

Review: Roger Southall, The New Black Middle Class in South Africa (2016)

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Rezension / review

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Schotte, S., & Giesbert, L. (2016). Review: Roger Southall, The New Black Middle Class in South Africa (2016). [Review of the book *The new black middle class in South Africa*, by R. Southall]. *Africa Spectrum*, 51(3), 135-139.
<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-9925>

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Book Reviews

Roger Southall (2016), *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa*, Auckland Park: Jacana, ISBN 9781431423163, xix + 296 pp.

Over the past decade, debates centring on the “African growth tragedy” have made room for a radically different grand narrative that portrays an Africa “on the rise.” This mood swing has been accompanied by glamorous images of an emerging African middle class playing a leading role in this new narrative. In numerous reports and articles, consulting firms, banks, development agencies, and the media alike eagerly depicted its assumed members posing with a smile in front of their townhouses and brand new cars, or walking down luxurious shopping streets in suits and ties, talking on their mobile phones. Roger Southall’s latest book renders these consumptionist stereotypes incomplete. Starting from the cover photo, the book seeks to capture the middle class in its ambiguities – being caught between tradition and modernity, petty bourgeois conformism and generational change, and partisanship and new configurations. In its self-avowed aim to “complicate” the picture, Southall offers a comprehensive, historically rich, and multifaceted perspective on what it means to be black and middle class in South Africa.

Nine chapters portray the middle class from different angles. The first main chapter is a general recap of the theoretical literature on the middle class comparing specifically Marxist and Weberian traditions. Three key messages here remain vital to Southall’s discussion in the South African context: first, beyond the ownership of capital and wealth, in modern industrial societies access to political power and authority as well as occupation (offering income and status) are central class-defining criteria; second, throughout history the middle class has been highly heterogeneous and fluid due to the differing locations of its members with respect to these criteria; and third, the democratic commitment of the middle class cannot be taken for granted, especially as their position with respect to these criteria becomes more precarious.

Different from most recent studies on South Africa’s rising black middle class, Southall (Chapter 2) traces its history to the early 1900s, which saw the evolution of a largely mission-educated “African elite” entering the professional world as teachers, ministers, professionals, clerks, builders, and traders. He explains impressively how this “old” black middle class began to organise in professional and political associations and take on leading positions in their communities, building the founda-

tion for their key role in the formation of the African National Congress (ANC). The book goes on to elaborate how in the context of skilled-labour shortages and an overall economic downturn in the late Apartheid era the size of the black middle class increased significantly; a majority of its members allied with the working class and took on an active role in the cross-black liberation movement, rather than being just an “appendage” of the black proletariat or collaborators of the Apartheid regime and white capital.

The data-rich third chapter grapples with the definitional problem of who exactly constitutes the middle class in post-Apartheid South Africa. Following a review of rivalling approaches and their implications for this group’s relative size and growth, Southall identifies two main sources of power in South African society: the state and the corporate sector. He then defines a set of class categories based on typical occupations (closely building on Seekings and Nattrass’s work¹) and their location on this power spectrum.

The three chapters that follow investigate state patronage, education, and employment opportunities as key mechanisms facilitating the evident rise in black upward social mobility since 1994, while Chapter 7 pays closer attention to the social realities of the black middle class. The pre-eminent issue in common is the interaction between race and class in shaping social structures. Southall argues that today’s black middle class is to a non-negligible extent the result both of the “deployment” of ANC party cadres to key positions in the state and the wider public sector and of affirmative action programmes by the ANC government that were more stringently implemented by the public than by the private sector. While strategies of black economic empowerment (BEE) helped to increase the share of black managers and produced a small but outstandingly rich black elite, the private sector work environment and capital ownership remains “white-dominated.” Southall highlights that while particularly university education “remains a ticket of entry to the black middle class” (119), access to high-quality education continues to depend on factors such as “wealth, socio-economic status, geographic location and language” (104), which, in turn, remain closely interlinked with race.

As much of the rise of the black middle class has been closely linked to the ANC-led liberation project and post-1994 policies, Chapter 8 then centres around their ambiguous political role at present. Southall here argues that “the black elite and middle class now in positions of power,

1 Seekings, Jeremy, and Nicoli Nattrass (2006), *Race, Class and Inequality in South Africa*, Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

privilege and profit are not likely to bite the hand of the party-state that feeds them” (203). Having said this, he also points to an increasing dissatisfaction with government performance, especially among the “born-frees,” met by a lack of political alternatives able to gain the trust of the black middle class.

The final chapter links the lived experience of South Africa’s black middle class to the regional context and wider discussion on the emergence of middle classes in the global South. Given its history, an important way in which South Africa’s middle class is exceptional is its tendency to self-identify primarily as “black” and to be “more race than class conscious” (239), an ethos that would resonate in only a few other countries, such as Namibia and Zimbabwe.

Overall, Southall offers a highly differentiated perspective on the black middle class in South Africa that avoids the common pitfall of regarding classes as homogeneous groups whose members necessarily behave alike. Refreshingly, the analysis offers a comprehensive assessment of great sociological depth that contributes to a greater understanding of the drivers of class formation and also provides a valuable assessment of the opportunities for and constraints of social upward mobility in South Africa – historically and contemporarily. The book’s rich examination of the country’s context is persuasive, particularly in its comprehensive consideration of the colonial and Apartheid legacy that continues to shape social structures. Especially timely in the face of the recent student protests for free and decolonised education throughout the country, the fifth chapter, which illustrates unequal educational opportunities from the early school level, is well worth reading. In this context, Southall also nicely captures the vulnerabilities of South Africa’s new black middle class with perhaps universal validity: “While a middle class can be created within a generation, it is likely to take two or more generations to become consolidated” (169).

Similarly timely is Southall’s discussion on the ambiguous relationship between South Africa’s black middle class and the ANC government, which constitutes the centrepiece and recurring theme of the book. Here, the distinction between the party-state and the corporate sector as the two main sources of power offers a revealing perspective, and the book adds substance to the question of which segments of the new black middle class can be expected to play a more critical role in contemporary South African politics.

The book’s strengths notwithstanding, a couple of criticisms may be raised. First, despite the final chapter’s attempt to broaden the picture and locate South Africa’s new black middle class in the wider regional

and global context, the discussion remains somewhat abstract and disentangled from the rest of the book. In terms of South African particularities, one may have highlighted not only the legacy of racial segregation, but also other factors such as the structure of the labour market with its small informal and micro-entrepreneurial sector, which substantially differs from most African countries. Despite its suggested peculiarity, though, some parallels to other cases could have been drawn. For example, the distinction between members of the middle class employed by the state and those employed by the private sector has relevance for many third-wave democracies and even autocracies, where the public sector provides the key avenue of mobility into the middle class. In this context, it would have been interesting to see to what extent vulnerability and dependence on the state also shape the middle class in other countries, including within the repeatedly mentioned Chinese example.

Given the book's aim to "complicate" the discussion, a couple of points may have required an even more differentiated approach. The first is the book's self-imposed exclusive focus on the black African middle class; in so doing, the book misses the opportunity to show links, comparisons, and overlaps of characteristics and behavioural patterns with the Indian, Coloured, and white populations. Particularly the white population is presented as one homogeneous elitist class, although this group likewise tends to exhibit important heterogeneities and ambiguities. Second, the theoretical chapter in the beginning leaves the reader wondering when those "issues which have particular salience for [...] the black middle class in South Africa" (7) will finally appear and has the potential to lose an interested but non-academic audience at the outset. While the author rightly points to the difficulty of applying theories "developed in relation to countries in the global North [...] to the global South, where social conditions are very different" (21), he does not offer any suggestions for solutions to this problem. Third, Southall's focus on occupational categories as the key class-defining criterion creates a very heterogeneous "residual" group of households representing about one-third of the population, including "unemployed people dependent upon government grants through to a relatively small number of people enjoying a prosperous retirement funded by pensions and investments" (55).

Last, while offering an outstanding in-depth summary of the existing knowledge, the book does not surprise the reader with a very novel approach or unexpected findings and one may lament Southall's resistance to formulating any strong and clear takeaways or conclusions. Given the preceding analysis, he could have ventured an answer to some of the questions loosely assembled in the last few pages of the book – for example,

regarding the likelihood that Africa's middle classes will challenge authoritarian leaders or demand greater government accountability.

In sum, the book is an insightful and engaging read for those who seek to learn more about social stratification and mobility in South Africa and who are ready to delve into a profound – though sometimes abstract – study of the specificities of South African society, which can be considered exceptional in many regards.

- Lena Giesbert and Simone Schotte