

leave the reader not only intrigued but also curious to conduct their own further research on the cases that are covered. The reader can also pick themes of personal interest and does not have to read the entire book, although I would recommend it.

African Muckracking is a book that can be very valuable for history teaching and learning. Its content covers not just political, but also economic and social topics. The major advantage of such journalism-rooted writing is that it provides alternative narratives on topics that may seem to be glossed over in official history books, particularly school textbooks. This gives history teachers and students a chance to expose themselves to multiple narratives and engage with them critically. Schiffrin and Lugambi's book is definitely worth reading.

The rise of Africa's middle class: Myths, realities and critical engagements
(WITS University Press, 2017, 219 pp. ISBN 978 1 77614 082 4)

Henning Melber

Simphiwe Ngwane

Institutional Researcher at the Gauteng Provincial Legislature

ngwane23@gmail.com

How people categorise themselves influences the ways in which they experience their social location, and many have important consequences for political actions (p. 19).

Henning Melber and his contributing authors in their 2017 book, *The rise of Africa's middle class: Myths, realities and critical engagements* have produced a well-considered contribution to the much popularised research foci that is Africa's middle class. The collection is notably limited in its continental reach as it primarily focused on east coast and Southern African states. However, it still has distinct sediments; yet, common understandings permeate through the layers, although some layers have more depth than others do. Overall, the book's contribution broadens the African middle class debate, moving beyond income-based markers of class and placing vivid focus on boundary work as a contextual theoretical frame to understand Africa's middle class.

The introduction by Melber provides a critical framework and reference point for the contributions in the book. It recapitulates parts of the debate emerging on the middle class(es), its intricacies and contradictions, and looks

for a critical explanation regarding the sudden appearance of such a debate, as if classes were a new phenomenon (p. 1).

The introductory chapter begins by foregrounding more economically inclined markers of class, citing various international reports that bracket the middle class on differing income brackets. Melber argues that, what is most problematic beyond fiddling with figures is the deficiency of a rigorous definition of middle class. “Middle class” tends to be used in an inflationary manner to cover almost everything without any further internal differentiations that exist within a very broad band of income groups, thereby signifying little to nothing (p. 2). Melber argues that these examinations hardly bother to engage with the more methodological aspects of the analysis of classes, which has a long tradition in social sciences and should have an integral part of the engagement with the phenomenon now under deliberations and discussed (p. 3).

Chapter 1 by Lenz engages with the history and theory of the terms elite and middle class on the African continent. Lenz argues that the changing scholarly usages of elite and class concepts echo the socio-economic development of the continent where middle-income groups, sharing certain ‘middle-class’ values and lifestyles, have only rather recently come to the fore. Both terms were initially coined by societal actors and have since the end of the eighteenth century, become catchwords in political discourse, well before scholars defined them in any systematic fashion (p. 18).

Lenz then warns that scholars should therefore be sensitive to the complex feedback process between social science and political-cum-social practice. In order to do so in a comprehensive manner, however, scholars also need to go beyond folk terminologies, develop their own analytical categories, and critically engage with the baggage that received theoretical concepts with them (p. 19).

A pertinent concept, which Lenz foregrounds in his chapter, is that of boundary work. An important aspect of the middle class’s boundary work is the reference groups on which people draw when defining their social location (p. 27). The sometimes surprisingly diverging definitions of who belongs to the “middle” can be seen as resulting from the different frames of reference that people adopt (p. 27). The concept is contextual in its drafting, allowing it to be transplanted to different localities instead of imposing, sometimes-foreign concepts onto divergent localities.

The second chapter by Stoffel, just like all the previous and forthcoming chapters, begins the chapter by laying out the unsettled discourse with income-based markers of class. He argues that, “The arbitrariness of the different thresholds has been criticised most prominently by some scholars, trying to define middle class on a cross-country level (p. 54). The assumption that middle class living standards begin when poverty includes all people in the middle class who are not poor according to the median of the national poverty lines of 70 developing countries, which lies at US\$2 per day at 2005 PPP” (p. 55).

Stoffel’s Human Development argument supported by new assets in the Multidimensional Poverty Index mentions this proposed approach but does not detail how it would work or offer any case study to propel the argument.

Chapter three by Akinkugbe and Wohlmuth examines the role of the African middle class as a base for entrepreneurship development. The authors argue that there is a huge gap in entrepreneurial activities between the informal sector microenterprises and the large formal sector enterprises, just as there is a huge credit-granting gap between the microfinance institutions at the low end and the big commercial/merchant banks, at the high end in most of the African countries (p. 74).

The authors put forward a well-considered and aptly relevant argument on the needed minimum conditions for a transformative middle class in Africa. The authors highlight the need for a “collective identity,” which may be called “class consciousness”. In addition, Africa’s middle class needs to demand a more strategic role from the state in terms of public goods provision, and lastly; their interest should be compatible with the interest of the broader society.

Chapter 4 by Hellsten challenges the assumptions that the expansion of the middle class will somehow “automatically” steer Africa towards democracy and good governance (p. 95). The chapter promises to deconstruct the myth of the African middle class but generically focuses on the political loyalty of the African middle class, without delving deep to any empirical sources.

Chapter 5 by Neubert, highlights the scepticism regarding the democratic attitude of the middle class leads us to ask whether the members of the middle class share a common political vision and how this is related to the middle class consensus (p. 110). Although large parts of the middle-income stratum cannot be sure whether they will keep their position, and this stratum is marked by upward and downward mobility – there is a group living in moderate prosperity and a group is less well-off. They lack joint class consciousness,

but share an important feature: they have the ability to consumer above and beyond the fulfilment of their basic needs (p. 118).

Neubert further argues that the middle class shares with the poor a feeling of uncertainty because the social position of the largest part of the middle class is not secured and they risk falling down the social ladder, even when there is at the same time the chance to climb (p. 123). Against this background the Kenyan middle class does not develop particular political interests because they lack a peculiar structural position that many be the foundation for a distinct joint political orientation (p. 124).

Chapter six by Orji, contributes to the understanding of the role of the role of the new middle class in African by looking at the political activism of the Nigerian middle class. The new middle class in Nigeria has embraced new digital technologies, particularly social media and is using them to widen the boundaries of political participation. The chapter lacked in illustrating how the Nigerian middle classes usage of social media made them activist.

Chapter seven by Schubert presents the experiences of some inhabitants who might be termed part of a new, emerging urban middle class, to interrogate the analytical and conceptual usefulness of the term in a context like Angola (p. 147). The chapter comes across as sporadic and its construction does not aid the reader understanding the sample selection and how their realities can be seen as political subjectivities.

Chapter eight by Sumich examines the middle class of Mozambique and further traces the formation and political embeddedness of a middle class in Mozambique from independence to present (p. 161). The middle classes of Mozambique and Africa more generally do not necessarily act autonomously from the political system, checking its overweening ambitions, but are largely an outgrowth of the state that created them. The middle class is dependent on political structures they do not trust and are vulnerable to be a volatile economic situation (p. 166).

Chapter nine by Ngoma examines South Africa's black middle class professionals and it is empirically based on a qualitative study that explores how such black professionals construct their class and political identities (p. 170). Importantly, the dominant and underlying analytical point in these arguments is that class has superseded race as a social and identity marker (p. 171). The second analytical outcome derives from the pervasive argument that the ANC's aggressive new affirmative action policies, BEE and EE have directly, if not singularly, created

the new black middle class resulting in its support of the ANC (p. 171). The chapter argues that the high intra-racial inequality maintain the Black Middle Classes' (BMC) racial alliances rather than class alliances (p. 177). Instead, it seems more plausible that segments of the new BMC have an identity that is historically defined and that might be reinforced by the continued dominance of white capital (p. 177). Income allows a person to be middle class, but debt strips away affordability and therefore, middle class status. Credit access was a defining marker in being middle class (p. 179).

Chapter 10 by Shule is truly lacking and is very disappointing. The author cobbles together a weak argument about Tanzania's middle class-elite unwillingness to consume Kiswahili video-film and Bongo movies and this lack of consumption will shrink the industry. There is no ethnographic analysis of the sample, why the Tanzanian middle class should consume the movies, the significance of them consuming or not consuming this genre and what this all tells us.

The conclusion by Melber draws the books multiple threads and illustrates that what is lumped together as middle classes represents at best an opaque awareness if not about themselves, then at least about society and their position, aims and politics (p. 202). Melber is upfront about the books limitation and future angles that the topic should be directed towards.

Virtually all historical and anthropological studies on the global middle classes agree that economic definitions of the middle class through its location in the occupational structure or its income and expenditure do not suffice, and can even be misleading (p. 27).

The rise of Africa's middle class offers itself as a multiple lens to examining Africa's middle class. It prompts the reader to always enquire who is doing the defining of middle class and what their intentions are. The book furthers what Deborah James in her 2014 book, *Money from nothing*, contends as; "a young middle-class aspirant today is burdened with multiple expectations" (p. 26). The proffered boundary work framework, which the book foregrounds as being innately sensitive to context, is a much-needed nuance. Melber and the contributing authors have foregrounded key insights into Africa's middle class debate, primarily the east coast of Africa. It would have been worthwhile to also hear voices from West African and the interior regions.

