
Book Reviews

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Henning Melber (ed.), *The Rise of Africa's Middle Class: Myths, Realities and Critical Engagements*. London: Zed Books, 2016, pp. 219, \$34 (paper), ISBN 978-1-78360-713-6

The Rise of Africa's Middle Class highlights the complexities in applying the class concept in Africa. The subtitle of the book *Myths, Realities and Critical Engagements* gives the reader a clear idea of the book's argument which questions the decade-long scholastic perspective that the African continent is rising and that such rise is palpable by the growth of its middle class(es). Through an analysis of the contemporary circumstances of the middle class, in the introductory chapter, Henning Melber reflects about Africa's middle-class vulnerability due to income uncertainty and scarcity of assets. Moreover, the editor seems sceptical about the role of the middle class(es) in promoting the development of and in African societies due to the weakened economic role as well as conflicting political expectations that do not seem to respond to predictions by normative models (p. 6).

Conceptually, the book is, on the one hand, critical of the economic classification of the middle class in Africa. The argument is anchored in the need of greater class analysis that includes social status, cultural norms, lifestyles and professions in order to abandon the use of the term 'middle class' 'to cover almost everything without any further internal differentiations that exist within a very broad band of income group, thereby signifying little to nothing' (p. 2). However, Melber seems to have fallen in the trap of continuing to use economic categorisations to define the group composing the middle class in order to further his discussion about its social and political roles in the introduction of the volume. On the other hand, the book is critical of middle class in Africa being used as a descriptive and superficial concept. Nevertheless, as one progresses reading the book, the impression is that the contributors concentrated on case studies and comparisons again, generally in a descriptive form that does not necessarily help the reader become clear about the actual meaning of the term 'middle class' in Africa. Such contradictions highlight the complexities of the applicability of classical class theories and concepts when using evidence and dynamics from the Global South.

Other than the Introduction and Conclusion given in the volume, it has 10 contributions. The contributions can be grouped into three themes. The first three chapters have a comparative perspective. Carola Lentz presents an in-depth historical literature review in which she lays the foundations for the understanding of middle class through education, family, gender relations, consumption

practices, sociability and politics. Based on that she advises Africanist scholars to engage in innovative potential to understand class dynamics including the questioning of class as an enduring membership as well as dislocating the theorisation of class from the nation state as its framework to subnational and transnational dimensions as class formation is experienced in various African countries. Tim Stoffel liaises with the limitations of purely economic perspectives in the definition of class, thus problematising how the rising middle class is calculated, its conclusions and projections. The chapter by Oluyele Akinkugbe and Karl Wohlmuth, though not so evidently a comparison, continues the discussion of the previous two chapters by demonstrating how economics can effectively be applied for the engagement with the middle-class concept. Chapters four and five constitute general reflections based on case studies. Sirku Hellsten is interested in the values of those belonging to the middle class in order to make sense of the group's ideologies and political sets. Based on the analysis of the Kenyan context, Dieter Neubert problematises class concepts and the dynamics of class formation in his research site to advocate a broader concept of class that includes socio-cultural diversity. He advances the concept of socio-cultural milieus, a concept that brings together diverse categories, though he still leaves open the possibility of these groups to develop class consciousness. The remaining chapters offer empirical evidence of the middle-class phenomena in various African countries anchored in social realities. Nkwachukwu Orji traces the political activism of the Nigerian middle class using the 'Occupy Nigeria 2012' and the 'Bring Back Our Girls' campaigns to reflect on the use of new forms of communication, through social media, for social mobilisation. Jon Schubert interrogates the analytical usefulness of the term 'middle class' in Angola. He analyses the contemporary state of class under a political oligarchy. Jason Sumich focuses on the case of Mozambique to reflect on the role of political history in the creation of spaces of privilege. Through the use of ethnographic material, he shows how the middle class in Mozambique was born out of socialism and liberalism. Amuzweni Ngoma demonstrates how the black South African middle class is tightly linked to the African National Congress (ANC) through its black economic empowerment policy. The reflections progress to the current dynamics of such links in a context of corruption and its implications for the political scenario in South Africa. Lastly, Vicencia Shule examines how the negation of Kiswahili video films, Bongo movies, is used as a marker of distinction from the poor by the self-declared middle class in Dar es Salaam.

This book is a comprehensive and empirically rich compilation of the diversity of middle class in Africa. It raises a number of questions on how to approach the concept and theories of class when analysing Africa. However, the volume misses a precise, robust and coherent framework on how to think about middle class in Africa that would be helpful for scholars interested in the topic.

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