

The African Middle Class(es) - In the Middle of What?

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This Briefing and Debate article critically engages with the middle class phenomenon, which emerged as a prominent focus in Development and African Studies.¹ Göran Therborn already wondered if we were entering a century of the middle class. He suggested that the middle class society had emerged as the symbol of an alternative future (Therborn 2012, 17), being promoted among others by the OECD report on global development perspectives (OECD 2011) and Nancy Birdsall (2010).

As if to confirm his suspicion, the 22nd Human Development Report (HDR) for 2013 of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2013) had a trendy focus on the new global players from the Southern hemisphere. Following the Brookings Institution (2012) and Kharas (2010), the report defines a (Southern) middle class by means of a daily income or expenditure from US\$ 10 to 100. World Bank Chief Economist Martin Ravallion (2009, 17) advocated an even more flexible definition of middle class in the so-called developing world, with a household consumption per capita of US\$ 2 to 13 a day at 2005 purchasing power parity (PPP). In contrast, Sumner (2012, 37) dubs the US\$ 4 to 10 group as the 'in-betweeners', i.e., between poverty and a secure middle class lifestyle. The US\$ 2 threshold was also a reference point in a 2011 briefing by the African Development Bank, which declared that over 300 million Africans, or one-third of the continent's population, had entered the middle classes. A review in 2012 reconfirmed the bank's almost obsessive gospel about the role of the middle class in the continent's rapid and accelerated development: the 'rise of Africa's middle class, now thought to number between 300 and 500 million people' is identified as a 'key factor' (African Development Bank 2012, 13). But it requires substantial creativity to visualize how the defined minimum income or expenditure (be it a paltry US\$ 2 a day or even the substantially higher US\$ 10) allows for a lifestyle and social status that qualifies as middle class even in African societies.

That, in turn, feeds considerable doubts that such a middle class could play a pioneering role in the transformation of societies towards greater social justice and less inequality (cf. Furness, Scholz and Guarin 2012). Ravallion (2009, 17) is at least honest enough to admit that such a definition of middle class is at best precarious, since 'the vulnerability of this new middle class to aggregate economic contraction is obvious: one-in-six people in the developing world now live between \$ 2 and \$ 3 a day'. As Raphael Kaplinsky from the British Open University quipped in his lecture at the General Conference of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutions (EADI) in mid-2014, such a category means that everyone not starving qualifies as middle class.² A background paper compiled in preparation for this conference engaged in much detail with conceptual issues of the middle class(es). But again, it concentrated almost exclusively on a merely economic classification of these

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social strata (Wietzke and Sumner 2014). This underscored the randomness of interpretations, which is not solved by introducing sub-divisions such as lower, middle and upper middle classes. Rather, this underlines the arbitrary character of such terminology in the middle class debate.

As problematic as fiddling with figures is the deficiency as regards a rigorous definition of middle class, not only because of the almost exclusive emphasis on the financial/monetary aspect, while often ignoring or only considering in passing as a kind of secondary aspect the professional and social status, cultural norms and lifestyle related attributes as well as political orientation(s) and influence. "Middle class" is rather 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. While 'recognising that the middle class is as much a social designation as an economic classification', Kharas (2010, 11), as a prominent example, opts 'to measure the middle class in terms of consumption levels'.

The role of middle class(es) in Africa

The HDR 2013 promoted the gospel of the emerging middle class as a cure to the developmental impasse. It predicted a massive expansion and global reconfiguration of the middle class:

Between 1990 and 2010, the South's share of the global middle class population expanded from 26% to 58%. By 2030, more than 80% of the world's middle class is projected to be residing in the South and to account for 70% of total consumption expenditure. (UNDP 2013, 14)

The prognosis assumes that two-thirds of this middle class will be in Asia and the Pacific, one-tenth in Central and South America, but only a bare two per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. This reminds us that the resource boom is not necessarily feeding the majority of people on the continent. Despite above-average economic growth rates during the last decade, mainly as a result of extractive industries as part of the resource boom, 'the size of the labor force, already characterized by significant open unemployment and under-employment (is) set to surge', leaving 'no room for complacency' (International Monetary Fund 2013, 19). But how can a middle class consolidate while high unemployment remains a chronic feature of Africa's societies?

Notwithstanding such reservations, the ominous middle classes have sneaked as a popular subject into African Studies too and occupy the thoughts of economists, political scientists, sociologists and social anthropologists alike, often with strikingly a-historical perspectives and short of any awareness of class-related social structures and trajectories, which are anything but as new as often suggested. The discovery of the middle class(es) is at a closer look by no means engaging with a new social phenomenon, as earlier work on African elites documents (cf. Lentz 2015). Resnick (2015, 574f.) therefore rightly observes, that 'scholarship around class formation and its implications for Africa's political economies has deep roots'. One just needs to recall the works of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, who discuss the African petty bourgeoisie of their days (kind of tantamount to today's middle classes, though seen from a perspective more aware of class analysis) half a century ago with differing to

opposing conclusions (cf. Peterson 2007). While Amilcar Cabral had assumed that at least considerable parts of the petite bourgeoisie would commit class suicide, Frantz Fanon stated in the chapter on “The Pitfalls on National Consciousness” in his manifesto on *The Wretched of the Earth*:

In an under-developed country an authentic national middle class ought to consider as its bounden duty to betray the calling fate has marked out for it, and to put itself to school with the people: in other words to put at the people’s disposal the intellectual and technical capital that it has snatched when going through the colonial universities. But unhappily we shall see that very often the national middle class does not follow this heroic, positive, fruitful and just path; rather, it disappears with its soul set at peace into the shocking ways – shocking because anti-national – of a traditional bourgeoisie, of a bourgeoisie which is stupidly, contemptibly, cynically bourgeois. (Fanon 2001, 120-121)

As Gibson (1999, 111) summarizes with reference to Fanon, ‘the new huckstering middlemen of the postcolonial dispensation stole Africa’. The debates on class and state in Africa of the 1970s, using categories such as ‘labour aristocracy’, ‘state class’, ‘bureaucratic class’ and the like all testify to a vibrant engagement with what in our days miraculously re-emerges as the “middle class”.³ Similarly, *The Interpreters*, a handful of young intellectual protagonists who had studied abroad but returned to independent Nigeria and are at the centre stage of the first novel by Wole Soyinka (1965), can be understood as an implicit anatomy of a diverse collection of “middle class” aspirants torn apart between the old and the new with rather differing orientations beyond the seemingly common. Other African novelists have in different ways and forms also engaged with such middle class protagonists since decolonization and thereby offered lively and often not very flattering illustrations of their behaviour and attitudes.

In contrast to such markers, the current debate appears to be rather short in memory given the obvious but largely ignored trajectories. It implies to a large extent the assumption that the middle class(es) are a positive ingredient for the development of and in African societies. But such optimism seems rather unwanted both in terms of the potential economic role of such middle classes as well as regards the expectations concerning its political role. Handley (2014, 13) could not find any ‘great deal of evidence that Africa’s new middle classes on their own will necessarily drive growth in the ways predicted by our normative models’. She is rather sceptical as regards the transformative potential of these new segments. This is reinforced in the political sphere by findings in the Afrobarometer Survey. These suggest that,

middle-class persons display a pervasive suspicion that their fellow citizens are incapable of casting a responsible vote. Afrobarometer surveys repeatedly show that, as education rises, individuals are more likely to agree that “only those who are sufficiently well educated should be allowed to choose our leaders” and to disagree that “all people should be permitted to vote, even if they do not fully understand all the issues in an election”. (Bratton 2013, 281)

On balance one can conclude that neither economic growth nor the proclaimed rise of a “middle class” automatically heralds the spread of democratic values or the anchoring

of social security for the majority of the people. A recent IMF Working Paper conceded that economic growth rates – considered a precondition for the expansion of a middle class and redistributive effects – do not automatically translate into social progress. Examining the correlation between growth dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa and social indicators, Martinez and Mlachila (2013, 22) conclude that, ‘for the most part there is little correlation between growth and social indicators in general’ and that ‘growth is but an ingredient in the dynamics.’ They state further: ‘While in principle growth should increase the amount of available resources to undertake social programs, the success hinges crucially on a complex interaction of a number of institutional and policy factors’. However, a middle class is no guarantee of policy factors conducive to greater socioeconomic equality and improved living standards for the poor.

So what is “middle class”? – South African realities

‘By definition’, as Keeley (2015, 39) suggests, “middle class” is a relative term – it’s somewhere above poor but below rich, but where?’ A team headed by Peter Alexander from the University of Johannesburg explored this question further in South Africa’s biggest township. *Phakati – Soweto’s Middling Class* is a documentary produced in 2008/2009, which illustrates mainly through interviews the final stages of a survey, initiated in 2006.⁴ Investigating class identity was a core part and aim of the empirical work. The outcome was revealing as regards the term middle class in the perceptions of those interrogated. In total 2,284 respondents were classified according to their work status. Among them, 129 were considered to be petty bourgeoisie (self-employed professionals or small businesses not looking for work), 24 as employed middle class (salaried managerial positions) and four as bourgeoisie (Phadi and Ceruti 2011, 95). In terms of occupational categories, two thirds of the persons in the sample were without occupation (being unemployed, pensioners, students etc.). Respondents were then offered a variety of class or status related labels with the option for multiple self-categorizations. 66% of the respondents classified themselves as middle class (Phadi and Ceruti 2011, 96), followed by 43% working class, 38% lower class and 13% upper or top class (Alexander 2013, 235).

Watching the documentary, the explanations given by a wide panorama of individuals living in very different socio-economic circumstances (ranging from a woman being the owner of a company in the educational sector occupying a spacious posh house in the upmarket part of Soweto to an unemployed woman in a shack coping with the daily life without water and electricity) were almost stereotype. Those in the upper segment argued that others were better off, while those in the lower and lowest segment referred to others still worse off. Such comparison disclosed ‘an identity understood as “neither rich nor poor”’ (Phadi and Ceruti 2011, 101). Respondents positioned themselves as ‘living somewhere between those who were “suffering” and those who had “everything”’ (Alexander 2013, 236). According to Phadi and Ceruti (2011, 99), ‘Sowetans who declare themselves middle class are thereby distinguishing themselves from mediocrity’. Their identities ‘not only reflect the material reach that social location confers, but also the width of the social view that different social locations permit’ (Phadi and Ceruti 2011, 102).

The self-perception clearly had to do with a form of pride, of dignity, and of belonging: the middle class label ‘was linked to self-respect, to upward mobility and

aspirations' and 'regarded as normal, thus neither "above" nor "below" other people' (Alexander 2013, 236). As Alexander adds further:

when Sowetans look "upwards" they tend to emphasis (sic!) cultural and individual characteristics, and when they look "down" they tend to stress economic considerations, such as unemployment. Linked with this, "class" can be seen as something positive, because unlike "race" it permits upwards mobility. (Alexander 2013, 236)

Being "middle class" is a kind of fluid "in-between" self-categorization of most residents. While the differences in their social status, lifestyle and (in)security are enormous, they all merrily classify themselves as being part of a rather arbitrarily defined "middle", with others socially positioned below and above. But South African realities (in the plural) are by no means confined to the Soweto setting or other township locations.

A contrasting analysis was almost in parallel undertaken by Ivor Chipkin (2012) on "middle classness" in the townhouse suburbia of Roodepoort, a previously "white" residential area of the wider Johannesburg city, now also inhabited by residents representing components of a black middle class. Despite all differences to the township habitat of Soweto, a 'common world' emerges there too. This world 'is not associated with new patterns of sociability that transcend race or ethnicity'. But assertions that different groups defined by ethnicity would 'signify antagonistic social positions' and survive especially among white middle class members, have been replaced by 'an openness to black South Africans that may well be unprecedented outside liberal and/or leftist political circles' (Chipkin 2012, 83). He therefore concludes, that 'ordinary life refers to the pursuit of identity, of structure, rather than revolt or resistance to it' (Chipkin 2012, 82). The Roodepoort townhouse complexes signify a 'paradoxical common world conjured into being through a new regime of property right and mediated by body corporates' (Chipkin 2012: 82). He asserts that 'spaces of order have been constituted through a regime of (private) property', which is not necessarily in compliance with 'a post-apartheid society tending towards socialism or participatory democracy or, at least, subject to the morality of the Constitution' (Chipkin 2012: 86). It is, in other words, the identity of haves, who consider their own possession as the only important point of reference.

The BBC's "Africa Business Report" televised on 1 and 2 January 2016 as part of a continental outlook for the year a conversation with three South African observers of the economic trends. The debate ended with views on the emergence of the new segments of the socio-economic strata dubbed the African middle class(es). Asked about their attitudes and roles, one of the participants attributed to them not much more than greed and own individual aspirations to accumulate wealth and status as a generation seeking 'instant gratifications' with 'no loyalties' to any political or other ideological orientation.

Such conclusions seem to suggest that there is no social force in the making, which by status and definition would indeed be the torch bearer for more democracy, participation, human rights, social equality and redistribution of wealth beyond group-centered own benefits and interests. One might call this to some extent a class interest, shared by many members of these middle classes across the continent. But depending

on the circumstances ethnicity, pigmentation and other criteria matter as much (and at times even more) than such at best diffuse class awareness.

A recent survey among black members of the South African middle class, defined by higher professional positions (and clearly over and above the earlier suggested minimum income) investigates the meanings and political attitudes of such BMC (black middle class). Based on interviews, Ngoma (2015, 41) argues that 'the high levels of intra-racial inequality bond the BMC to race-based alliances rather than class-based alliances' and reaches the conclusion that 'occupation and income as class markers do not automatically translate into a (sic!) class identities' (Ngoma 2015, 43). But she also observes, 'that the BMC is becoming increasingly confident in its class position, a development allowing it to begin critically assessing the wider political landscape', which also 'indicates a deeper commitment to the developmental needs of the class itself' (Ngoma 2015, 81).

The three different case studies from South Africa, which has the biggest slice of the defined African middle class cake, shows the need for a much stricter definition and investigation of class based belonging and orientation. We should be more cautious than promoting simplifying and sweeping explanations as regards the scope for potential political reforms and their impact on social change in the sense of transformation of societies, which middle classes (defined in which ever way) might be able or willing to promote. As Handley (2014, 13-14) points out,

in order for a new middle class to act in a way that is politically and economically transformative, it needs ...first, a collective identity (what used to be a [sic!] called a class consciousness) – that is, as a class it must be aware of its interests and have the ability to organize collectively in pursuit of those interests.

As she adds, 'the middle class ought ideally to see its interests as, at least, compatible with the interests of the broader society' (Handley 2014, 14), which 'is a fairly demanding set of conditions'.

How much class have the African middle classes?

While at pains with a definition, Keeley (2015, 39) suggests, that 'this new middle class ... has at least risen above day-to-day subsistence living and can plan for, and invest in, the future'. But if that is all one has to offer as classification, one feels provoked to further ask, which future this means. – A future for the middle class(es)? Or maybe rather a renaissance of the term class, as Therborn (2014, 10) suggests with reference to the ominous middle class debate? At least, as he observes further, this discourse brings back reflections related to class(es).

Summarizing her explorations of the middle classes in Nairobi (sensibly in the plural) Spronk (2014, 110) suggests that a truer measure of the phenomenon than the income-based position might be sociocultural, with the lifestyle as 'an important marker of their identity'. Considering urban young professionals as avant-garde, she further suggests that their lifestyles cultivated 'are not merely an expression of desires, but can be understood as realizing and maintaining subjective realities' (Spronk 2014, 111). For her a focus on "middle classness" thus illuminates how education, urbanization, and social stratification have contributed to social and cultural change in Africa'. She

concludes that considering 'class as an aspirational category and the ways in which it is practiced allows us to see that forms of capital that are not, strictly speaking, economic, are central to understanding middle-class formation' (Spronk 2014, 111). While this is a step forward in grasping the formative aspects of so-called middle classes, the term consciousness (never mind class consciousness as a political awareness) remains limited to the diagnosis that 'young professionals are highly conscious of their distinctive position in Kenyan society' (Spronk 2014, 110), which seemingly relates more to status than anything else.

While devoting parts of her essay on the positioning of class in African Studies and drawing a dividing line between the 'elite' and the 'young professionals' as subject of her study (Spronk 2014, 100), she stops short of properly engaging with or applying class analysis. This might be indicative for the currently still infant stage of an assessment of the African middle classes in terms of a proper class analysis. At least there seems to emerge a generally growing awareness, that the original "middle class hype" had been somewhat superficial. As Thurlow, Resnick and Ubogu (2015, 593) observed, 'many of the absolute and relative measures ... fail to approximate classical concepts because certain income and expenditure levels may be necessary, but certainly not sufficient, to qualify a middle class'. But despite their final appeal to apply 'a more robust conceptualization that would be minimally applicable in other areas of the world as well' (Thurlow, Resnick and Ubogu 2015, 604) they fail to translate 'classical concepts' into classical class analysis.

Revisiting an earlier debate, dating back to the first (provisional and incomplete) thoughts expressed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their preliminary reflections on the notions of 'class in itself' and 'class for itself' might be illuminating.⁵ This is more than a semantic distinction between members of a social class, who '*in itself*' in relation to the mode of production are similar but remain unaware of their common interests as a class and therefore do not act collectively accordingly. In contrast, those acting in a class '*for itself*' are aware of their collective strength and pursue joint interests in an organized manner to achieve common goals.

In his essay on 'Class Consciousness', Georg Lukács (1971, 46-82) has pursued such an approach more profoundly further (cf. Nineham 2010). This is not a nostalgic step backward, but a step forward in coming to terms with the socio-political impact the ominous middle classes might have – or not have, if one defines class consciousness as 'the self-understanding of members of a social class' (Munro 2015). Lukács was aware of the different forms of social formations and their (re)production in different societies with differing degrees of penetration by the capitalist mode of production. But he also maintained that, 'every society constitutes an economic unity. The only question that arises is whether this unity enables the individual sectors of society to relate to society as a whole in such a way that their imputed consciousness can assume an economic form.' (Lukács 1971, 56) And he suggests that 'the relation to the whole created by the consciousness of one's status is not directed to the real, living economic unity' (Lukács 1971, 58). Rather,

Status – consciousness – a real historical factor masks class consciousness; in fact it prevents it from emerging at all. A like phenomenon can be observed under capitalism in the case of all "privileged" groups whose class situation lacks any immediate economic base. The ability of such a class to adapt itself to the real

economic development can be measured by the extent to which it succeeds in “capitalising” itself, i.e. transforming its privileges into economic and capitalist forms of control... (Lukács 1971: 58)

For Lukács the (petty bourgeois or peasant) ‘other classes’ in the early 20th century have an ambiguous or sterile outlook ‘because their existence is not based exclusively on their role in the capitalist system of production’. Their class interest therefore ‘concentrates on *symptoms of development* and not on development itself, and on elements of society rather than on the construction of society as a whole’ (Lukács 1971, 59; original emphasis). This suggests that what is lumped together under the label middle classes represents at best an opaque awareness if not about themselves (in the plural), then at least about society and their position, aims and politics. What then is left in terms of explanatory meaning of the term? Such ambiguity explains the different political and social orientations of members of a middle class, their different roles and positions in social struggles, and their difference in interests. Not by coincidence, the later critique by Fanon diagnoses a similar limited historical role of an African middle class, when he bemoans its role of intermediary. ‘To them, nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period’ (Fanon 2001, 122), but not ownership over productive resources developed further for the use and benefit of the local population. Rather, “this underdeveloped middle class, reduced in numbers and without capital, which refuses to follow the path of revolution, will fall into deplorable stagnation” (Fanon 2001, 121).

What’s (not) in the middle class debate?

Therborn (2014, 10) stresses that discourses on class – whether right or wrong – are always of social relevance. The world wide boom of the middle class(es) debate is therefore a remarkable symptom of our decade. The social class will remain also in the future a category of central importance. But as he states elsewhere, it remains to be seen if the future social developments will be characterized more by the new middle class(es) or by the plebeian masses (Therborn 2012, 27 and 29).

The role subscribed to the middle class(es) as a source of hope seems to be at least in parts of the literature bordering to wishful thinking, if not being an ideological smokescreen. These narratives are the flip side of the “continent of hope” propaganda, the prevailing currency for promoting investment opportunities for external actors in resource extraction. Middle classes seem to come in handy as justification for the notorious “trickle down” effect, in the absence of any meaningful employment creation or local capital accumulation through value added activities. As even the African Development Bank (2012, 13) has to admit, income inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient has widened in recent years, and six countries in sub-Saharan Africa are among the world’s ten most unequal countries. At the same time, none has achieved the goals set with regard to poverty reduction in the first Millennium Development Goal. Even the global trend is no reason for enthusiasm: ‘more than 15 percent of the world’s people remain vulnerable to multidimensional poverty’, while ‘nearly 80 percent of the global population lack comprehensive social protection’. At the same time, some ‘12 percent (842 million) suffer from chronic hunger, and nearly half of all workers – more than 1.5 billion – are in informal or precarious employment’ (UNDP 2014, 2).

As other analytical approaches to social structures and power show, it is neither the middle class(es) nor the upper fifth of the income pyramid that has any influence on the distribution of wealth in societies. They too are at the receiving end. It is indeed the top decimal (if not the top five per cent or an even smaller fraction) among the haves that has grasped the steering wheel. Their forms of appropriation and enrichment are the ultimate determinants of the scope and limit of poverty reduction by means of redistributive measures in favor of those in the bottom half of society. To understand inequalities and the mechanisms of their reproduction, the motto coined by Palma (2011) is appropriate: 'It's the share of the rich, stupid'. Even Nancy Birdsall (2010, 11), who has continued high hopes of the indispensable middle class, admits that in many developing countries 'the relevant political economy might better distinguish between the rich – with political salience – and the rest.'

One is tempted to suspect that the middle class(es) hype in some of the contexts we witness seeks to propose a historical mission of these social layers in terms of future perspectives, which in the light of the real (also material and political) power relations and structures of societies and the global economy they are never able to live up to. In another contribution to this debate, Birdsall (2015, 24) combines several hypothetical assumptions resulting in such a scenario pinning hopes on the growing middle class(es) as a relevant (if not decisive!) contributing factor towards better governance: that economic growth continues unabated; that inequality would not increase further but could decline; that 'a larger middle class has a greater interest in a responsive and accountable government'; and that 'a larger middle class is more likely to support a social contract in which the taxes it pays are largely channeled to collective and public goods from which all – including the strugglers and the poor – benefit'. This scenario seems in tendency bordering to wishful thinking, which detracts from the real challenges in a world of growing inequalities. Allocating such strategic prominence to the emerging middle class(es), elevating them into a historic mission they are expected to fulfill, at the same time allows the really rich to get off the hook again and thereby overlooks the real dimensions of class and power at play when it comes to shaping social realities.

An Oxfam paper – based on data in Piketty (2014) as well as supplied by *Credit Suisse* and *Forbes* – pointed out that about 46% of the world's measurable wealth (some 110 trillion US\$) is in the possession of one per cent of the world's population. This is 65 times as much as the lower half of the world's population has to share with about 0.71% of the global wealth. The super rich one per cent in 24 of 26 countries measured between 1980 and 2012 increased their share in the wealth further, while 70% of the global population lives in countries, in which inequalities further increased during the last 30 years. 95% of the US-American economic growth since the financial crisis ended in the pockets of the richest one per cent of society, while 90% of the population became poorer. The 85 richest people in the world control about the same proportion (0.71%) of the global wealth, from which the world's poorer half has to live (all data from Fuentes-Niva and Galasso 2014). In October 2015, *Credit Suisse* published an updated *Global Wealth Report*, which offers some sobering new insights. While the net worth on what the report considers the middle class worldwide was at US\$ 80.7 trillion or 32% of the global wealth, the wealth for those above the middle class threshold was put at US\$ 150 trillion. Together, the total wealth of both groups was put at US\$ 231 trillion or 92% of the global wealth (Credit Suisse Research Institute 2015, 32f.).

Pinning hopes for social advancement on the emerging middle classes, as Birdsall's (2015) optimistic conclusion suggests, is like the trust that those who row the galley will decide its course. Meanwhile, the captain and his adjuncts are navigating from the commanding bridge, and are not rowing at all. The ordinary crew keeps the galley moving, but only a handful others defines, decides upon and coordinates the course guiding the way – unless there is mutiny. Rather, the more interesting question therefore would be, to which extent in each given particular setting, a “spring tide” would also include segments of middle classes and which potential role these would be willing and able to play. That, in return, requires a proper class analysis based on the empirical socio-economic and –cultural realities and the degree and forms of political interaction and awareness within and among different segments of societies. The main thrust of the middle class(es) discourse has so far not been able to gain such insights.

So what about “the middle”?

Despite the amount of literature using the perceived growth of an African middle class as a point of departure, assessments tend to suggest that the African middle classes are not really expanding as originally anticipated. *Credit Suisse*, for example, bases its annual Global Wealth Report on a middle class definition of individual wealth between US\$ 50,000 and 500,000.⁶ While it records an increase in the number of middle class adults from 524 million to 664 million between 2000 and 2015, the number of middle class members based on such definition has since the financial crisis of 2007/2008 declined in Africa, while the number of those above the middle class range has increased (Credit Suisse Research Institute 2015, 34 and 35). It puts the figure of such defined “middle class” on the continent at 18.8 million (with almost a quarter of it in South Africa), quite in contrast to the 300 to 500 million suggested earlier on by the African Development Bank. Assessments suggest that it is actually not “the middle”, which expands most in African societies, but the lower and upper levels, i.e. the lowest and highest segments. A report by the Pew Research Centre maintains that ‘African countries experienced some of the most dramatic declines in poverty rates from 2001 to 2011; however, few countries had much of an increase in the share of middle-income earners’ (Kochhar 2015, 19). As observed by Morten Jerven: ‘What we are seeing is not a pyramid bulging in the middle but a society where the top spenders are getting richer’ (quoted in Brock 2015).

The trend to some extent also worries those who earn their money through sales in specific branches. Market research for companies selling consumer goods and providing services already adjusted its prognosis and expectations considerably, and suggested a less optimistic outlook for gains. *Nestle*, the biggest global player in the food industry, scaled down its regional operations in Sub-Saharan Africa and cut its workforce there in 2015 by 15% (Mwiti 2015). ‘Africans are mainly rich or poor, but not middle class’, subtitled a report in *The Economist* (2015). Despite such observations and conclusions, however, the current engagement with the phenomenon called the African middle class(es) is anything but obsolete. Independent of their size, they signify modified social relations in African societies, which indeed deserve attention and rigorous analysis. – With the emphasis on the latter.

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Notes

¹ This article is based on some previous work (cf. Melber 2013 and 2015) and the contributions to a forthcoming volume critically assessing the middle classes (Melber 2016).

² Raphael Kaplinsky, Sustainable Growth in a Globalising World – Not *Whether* But Rather *How* to Participate in the Global Economy. The European Journal of Development Research at 25: Jubilee Lecture, held at the 14th EADI General Conference, Bonn, 23 June 2014.

³ Robin Cohen, Colin Leys, Archie Mafeje, Irving Leonard Markovitz, Guy Martin, John Saul, Issa Shivji and Richard L. Sklar are a few among those who already then offered a class analytical approach missing in the current debate.

⁴ A few revealing passages are accessible on You Tube and also on the web site of The South African Civil Society Information Service (SACSIS). Available from: <http://sacsis.org.za/site/article/1270> [Accessed on 4 January 2016].

⁵ See for an informed summary of the debate the note by Andrew (1983). He refutes the common adoption and argues that Marx actually made a distinction between 'class against capital' and a 'class for itself', thereby adding a political dimension which is missing in a 'class in itself'.

⁶ This amount is translated into purchasing power parity (PPP) values by the IMF and hence in South Africa, for example, would require a minimum wealth of US\$ 22,000 to be middle class.