

# Review

## Roger Southall (2016) *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa*. Auckland Park: Jacana

Geoff Waters

geoffmanzi@gmail.com

Recently I had occasion to visit my bank and a local suburban shopping mall as I usually do. Much to my surprise, on this occasion as I entered and attended to everyday matters at these, I found that I was paying particular attention to the black African people – both staff and fellow customers – whom I encountered in my immediate orbit: bank clerks, checkout staff, floor managers and shoppers. Subliminally, I kept asking myself: are they members of the new black African middle class? If so, what are their personal trajectories, their life stories? What are their family backgrounds and how have they achieved their current statuses?

In retrospect, I realise that this newfound sensitivity on my part was a direct result of my having recently read Roger Southall's book, *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa*. The book had clearly left a deep impression on me. On these grounds alone, I would unreservedly recommend it to anyone seriously interested in contemporary South African society. But what of the book itself?

This work, written as it is by an eminent senior modern South African academic, testifies to a growing awareness of the phenomenon of black *embourgeoisement* in scholarly circles. This, in turn, reflects a wider public curiosity about it. Nowadays, references to 'black diamonds' and 'buppies' in both the local media and amongst the suburban 'chattering classes' are not uncommon.

This contrasts with the fact that, for decades, South African academics remained preoccupied with the country's black working class and, before that, with white Afrikaners, both of whom were viewed as critically shaping the country's social landscape. The current interest in the black middle class thus not only makes for a refreshing change but suggests a new social

dynamic. It reflects dramatic changes occurring in post-apartheid South African society in the early twenty-first century. Moreover, these were seemingly totally unanticipated by the anti-apartheid radicals of the past who looked forward to a new classless South Africa devoid of race consciousness.

Given the extensive research on which this book is based, *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa* is clearly aimed primarily at a scholarly readership. However, it is likely to also attract the attention of many non-specialist readers, and deservedly so. By virtue of its intensive research base, historical depth and the range of aspects discussed, I feel that it fully merits being subtitled: ‘*processes of upward social mobility amongst black South Africans in the post-apartheid era*’.

As to the details of the book, these are wide ranging in both depth and scope and are impressively covered. That Southall is interested in more than simply charting the rise and salient features of the new black middle class stratum is evident from the outset.

He wants to understand and account for the phenomenon. To this end, he begins by outlining the classical theories of social class formation advanced by Marx and Weber and subsequently modified by their epigoni. In so doing, Southall casts his work in the ‘great tradition’ of macro-level socio-political analysis. This notwithstanding, when his attention is turned to outlining the history of the black middle class in the twentieth century, Southall points to the significance of empirically-grounded local studies exemplifying the ‘little tradition’ such as Leo Kuper’s, *An African Bourgeoisie* (1965), Wilson and Mafeje’s study of the Cape Town black township of *Langa* (1965) and Brandel-Syrier’s *Reeftown Elite* (1971). As a Durbanite, that the earlier illuminating study of the city’s original black township of *Baumannville* (1959) is not mentioned is somewhat disappointing.<sup>1</sup>

Having thus laid the groundwork for his analysis in these opening chapters, Southall turns his full attention to the new black middle class of the ‘rainbow nation’ era. In a series of chapters he successively discusses black class formation under the ANC government, education and black upward social mobility, the black middle class at work, the leading features of their ‘social world’ and their politics and election voting trends.

The policies of successive ANC governments from 1994 onwards – specifically: *cadré* deployment to key societal command posts, affirmative action, black economic empowerment (BEE) and its subsequent elaboration into broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE) – are identified by

Southall as being almost exclusively responsible for the genesis and rapid expansion of the new black middle class. He acknowledges that the white-dominated private sector has played a limited proactive role in this process, but simultaneously points to a hesitancy on the part of young black people to become submerged in an unfamiliar 'white business culture'.

With regard to black upward social mobility, Southall recognises that a minority of strategically placed ANC party members have been able to achieve rapid, often spectacular, promotion. However, he points to the acquisition of academic qualifications as the primary means by which black South Africans have and are able to gain entrée into the new middle class and prosper further there. A university degree coupled with fluency in English is the 'open sesame' and the academic doctorate the ultimate guarantee of success. In the light of this, that the country's universities, particularly those in which Afrikaans has been the main medium of instruction, have become epicentres of present-day mass black youth protests and struggles would seem hardly surprising. The negative consequences for black students of their being unable to find places at these for whatever reasons are obvious.

On the issue of middle class employment opportunities, Southall maintains that the ANC's rapid expansion of the civil service at national, provincial and local levels to accelerate opportunities for black people has created a bloated bureaucracy accommodating vast numbers of party-loyalists who function as low level *apparatchiks*. At the same time, the shortage of suitably qualified black personnel, he points out, allowed many black functionaries from the old apartheid-era 'bantustans' to move seamlessly into the new bureaucracy. Conversely, the white dominated private sector has been slow to provide opportunities for appropriate black employees.

In discussing what he rather loosely terms the black 'social world', Southall examines black middle class lifestyles, emphasizing their apparent commitment to what the nineteenth century American analyst Thorstein Veblen called 'conspicuous consumption'. In its most extreme form, he identifies this as involving a penchant for luxury cars, designer labels and clothing, mobile technology (especially state-of-the-art cell phones), lavish celebrations and social events, elaborately-choreographed state occasions, and dignitaries parading publicly in high speed 'blue light' motorcades. The new middle class are also characterised as often being drawn to apolitical and socially conservative charismatic fundamentalist 'good news' Christian church communities.

Turning finally to the politics, elections and the voting behaviour of the black middle class, Southall acknowledges the wide social, cultural and economic diversity of the stratum, but identifies a solid critical mass as currently existing at its core. Concentrated in the unionised civil service and public education and health sectors, they recognise that they owe their livelihoods to the continuance of ANC policies which favour them. Southall maintains that this core will continue to vote for the party regardless of any such conflicts and vicissitudes as may occur within the party's leadership elite.

Viewed overall, in many respects Southall's analysis parallels those of many commentators on the contemporary South African scene. What his analysis does do, however, is to add substantial information and depth to this scenario by providing details, much of it contained in the numerous highly informative tables of facts and figures contained in the text, to buttress the points he makes. It raises many issues and questions, one of the most intriguing being:

Will this new black middle class, should its aspirations not continue to be realised, remain unswervingly loyal to the ANC which created it or will it ultimately prove to be a 'Trojan Horse' which, from within the ANC party-state's citadel finally turn and destroy it?

Reflecting on Roger Southall's book, which I immensely enjoyed reading, I realised that it suggests many further lines of inquiry. In particular, it led me to hope that a new generation of social scientists will undertake detailed empirical studies of this new black middle class. As the book makes clear, they are now to be found not only in the old black townships but also in the former white inner city flatlands and suburbias as well as the new gated townhouse complexes where their presence is becoming increasingly evident. Such investigations will subject Southall's many claims to rigorous empirical test. They will also serve to reconnect contemporary scholarship with the tradition of studying South Africa's black middle class at first hand as established by an earlier generation of social scientists like Leo Kuper and Wilson and Mafeje who worked under such difficult conditions at the height of the apartheid era to produce studies of enduring quality.

## Note

1. Natal Regional Survey, Report Number 6 (1959). *Baumannville: a study of an urban African community*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.