demystifying the narrative.¹

This volume is among the growing number of serious efforts to deconstruct the mystification and to replace wishful thinking with proper analyses. Subdivided into four parts, concepts of middle classes in Africa are reconsidered (chapters 2 to 4), the rise of middle classes is discussed (chapters 5 to 7), their political consequences are considered (chapters 8 to 10), and the formation of interconnections and interdependencies are explored (chapters 11 to 13). With short introductory summary justifications for the subdivisions and their focuses, these four main parts are bookended by an introduction and an afterword (chapters 1 and 14, respectively).

The volume is well structured, offers nuanced questions, and engages with relevant challenges relating to current trends in social formations of African societies. The compilation adds new theoretical reflections and empirical realities to the recent debate and stimulates further discussions. Eight of the chapters are case studies – on Ghana (Jan Budniok/Andrea Noll), on the Nubians of Kibera (Johanna Sarre), on Botswana (Astrid Bochow), on the urban settings of Johannesburg (Barbara Heer), on the University of Makeni in Sierra Leone (David O’Kane), on Namibia (Julia Pauli), on Kenya (Lena Kroeker), and on Madagascar (Tsiry Andrianampiarivo), while Jason Musyoka contributes a more general overview of the formative and destabilising effects of African middle classes (chapter 10).

In the Introduction, the editors list the political, the economic, and lifestyle as dimensions that should serve to deconstruct what they qualify as a concept of the middle classes (rightly so in the plural) “overloaded

1 See among the first critical engagements the review article in *Africa Spectrum*, 48, 3: 111–120, also referred to in several of the chapters in this volume.

with inflated expectations and unexamined assumptions” (1). They ask, “What is specifically ‘African’ about the continent’s middle classes?” (3). Like others before, they dismiss the uncritical number crunching that merely played with monetary terms of income and expenditure figures. Context matters, they suggest, and local definitions of the “middle” make middle class a feasible category (9).

For them, class emerges from “the complexity of individual choices and actions” (24). But at the same time, they also state that “class-based boundary making can still occur” (24) – which invites the question of whether class identity is purely a matter of individual choice, or if individual choice is influenced by the class-based position of what Dominique Darbon (chapter 2) describes as an “elusive reality.” As he concludes, “something is at work [...] in the ‘middle’ of African societies” (51). For him, it relates to an intergenerational accumulation process, where “the structure of African societies is [...] no longer a dual one in which a numerically massive poor category is opposed to a few rich elites” (51). Such a diagnosis does indeed merit serious explorations into what is in formation.

But matters are more complicated than the older schools of class analysis would suggest. Dieter Neubert and Florian Stoll (chapter 3) point to the conceptual limitations of the term “middle class,” which fails to reconcile aspects of socio-economics with socio-cultural dimensions of the social strata. Suggesting that an emphasis on milieu and lifestyle might offer tools to assess differentiation, they conclude that “the assumptions of certain common characteristics of ‘the African middle class’ are not (yet) justified, neither theoretically nor empirically” (72).

An anthropological perspective is presented by David O’Kane and Tabea Scharrer (chapter 4). The notion of class has been an ongoing feature, they argue, without resulting in a clarification of “middle class,” which as a categorisation “coexists with other social categories and institutions of differentiation” (82). They problematise the “social class” approach to African societies and recapitulate historical stages of organisation to illustrate the complexity of social stratification on the continent and point to the limits of class analysis. While they stress other factors structuring social life and identities, they also maintain that class “has never been far from anthropological thinking” (100). But they also insist that “the anthropology of class in Africa generally, and of the middle class in particular, must be theoretically creative, eclectic and, above all, open. It must be as flexible in theory as class is flexible in African social practice” (101).

A superb afterword by Rachel Spronk (chapter 14) deconstructs the generalised “Africa” as a projection that reduces pluralities and points to the need to be much more aware of local realities – as in any other regional studies: “there can be no one ‘African’ middle class [...]. Any claims to the contrary deserve immediate deconstruction” (314). She also cautions that “horizontal links of kinship, religion, regional affiliation, and ethnicity [...] have as much social weight as do vertical connections” (316). I suggest that gender matters too – not least given the often comparatively high number of female-headed households. Spronk adds an important aspirational category to the criteria guiding the analysis of so-called “middle classness,” which she associates with “cultural practice” (316). As she cautions, such an aspirational category is ambiguous, since “people who are doing relatively well are pre-occupied not so much with going up as with not going down” (322).

The editors promise at the beginning that the volume explores what “consumer-based studies cannot answer” (22). It strives to tackle the questions “How do the middle classes live, think, love, and consume? And at whose expense?”, thereby focusing on “what is uniquely African about them” (22). Such a commitment sets a rather ambitious agenda. Checking for answers in the chapters following, it becomes obvious that explaining convincingly what is uniquely middle class in the African middle classes, what is uniquely African, and what African middle classes might actually share with middle classes elsewhere is still a work in progress. But to understand that “Africa is first and foremost a place *from where* to think, read, write, talk and disturb,” as advocated by Spronk (323), is the important point of departure.

Maybe, as a final reflection, more field studies analysing social strata categorised as middle classes – both in Africa and elsewhere – might just confirm that such social formations in our neoliberal world of 2018 have in common that they cannot be pinned down as a single class. As Spronk suggests, “Seeing the problems associated with ‘middle class’ in Africa therefore provides a productive starting point to rethink the concept itself, based on empirical investigations *from* Africa and not only with regard *to* the continent” (317).

- Henning Melber