Article

What's missing? Reflections on the debate on middle class(es) in Africa

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Abstract

The article explores what is missing from the burgeoning debate about the character of the African middle classes. Contemporary debate revolves around definitions, identities, consumer behaviour, spatial practices and historicity of the African middle class. However, this underemphasises the role of the state in making of African middle classes; how they are located within wider class structures; the role played by education systems in reproducing middle classes; the experiences of middle classes at work; whether African middle classes have the capacity to become a capitalist bourgeoisie; and whether African middle classes have genuine democratic potential.[1]

Introduction

If global institutions are to be believed, the middle class in Africa is 'rising': it is growing in size and economic weight, it is adopting globalised urban lifestyles, and it is viewed as a driver of both 'development' and 'democracy' (eg Deloitte on Africa 2013, AfDB 2011, 2012a). Generally the argument is that the African middle class, along with other (faster-growing) middle classes in the global South, is becoming more prominent, more visible and more influential with the spread of market capitalism. In turn, Africanist scholarship has built upon this narrative, placing heavy emphasis upon such key issues as definition, consumption and the fragility of 'new' middle class. Yet much of this literature is simultaneously highly critical of the work of the global institutions, suggesting that it is quantitatively dubious and qualitatively blunt (eg Darbon 2017, Melber 2013).

Controversies around the African middle class abound. Whatever our perspective, it would seem that something significant is happening, more or less on a continent-wide basis, although how we pin this down is problematic, not least because approaches to the notion of 'middle class' vary so widely.

At considerable risk of simplification, it may be argued that there are three main approaches to the African middle class. The first, inherent in the work and definitions of the global institutions and many (especially North American) social scientists, is the view that the middle class (anywhere, including Africa) is a category of people whose income is located in the middle of an income distribution (or is located in between upper and lower tiers). A second approach, broadly derived from the tradition of Max Weber while also borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu, uses the term 'middle class' to refer to those people who are employed in occupations such as managers, professionals, scientists and technicians. Demanding high level skills and education, this category enjoys middle to high incomes, and as a result, may enjoy distinctive lifestyles and cultural behaviours which mark them off from those below them in the social hierarchy. The third approach, pursued by Marxian or neo-Marxian scholars, views as middle class those individuals who occupy a place in a class structure which cannot easily be identified as either capitalist or working class. In much of the literature (inclusive of that relating to Africa) such individuals are sometimes described as belonging to either an 'old' 'petty-bourgeoisie' (typically the self-employed) or a 'new' petty-bourgeoisie, such as managers and professionals, who perform important tasks for capitalists yet enjoy a relative autonomy in the workplace – although they may also encounter social pressures which draw them closer to the working class.

The view here is that it is unlikely that disputes about what constitutes the middle class will ever be resolved. In any case, different definitions and approaches may suit different purposes (for instance, economists may be more concerned with policy issues whereas sociologists may be more interested in social and political analysis). This is one reason why much of the debate about African middle classes is so confused. Simply put, the term 'middle class' is widely used, but rarely has the same meaning for those using it! Consequently, for readers to make sense of what follows below, it is important to indicate that the approach pursued here is one which seeks to combine elements of the second and third approaches. That is, (again simplistically), it draws from the Marxist approach the view that the middle class is neither capitalist nor working class, and from the Weberian position, the view that the middle class is located in 'middling' occupations, such as the professions and management, although this can be extended downwards to include a 'lower middle class' of white collar workers. However, again drawing from the Marxist approach, it argues that different classes possess and deploy different amounts and forms of 'class power' (Southall 2016) (this will be further elaborated below).

It is from this perspective that this article seeks to further debate by offering reflections not so much on what has been achieved by the burgeoning literature on the African middle classes as to what seems to be underplayed or is missing.

It should be further noted that the article does not claim to provide a comprehensive review of the current literature.[2] Rather, it seeks to put forward propositions for discussion following on, not only from this author's own work, but more particularly, from a reading of the recently published collection on *The Rise of the African Middle Class* edited by Henning Melber (2017a), which is already attracting extensive attention. Initially, however, it is helpful to recall how African middle classes have featured in the academic literature.

The academic career of the African middle classes

There can be no better overview of the way in which African middle classes have been analysed than that provided by Carola Lentz (2017) in the Melber volume. Taking cogniscance of the close connection between the growing emphasis on the middle class and the 'Africa Rising' narrative, she implies the poverty of the income/spending definitions of middle-classness regularly provided by global institutions (with the African Development Bank, for instance, defining the middle class as lying within an income/expenditure range of between US$2 and $20 per capita per day), by reference to the importance of the lived experiences of people in Africa, and how they speak about their own position in society.

Lentz then proceeds by providing a comprehensive review of the bibliography relating to African elites and middle classes since the 1950s and 1960s. Her work is a model of its kind, too detailed to discuss at any length here. However, the gist of her argument runs as follows.

Initially, drawing upon the Weberian tradition, studies of the middle class tended to be subsumed under studies of 'African elites', who in colonial or early post-colonial days were regarded as the key players in bringing about modernisation and development. Then, when disillusion with post-colonial African economic and political trajectories set in during the 1970s and dependency and Marxian analysis took hold, these elites were transformed in the academic literature into various forms of 'bourgeoisie' (national, comprador, bureaucratic, organisational, managerial or whatever).

These bourgeoisies were presented as clustered around the state. Capital in African hands was scarce and African private sectors were dominated by multinational corporations. Accordingly, African bourgeoisies were largely composed of politicians, public servants and other functionaries who enjoyed privileged access to the state, which they regarded as the motor of development and private accumulation. Where they did venture into business ventures on their own behalf, they generally did so with the tolerance of the state, upon which they remained dependent for capital and patronage.

This happy situation for the African bourgeoisies was not to last. The oil crises of the early 1970s, depression in the US and Europe, and a calamitous fall in many commodity prices plunged most African states into debt. They fell into the clutches of the International Monetary Fund and other global institutions which now dictated recipes of structural adjustment. State expenditures on education, health and other social programmes were slashed and African governments urged to privatise their nationalised industries. By the 1990s, therefore, state bourgeoisies were having the ground cut from beneath their feet. The collapse of the Soviet Union discredited African socialism and Afro-Marxism. 'Bloated' states were shrunk and civil services cut back. Neo-liberal prescriptions delegitimised notions of the 'developmental state' and hailed 'entrepreneurship' as the motor of development.

In this context, state bourgeoisies were forced into closer partnership with multi-national capital. In many countries, state enterprises were sold off cheaply to those with political clout; in others, state enterprises were supposedly 'marketised'. Such arrangements, often presented in nationalist discourses as 'indigenisation' or 'empowerment', commonly involved deals between political elites and foreign corporations granting the latter access to commodities (notably oil and other minerals), so in many ways it was not a far cry from the compradorism of the earlier era.

Even so, there was accompanying structural change in African economies. African working classes, always small, were further weakened by the decline of formal employment, rendering African populations more heavily dependent upon the informal sector. Simultaneously, however, most African countries were to experience employment growth in high value-added sectors such as finance, business and real estate, transport, communication, construction, hotels and tourism. These were to provide an important basis for the growth of new middle classes which seemed to be distinctively different from predecessor bourgeoisies. At last, it seemed to the global institutions, a genuine African middle class had arrived!

Henceforth, the African middle class was to be celebrated as the agent of modernity and development – much like the African elites of the immediate post-colonial period! However, this time round, by virtue of the fact that it was less closely tied to the state and was principally located in the private sector and civil society, the African middle class was presented as demonstrating a more robust independence. Furthermore, it was viewed as urban based, increasingly cosmopolitan in outlook, attuned to changing technologies, highly educated, progressive, future-oriented and hugely aspirational, with its consumer behaviour and desires following global trends and fashions. Not least, this new middle class was seen as potentially if not actually politically assertive, eager to push aside an older generation of dictators to inaugurate a new era of democracy (eg Birdsall 2010, Fletcher 2013, UHY International 2013).

Contemporary research on the African middle class: what's missing?

It is against this background that, following a decline in class analysis following the onset of neo-liberalism, the African middle class has again become a topic of major importance for Africanist scholarship.

It is dangerous to summarise a huge swathe of recent literature. However, my surmise is that the current scholarship revolves principally around:

- First, discussions of what it means to be middle class, with the income and expenditure-based definitions of middle class-ness developed by global institutions under heavy attack from qualitative (especially ethnographic) approaches (eg Melber 2013, Heiman et al 2012).
- Second, explorations of how, why and whether people identify as middle class (eg Phadi and Ceruti 2011).

- Third, strong emphases upon middle class consumer behaviour, and how middle class consumption habits and capacities are shaped and exploited by multinational capital (eg Spronk 2014).
- Fourth, given that the African middle class is overwhelmingly urban based, interest is growing in its spatial practices – where it lives and can afford to live, and how it is affecting and re-shaping the urban environment (Crankshaw 2008, Kracker Selzer and Heller 2010).
- Finally, there is an increasing stress upon the historicity of the new middle classes in Africa: where they have come from socially, how middle class-like values have been and are passed from one generation to another, and how other inheritances (land ownership or wealth) have contributed to shaping the present (West 2002, Mabandla 2015).

There can be no doubt that, despite the varying definitions of 'middle class', this growing wealth of attention lavished on the African middle class is valuable. After all, Göran Therborn (2012) has argued that the twenty-first century is likely to become 'the age of the global middle class'. Whereas the 'project of universal emancipation led by the proletariat' dominated the twentieth century, this is now being replaced 'by a universal aspiration to middle class status'. Whether or not we agree with that, it seems indisputable that the economic and political weight of the middle classes is growing, notably in the global South. Even if Africa is behind in this regard, the thrust of the literature is that it is beginning to catch up with what is happening elsewhere. This is enough to prompt us to consider what present analysis is lacking.

It is suggested here that lacunae in the study of the African middle class(es) relate in particular to:

- First, an under-emphasis upon the role of the state in the making (and in some cases, the unmaking) of the middle class.
- Second, a widespread failure to locate middle classes within national (and international) class structures as a whole (this implying, too, that there is need to explore the segmentation of the middle class).
- Third, a lack of attention as to how changing educational structures and patterns are shaping the reproduction of the middle class.
- Fourth, a serious lack of studies of the African middle class experience at work, as public or private sector employees, as professionals, or as white collar workers or whatever.

- Fifth, a general failure to link the debate on the African middle class to that on African capitalism.
- Finally, although there is much assertion about the democratic potential of the African middle class, far more careful probing is required to elicit its true political character.

The underplayed role of the state

The World Bank, African Development Bank and the Asian Development Bank have been at the forefront in highlighting the rapid growth of middle classes in the global South. Their work, overwhelmingly undertaken by economists, provides a constant flow of data and analysis concerning the definition, size and measurement of the new middle classes, with additional projections of their capabilities. Indeed, the steady rise of a middle class is now increasingly considered as a major dimension of 'human development' (Southall 2017). As indicated above, these contributions revolve overwhelmingly around conceptualisations of the middle class as composed of income groups, with numerous income spans for defining middle class in the developing world being adopted. The multiplicity of these varying definitions is reviewed ably by Tim Stoffel in the Melber volume, who picks up strongly on critiques that the majority of them define a middle class as those who have managed to lift themselves out of poverty, this raising major issues about the vulnerability of those in the lower ranges of these income distributions.

The number-crunching done by the international institutions may be valuable, yet it is fundamentally atheoretical. As Stoffel asserts, the large body of this work lacks explanatory power – and only rarely moves beyond description. Even so, lying behind it is the proposition that the growth of the new middle classes in Africa has been prompted by the rise of new industries (2017). Take for instance the World Bank study edited by Mthuli Ncube and his associates (2015). Having projected an increase in its size from 323 million people (or 34 per cent of the total population) in 2010 to 1.1 billion (or 42 per cent in 2060), it is argued that the middle class in Africa is strongest in those countries with the most robust and diversified private sectors. Although manufacturing continues to play a significant role, these now feature rapid employment growth in sectors such as banking, finance, information technology, telecommunications and industrial processing – even though it is simultaneously asserted that the informal sector will continue to dominate most economies.

The assertion that the new middle classes are largely based in the private sector is entirely credible (although this needs more verification than it is usually accorded). However, this raises two immediate issues.

The first is quite simply that buried in this approach, although by no means always spelt out explicitly, is the assumption that the welfare of the middle class is heavily dependent upon 'good governance'. What this usually means is that it is up to the state to allow the private sector to flourish, which in turn implies the 'responsible' management of public finances, curbs on corruption, deregulation and the establishment of tax regimes favourable to private capital. In other words, so long as the state provides an open environment for investment, a middle class will grow and prosper. If it does not, as in Zimbabwe, a middle class will stagnate or decline. However, all of this is hugely problematic.

First, bland reference to 'good governance' ignores the reality that it is the state which brokers relationships with both multinational corporations and African business concerns. Even a cursory review of the literature on the state in Africa indicates that, notwithstanding neo-liberalism, state-business relationships continue to be shaped by political connections, influence peddling and access to patronage networks – all of which are likely to have significant class implications. 'Good governance' may be a nice idea – yet it may also be largely a myth!

The second issue is that the state continues to play a major role, whether or not in 'partnership' with the private sector, in providing the basic furniture of middle class life. For a start, states continue to play an important role in shaping labour markets, and, for political reasons, may prove resistant to the deregulation urged upon them by international institutions. Indeed, taken together, civil servants, doctors, nurses and teachers and other middle class professionals in public employ continue to constitute a major segment of those in formal employment in most African countries. Even if they have been overtaken, overall, by the private sector, it is probable that the state remains the single largest employer. Indeed, politics may dictate that when economic growth falls, public employment increases (rather than falling, as most economists may assume).

Meanwhile, the state is likely to remain a, if not *the*, major player in spheres such as education, public health and spatial planning. True, these may be more important at the lower end of the middle class hierarchy, where people are more likely to be dependent upon public service provision, yet if a middle class is to be reproduced it matters a lot whether it is able to access decent schooling and healthcare, and where it can afford to live.

All this is to suggest that the state, and the form it takes, matters much more than is implied in much of the literature. It is most welcome, therefore, that important papers in the Melber volume stress the continuing importance of the state in determining the fates and fortunes of the middle class. Schubert (2017) and Sumich (2017), writing on Angola and Mozambique respectively, outline similar state-shaped trajectories of their middle classes in the post-colonial era. As ‘petty-bourgeoisies’, their skills were badly needed by the incoming liberation movement governments, yet they were simultaneously regarded as politically suspect. Subsequently, even after the post-Cold War shifts to market economies rendered them more ideologically acceptable, their livelihoods remain heavily dependent upon their maintaining favourable linkages with their party-states, not only for continued employment but for access to such goods as public or affordable private housing. In short, the middle classes in both countries remain closely tied to the ruling party and the state bureaucracy.

A widespread failure to locate middle classes within class structures

Lentz (2017) makes the point that class is a relational concept. In other words, class theory presumes that society is made up of a number of classes. It might be thought that this is obvious – after all, it is to be presumed that somehow or other, a middle class is in some way in the ‘middle’ of a system or hierarchy of classes. Yet too often, this very basic point is simply ignored or, one suspects, deliberately overlooked – allowing middle classes to be viewed in isolation.

Sirkku Hellsten (2017) in the Melber volume notes the irony that, after a period when the utility of class analysis in Africa was brought into question, it has been economists linked to the global institutions who have brought class analysis back into fashion by writing so freely about the rise of the middle classes in the global South. He goes on to observe, however, that they seldom locate their conceptualisations of the middle class (as entrepreneurial and progressively democratic, etc) within a more systematic framework. Too often, alas, other social scientists follow in their wake, presenting analyses of African middle classes without locating them in wider systems or hierarchies of class. Melber (2017a) makes a similar point when he complains that by according emerging middle classes in the South the strategic importance that they do, economists regularly let the rich 'off the hook' and fail to explore the real dimensions of class and power at play in a world where a tiny fraction of the global population owns a massive proportion of its wealth.

Of course, the debate about the validity of class analysis in Africa goes back a long way. However, what does need stressing is that if class analysis *is* thought appropriate then it needs to be employed systematically. This requires that both the nature and characteristics of a class should be defined (with clarity whether an international or national class system is being referred to) and how classes may be differentiated from one another (or what Lentz refers to as 'boundary work').

This implies that we need to recognise that there is never going to be one definition or approach to class that satisfies everyone: for a start, the interests of historians or sociologists may differ substantially from those of economists or policy-makers. Yet whatever our interests, whether they are to understand the location of the middle class in the transformations of global capitalism, to explore middle class lifestyles, spaces, or consumption patterns, or to examine the political ideologies and leanings of the middle class, then we 'require an explicit theorization of the middle' (Heiman et al 2012:7). This in turn will allow for comparison of middle classes across time (what role have middle classes played historically in different countries and continents?), this demanding a recognition that middle-classness (so long associated in Western teleology with virtues such as thrift, responsibility, moderation and respectability, etc) is likely to play out differently in highly variable circumstances and be mediated through 'culturally specific parameters of gender, nation, race, caste, ethnicity, and empire' (Heiman et al 2012:13).

A recent attempt to theorise the middle class, which might provide a basis for comparative analysis across different countries, has been developed in relation to the 'black' middle class in South Africa. This draws from both the Marxian and Weberian traditions. Arguing that income derives directly or ultimately from production, this adopted definition of class based upon a combination of occupation and possession or non-possession of wealth, alongside possession or otherwise of power and authority, derived either or both from capital (ie the market) and/or the state. In turn, this entailed the elaboration of a class structure which ran through a power elite or bourgeoisie, an upper middle class, a lower middle class, a core working class, and a marginal working class respectively. This allowed, for instance, for senior corporate or state executives to be located within the power-elite, while junior managers, semi-professionals such as teachers and nurses, along with small scale business operators, to be slotted into the lower middle class (Southall 2016).

One critique of this approach might be that while this might be appropriate for South Africa, it is less likely to be appropriate for other countries in Africa where capitalism is less advanced. The response here is that the analysis of the middle class (or any other class) cannot be divorced from the consideration of their relationships to both the state and capital, and the resulting forms and extent of class power they deploy. Nonetheless, it may well be argued by some that reliance upon the grand traditions of Marx and Weber, and the theorisations of the middle class – largely by sociologists from the global North – are not automatically appropriate to understand what forms class takes or what class means in the global South. Again, the response might be that while class may well take on different appearances and forms in the global South, these need to be related to the two grand traditions if they are to be properly understood as class.

These are obviously key issues in any debate about the middle class. Even so, this does not negate the fundamental point that middle classes cannot and should not be analysed in splendid isolation from other classes in society.

A lack of attention to educational systems in the reproduction of the middle class

There is widespread agreement that education is vital to any middle class, whether aspirant or established. Education and the acquisition of qualifications, and the resulting access it grants to higher-level occupations is a staple of the Weberian approach to the middle class, having produced a voluminous literature upon the close connection between education and social mobility. It is therefore no surprise that the literature on the emergent middle classes in Africa stresses how much they value education, and how they link their investments (of both money and effort) to social position. Furthermore, acquisition of education is linked to notions of gaining respectability and accessing full citizenship (eg Fumanti 2006). Curiously, however, there seems to be almost total lack of attention to how the changing dynamics of educational systems affect class. This certainly seems to be the case regarding South Africa where, it has been argued, educationists may have lavished attention upon the de-racialisation of former ‘white’ schools, yet have paid minimal attention to how this has been integral to the post-1994 expansion of the black middle class (Southall 2016). It is similarly worth noting that while a couple of chapters in the Melber collection make stray references to the value placed on education, discussion of the role of schooling in the production and reproduction of the African middle class is totally ignored.

It is the rapid expansion of private schools and universities across the continent which is most revealing of how changing educational patterns are interacting with class structures. Kunene (2015) outlines how the dramatic increases in overall school and higher educational enrolments has underpinned the expansion in African middle classes. However, in Africa as elsewhere in many countries in the global South, the quality of education has remained low for many learners. In response, there has been a substantial increase in the number of private schools.[3] The majority of them are promoted as providing low-cost education for the poor, yet increasingly they are also directed explicitly as appealing to the aspirant middle class. Broadly, they come in two types. The first are run by NGOS, churches, charities or ‘edu-preneurs’; the second are managed by corporate educational chains, these backed variously by multinational corporations, equity funds, foundations and private investors.

While it is obviously important to debate the merits or demerits of the expansion of private schooling, the major interest here is in how it is targeting parental aspiration. Generally, parents are motivated by the desire to take their children out of failing public educational systems or simply to enable them to get ahead of their peers, driven by the belief that private education will be ‘better’. Yet evidence is accumulating that, even in low-cost private schools, learners are drawn from families that are ‘better off’, with those that can afford them colonising those schools that are deemed to be high in the pecking order (*The Economist* 2015) This applies particularly to the schools in the upper echelon of the private sector. For instance, GEMS Education, a private school group operating in ten African countries and backed, inter alia, by the Clinton Global Initiative and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, charges fees of US$1,700 a term for its school in Nairobi, and is dedicated to exploiting the ‘tremendous potential’ offered by ‘a growing consumer class’ in Africa. GEMS schools, concludes one educationist, is blatantly geared at ‘the provision of high-cost education for Kenya’s elite’ (Tran 2012).

Meanwhile, Enko Education, backed by the French Development Agency and a partnering investment group, has announced plans to open a network of 30 schools in 20 African countries quite deliberately designed to serve the middle class (French Embassy in Pretoria 2016).

When it is further considered that the provision of private education at tertiary level has also expanded, with the World Bank having estimated that the number of private universities in Africa increased from 24 in 1990 to 468 in 2007 (Havergal 2015), the need for systematic exploration of the class dynamics involved becomes clear.

A lack of studies of the African middle class at work

South Africa has a thriving tradition in labour studies. In recent times, this has placed major emphasis on how neo-liberalisation has brought about a massive change in working conditions for the broad mass of people. Generally, the labour market has been marked by a decrease in job security manifested by a drift from permanent to temporary employment, and an erosion of the privileges and perks that traditionally accompanied full time jobs. Employment, it is widely said, is becoming more ‘precarious’, with those at the bottom of the heap surviving through casual employment and marginalised participation in an increasingly informalised labour market. In turn, this has resulted in a steady decline in trade union power and membership, notably in the private sector, where employment conditions are generally far less secure (eg Bischoff 2015).

What is happening in South Africa is at one with what is happening in Africa more widely. Overall, the analytical thrust has been that neo-liberal restructuring has steadily chipped away at the size, power and working conditions of working classes which, although often politically influential, were always small. Generally, it has been the ‘shop-floor’ which has been the focus, although, at least in South Africa, there have been some studies of changing conditions in the service sector, these involving the greater insecurities of employment in white collar work (eg Webster and von Holdt 2005). In sum, therefore, labour studies has concentrated very largely upon the changing nature of work in the lower echelons of employment. In contrast, whereas Leela Fernandes (2006), in a highly influential work, has explored how neo-liberal restructuring has led to extensive precarity of employment amongst a swathe of salaried professional and managerial jobs in India, there would seem to be no such similar study in any African country.[4]

This blanket statement needs some qualification, at least as far as South Africa is concerned. There have been a limited number of studies of the established professions (notably law and accounting, eg Calland 2013:352-82), although the emphasis here has been upon the slow pace of 'transformation' of redoubts of historical white domination. In addition, teaching and nursing, the major sources of employment for middle class Africans before 1994, have received significant attention, although again, the focus has more often than not been upon black professionals' struggles for status and racial equality rather than changing work conditions per se. This was the case, for instance, with Shula Marks' (1994) classic work, *Divided Sisterhood*, which explored how black nurses battled hard for recognition and acceptance in a white controlled profession under apartheid. Subsequently, the tensions between their struggle for professional status and the perceived downgrading of their work conditions in post-apartheid South Africa has been the focus of a number of studies of both teachers and nurses, with a book by Elizabeth Hull (2017) on nursing stressing the fragility of their professional status. Even so, as illustrated by Amuzweni Ngoma (2017), South Africa's 'exceptionalism' continues to ensure that the predominant focus is still upon how black professionals perceive and confront racial barriers to upward mobility rather than the changing nature of work within the professions as such.

The occurrence in early 2017 of major clashes between teachers, doctors and nurses with governments in both Kenya and Zimbabwe should remind us that contradictions between the struggle for recognition and reward as 'professionals' and realities on the ground are a continent-wide phenomenon, demanding extensive study. Even so, this would leave us in considerable ignorance of the role of the African middle class as managers and entrepreneurs. Again, given the relative abundance of data for South Africa, there has been some initial studies of Africans as managers in private sector management (Luhabe 2002, Calland 2013:323-52, Southall 2017:131-6), even though again the thrust of these is about struggles around 'racial transformation'. Otherwise, however, there seems to be a dearth of studies about Africans as corporate managers and the economic and political role they play. To what extent do they belong to a capitalist bourgeoisie proper, that is, to what extent do they have significant investments in local firms and wield managerial authority on that basis? Or should they rather be regarded as belonging to the upper tiers of the middle class? Do they work for international or nationally-owned companies?

Are they independent of, or deeply connected to, the state? It may be safely ventured that, quite simply, we don't actually know.

Fortunately, however, previous decades have seen the emergence of a substantial literature upon African capitalism; less encouragingly, this seems to be ignored by contemporary literature upon Africa's 'entrepreneurs'.

The disconnection between studies of African entrepreneurship and African capitalism

The 'Africa rising' narrative has provided fertile ground for the thesis that the continent's economic salvation lies in African entrepreneurship, which will itself be boosted by the growth of an educated, aspirant and globally aware African middle class. The story-line goes that although African countries should continue to attract foreign investment, this in itself will not be able to provide for better living standards for the mass of people in countries in which there is massive inequality, poverty is rife, and most workers are in informal employment. Consequently, a major developmental role awaits indigenous entrepreneurs, although this in turn requires African governments, with their penchant for control, to relax constraints upon business.[5] Hey presto, roll back the state, allow entrepreneurship to flourish, and development will follow! However, the problem is that, the state apart, African entrepreneurs face major difficulties.

These are ably reviewed by Oluyele Akinkugbe and Karl Wohlmuth (2017) in the Melber volume. Their thrust is that the success of African entrepreneurship is hampered by the 'missing middle': there are too few small and medium sized companies to fill the space between large companies and the micro-enterprises which are the typical vehicles of African entrepreneurs.

Akinkugbe and Wohlmuth acknowledge a small 'upper class' of African millionaires who operate large companies, yet note that many of these are underpinned by government contracts and licences in sectors such as natural resources, finance, construction, services, media, telecommunications and advanced technologies. They report, too, upon the emergence of competitive companies owned by an 'independent and innovative' stratum of rich African entrepreneurs with links to international companies in technology sectors, finance and services. Even so, there remains a huge gap in Africa between 'the small group of large formal companies at the top and the very large number of survival-type micro, small and medium enterprises, the large majority of them at the bottom' (Akinkugbe and Wohlmuth 2017:75). Indeed, entrepreneurship in Africa is overwhelmingly 'survival' rather than 'growth-oriented'. Even so, although middle class entrepreneurs are weak relative to the politically connected upper classes, they have a 'unique opportunity' to spur growth so long as: they develop an 'empowered strategy versus governments and big business', if they are strong enough to demand that the state accord them a strategic role in terms of public goods provision, and if they are able to generate wider societal support for their 'transformative politics'.

This is useful enough as far as it goes. However, it does not really do much to advance our thinking about nature of the African middle class as a 'class' with its own interests distinct from those of either the thin layer of African capitalists or the broad mass of African society. Nor does it seriously tackle that major question: does the African middle class have the potential to give rise to a genuinely developmental African capitalism?

To address this question, we have to turn back to the important debates about African capitalism of the 1970s-1990s era. This is a massive issue, demanding far more attention than space here allows. For the moment, it is useful merely to refer back to Colin Leys' important reflections on 'African capitalists and development', first published in 1994.

Drawing from both Marx and Weber, Leys argued that however development is defined, it must involve the accumulation of capital. Only out of the surplus saved from past productive effort can society obtain more provision for health, education, leisure or mere output – the goals for which development is pursued. So any developing society must ensure that the production is organised to yield the necessary surplus, and see that it is invested appropriately. In capitalist society this is done by capitalists and their managers, supported directly and indirectly by the state. Globally, multinational corporations are the most powerful agencies of capital accumulation, yet they operate in harness with and alongside smaller companies. So for capitalist development to occur, there must also be 'national' (perhaps, 'indigenous') capitalists – and these vary greatly in their capacities. Consequently, in the absence of any practicable alternative to capitalist development (which, reluctantly, he takes to be the case in Africa), 'it becomes very important to understand what determines the relative strengths and weaknesses of each underdeveloped country's internal or domestic capitalist class' (Leys 1996:164).

Leys proceeds with a research agenda which includes identifying: the various fractions of a domestic capitalist class by sector and historical growth path; its relations with sub-groups (such as ethnic groups) in society, how far have these become impersonal and instrumental-rational, and how far it has developed a collective class consciousness; how far a domestic bourgeoisie has succeeded in persuading other class elements, particularly the petty-bourgeoisie, to accept the requirements for continued capital accumulation; how the domestic capitalist class relates to the state apparatus, notably with regard to the economic and political conditions for capital accumulation; what relations domestic capital has with international capital, and how far are these rational and mutually advantageous; and what decisive moments or events have determined the historical trajectory of a domestic capitalist class.

Leys concludes by observing that the overall global context in which African capitalists must operate is becoming increasingly difficult. One is the widening productivity gap between Africa's still predominantly pre-capitalist agricultural economies and capitalist production elsewhere. Another is that industrial productivity is advancing at such a pace that the capacity of manufacturing to create employment has drastically declined. This so severely compromises the prospect of 'late industrialisation' in Africa that as a result, 'African populations are becoming increasingly marginal to global production' (Leys 1996:186). This means that the problems confronting any African capitalist class may become all but insoluble.[6]

This does not mean that capitalist development is nowhere possible in Africa. But where it fails in Africa, marginalisation and social distress may lead to either recolonisation (via aid programmes or forms of conditionality) or anti-capitalist reaction: fundamentalist or nativist, or even some new forms of socialism. Whatever the case, it is 'reasonably certain' that an understanding of Africa's capitalist classes 'will remain important for understanding whatever happens next' (Leys 1996:187).

What we can draw from all this is the urgency of posing the question (which is manifestly not being tackled head on by existing scholarship), of whether the emergent middle class in Africa today has the capacity to foster a genuinely capitalist bourgeoisie. If not, what then?

The need for deeper probing of the politics of the African middle class

As noted above, there is an embedded assertion in much of the celebratory literature of the global institutions that the emerging African middle classes are drivers of democracy (Fletcher 2013). However, as Melber (2017a) discusses in his Introduction, the evidence is much more ambiguous.

Whether or not an African middle class is politically progressive or not depends on a range of factors. For instance, in the same special issue of the *Journal of International Development* on African middle classes, we find widely varying findings based upon sophisticated analyses of survey and other data. Nic Cheeseman (2015) finds that the Kenyan middle class is more likely to support democracy than poor Kenyans, with education the most vital factor in generating critical citizens. Even so, when push comes to shove (as during the fraught 2013 election), their democratic leanings are severely tested by their ethnic identities. Danielle Resnick (2015), in contrast, finds that the Zambian middle class is relatively apathetic in terms of political participation, even while more supportive of democracy than the poor. Even so, those among the formally employed middle class were more likely to support the incumbent Movement for Multiparty Democracy in the 2008 election, than those who were informally employed. Robert Mattes (2015) meanwhile, reported that black middle class South Africans are more likely to be better disposed to the opposition Democratic Alliance than poorer citizens, who remain more closely aligned to the ruling ANC. Against this, the black middle class are more likely to exit the democratic process (that is, to abstain from political activity) than their compatriots. In contrast, Melber (2017a) cites Michael Bratton (2013) as reporting, upon a basis of Afrobarometer surveys, that middle class persons display a pervasive suspicion of their less well educated citizens, and even query whether they should be allowed to vote!

We find a similar variety of findings in the Melber volume. Dieter Neubert (2017) concludes that the hopes placed in the Kenyan middle class as an agent of democracy have not been fulfilled, and that political mobilisation during elections continues to follow regional ethnic lines. Nkwachukwu Oriji (2017) reports that the political activism of the Nigerian middle class reflects their involvement in the social media rather than their participation in formal political organisations. For middle class activism to become effective, it needs greater organisational coherence, alliance with lower class activities, and connection with grass root activism. Jon Schubert (2017) finds that despite growing middle class discontent with the material realities of life in Angola, there is little prospect of this challenging the hegemonic project of the ruling MPLA. Similarly, Jason Sumich (2017) argues that because middle class privilege in Mozambique continues to revolve around political connections to the ruling party, Frelimo, the transformation potential of the middle class outside existing political structures is doubtful. Finally, Amuzweni Ngoma (2017) finds black professionals torn between their positive recognition that the ANC has done much to develop the black middle class, and their negative assessment of its overall poor performance in government. As a result, they are as much inclined simply to withdraw from formal political participation as to give their backing to alternative political parties.

Even summary citation of these highly diverse studies indicates that any generalisation about the democratic potential of the African middle class remains highly problematic. For a start, there is always the problem of definition of middle class-ness, especially for those using quantitative survey data, where results depend heavily upon cross-referencing criteria of income, education, urbanisation, and so on. Then again how do we relate quantitative findings to qualitative assessments of middle class political engagements (or lack of them) which study political involvements of an identifiable middle class over time?

Given the diversity of approaches towards the middle class used and the multiplicity of countries and historical situations which are analysed, there is unlikely to be any consensus around how we assess the politics of the African middle class. Yet what would seem to emerge out of even the briefest overview of different findings is that the African middle class remains extraordinarily heterogeneous – so much so that there are those who question whether it actually constitutes a class at all (see Neubert 2015)! This is precisely why it has made sense to differentiate the black middle class in South Africa according to their closeness to, or dependence upon, either the state or the market. Broadly, the argument is that the less dependent segments of the black middle class are upon the state, the more likely they are to become critical of the ANC and to espouse classically democratic values (Southall 2016).

Whether or not people find this convincing is not the point. What is the point is that we are only likely to come to anything amounting to an adequate understanding of the politics of the African middle class if we recognise its different segments or 'fractions' amidst its heterogeneity, and determine whether and how their different locations in society result in different political attitudes and engagements over time. This in turn will lead us into considering how the middle class, or fractions within it, relate to other classes, and form alliances with them or range themselves against them.

It is clear from the various works that have been cited that we are accumulating an enormously rich set of empirical findings and insights upon which to draw. How we seek to reconcile these, and identify patterns of middle class behaviour, is going to remain enormously complex. However, it may be argued, following Melber (2017c), that the most important question that we need to pose of the African middle class is 'Whose side are you on?'. Does its interest lie in defence of the status quo and existing privilege or does it align with other social forces struggling for human rights, greater social equality and a redistribution of wealth between the rich and the poor?

In conclusion

The extensive attention paid to the 'the rise of the African middle class' over the last few years attests to its growing importance. Increasingly there is recognition that the changes being wrought in Africa by global economic forces are transforming the continent's social structures – most particularly by inserting middle classes into the gap between the tiny rich elites at the top and the mass of poor people at the bottom. For this reason, a warm welcome needs to be extended to reflective volumes such as that edited by Henning Melber which contribute to our understanding of the potential role – developmental and political – the African middle class can realistically be expected to play. However, if the debate on the African middle class is to move forward, then an array of hard questions needs to be asked: about its relation to the state, educational systems, work and African capitalism, as well as far more nuanced probing about its political orientations and actions.

Posing such questions will mean that we will be taking class analysis seriously.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was delivered as a keynote paper at the conference on 'Middle Classes, Protest and Change in Africa and Beyond' at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, March 17-21, 2017.
2. Not least because, as noted, it would be difficult to improve on the work of Carole Lentz.
3. According to one source, enrolment in private schools is around 13 per cent in Kenya, 22 per cent in Nigeria and 15 per cent in Ghana (Tran 2012).
4. I stand to be corrected in making this statement, although Lentz makes no mention of any such study.
5. The African Development Bank noted in 2012 that only two African countries out of 183 listed in 2012 belonged to the top 50 countries in which to do business (AfDB 2012b).
6. Note however that since Leys was writing, multinationals have started something of a retreat. This is far less a product of rising protectionism than that they are no longer achieving superior performance as the advantages of global scale fall away: they have big overheads, complex supply chains tie up inventories, and sprawling organisations are hard to run. With foreign profits now coming increasingly from industries reliant on intellectual property, such as technology, drug patents and finances, 'there is no serious appetite among multinationals to recreate in Africa or India the manufacturing centres they spurred on in China, which removes a reason for those host countries to welcome them' (*The Economist* 2017). The implications of this for African capitalism need to be urgently explored.

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