

Africa's Middle Classes

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Abstract

Since the early 21st century, the middle classes of the Global South became a focus of attention. However, a precarious minimum income was all it took to be considered middle class. But who exactly is middle class? As the term is applied, it should certainly not be confused with Marxist theories of class. It refers to a socio-economic status somewhere between the highest and lowest echelons of society. What constitutes middle class remains all too nebulous. This article casts doubt on the positive political and economic impact and role ascribed to the declared growth of African middle classes. It argues that middle classness is a construct, which stresses the continued vagueness and fragility of this social segment in societies and cautions of too optimistic assessments when it comes to its role.

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Keywords

Middle classes, lifestyle, identities, urbanism, boundary work

Introduction

The broadly defined middle class became a beacon of hope in development debate beginning in the early 21st century. Some experts, including Ravallion (2009), then chief economist at the World Bank, and Birdsall (2010) of the Centre for Global Development in Washington,

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considered it to be a driver of economic, social and political development. Voices were raised in many quarters – for example, at the Washington-based think tank, the Brookings Institution – calling for the growing middle classes to be strengthened. The ‘Perspectives on Global Development 2012’, published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), was emblematic in this regard, stressing the need to strengthen the growing middle classes (OECD, 2011: 103). This echoed the appeal by Birdsall (2010), who argued in support of a shift in strategies from pro-poor to middle-class-oriented economic growth as a priority in development policy. The African Development Bank (AfDB) was similarly enthusiastic about this new emerging social strata (AfDB, 2011, 2012; Ncube and Lufumpa, 2015). The annual Human Development Report (HDR) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also put the middle class in the global South centre stage (UNDP, 2013). The middle class became the light at the end of the tunnel in the discourse on development (Melber, 2013).

The emerging ‘middle classing of development’ (Southall, 2017) provoked Göran Therborn (2012: 15) to wonder if we have entered a century of the middle class. As Therborn (2014: 10) pointed out, discourses on class always have social relevance: ‘Whether right or wrong, class discourses are always socially significant, so the global surge of middle-class discourse is a noteworthy symptom of the 2010s.’ And a cartography of the ‘new middle classes’, suggesting nine different types within the category, observed ‘a need for additional research and policy analysis on the relation between middle-class characteristics, on the one hand, and growth and development on the other’ (Brandi and Büge, 2014: 30).

This article summarises the debate on the African middle classes a decade after its initial take off. It shows how scholars in African Studies have responded to the oversimplification of social strata analyses by economists, who based their initial observations, comments, assumptions and recommendations mainly on global trends. The deficiencies observed suggest that a lot of work remains to be done as regards a proper analysis. A more careful and nuanced approach may challenge some of the over-optimistic projections of social change attached to middle classes as wishful thinking rather than realistic assessments.¹

Economistic Reductionism of African Middle Class

The middle classes of the global South mainly entered the stage more prominently as part of the trickle-down effects of economic growth. These modified the socio-economic structures in the emerging economies (in particular China). More people with higher income and purchasing power elevated out of poverty stimulated consumerism by a growing segment of society, in return fuelling more production for an also expanding domestic market. As a kind of side effect to rapid processes of industrialisation and the accompanying integration of a growing labour force into the formal economy (notably much less so in most African countries), a monetisation through wage employment resulted in a growing number of households exceeding the poverty level adjusted from USD (US Dollar) 1.25 daily per person to 1.90 in 2015 (Ferreira, Jolliffe and Prydz, 2015).

The middle-class label became rather generously applied in efforts to quantify and to some extent also classify the results of economic growth rates in terms of improved income for the first decade of the 21st century. Starting with an income/consumption of as little as 2 USD per person a day, a panorama of classifications were created for the 'middle class'.² The AfDB (2011) elevated a third of Africa's population into a middle class. Its members were numbered at 300–500 million and declared a key factor for development (AfDB 2012: 13). But on closer inspection, even the advocates of the middle-class presented a more sobering picture. As Ncube (2015: 203f.) admitted:

About one-third of the population lives on \$2–\$20 a day, nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of whom fall into the floating class, with consumption expenditure between \$2 and \$4 a day. Policymakers have to pay greater attention to the emerging middle class, but more importantly, to the 'floating middle class' that is vulnerable to falling back into poverty.

An overview in the same volume observes that data from 1980 and 2010 suggest that while a 'middle class' has been growing in absolute numbers, it actually declined from 14 per cent to 13 per cent of the total population (Lufumpa et al., 2015: 12). While another chapter welcomes the trend, it points to the inherent flaw in the praise:

Afrobarometer has provided survey evidence that many Africans continue to experience their lives as impoverished, despite high levels of recorded economic growth in their countries. Macroeconomic data, which show robust rates of growth at the national level, must be considered in conjunction with data from household income surveys that show continuing poverty and a lack of improvement in the economic conditions of poorer families (Lofchie, 2015: 53).

According to an overview based on data for the years 2005–2010 and the different monetary income/expenditure thresholds applied, the African 'middle class' ranged from 20 million to over 32 million to 197 million and 350 million to 425 million: the 'middle class estimate can therefore be summed as a moving average' (Bhorat et al., 2021: 8). A comparative perspective, measuring and contrasting income and ownership of assets as categories, points out that 'measuring the middle class solely by income does not sufficiently capture the reality' (Nemeckova et al., 2020: 22). As Søggaard (2020) put it: 'When the middle class is defined by arbitrary numbers, statistics become equally arbitrary, hence the size of the middle class becomes so politicised that numbers solely based on monetary thresholds become manipulative.'

Beyond Monetary Features of Middle Classness

As Southall (2017: 217) summarised: 'the number-crunching done by the international institutions ... is fundamentally atheoretical, lacks explanatory power and only rarely moves beyond description.' Wietzke and Sumner (2018: 131) echo, 'a legitimate question remains whether the income-based definitions that dominate in the literature are

sufficiently grounded in social contexts and interactions to capture the emergence of ‘classlike’ identities and preferences.’ Over and above the quantification of financial income and expenditure as well as assets or other property (if any), middle classness requires the inclusion of further attributes. Profession (or rather means of living and its sustainability), social status, education, cultural norms and lifestyle and other contributing factors, shaped among others by gender, religion and ethnicity, all matter. They have a bearing on political orientation and a person’s influence in society. It makes no sense to generalise and speak of an ‘African middle class’. Identity certainly does shape behaviour, but it does not simply result from income or hierarchical status. Kinship (extended families are still often at least partially intact), urban networks, religion, regional background, language and ethnicity all matter to assess positioning, options and interests guiding social interaction and engagement. Not least gender is an important category – especially given the number of female-headed households. Many of these co-determining factors have been neglected in the debate initiated by economists in international institutions of the Northern hemisphere observing trends in the global South and exporting (if not imposing) their assessments without necessary adjustments to Africa, where some of the locally operating agencies all too uncritically followed suit (Melber, 2015).

Scholars in African Studies however did not remain idle. They were quick to accept the challenge by reacting to a straightjacket imposed from the outside, which as many of them rightly criticised was far from social realities on the ground. As repeatedly pointed out by Lentz (2015, 2016 and 2020), the discovery of African middle classes as elites and a contributing factor to development and governance was by no means as new as suggested. From the late 1960s, a wide range of analyses on the postcolonial state and social classes in Africa engaged with middle-class-related notions (notably Lloyd, 1966), and created terms such as bureaucratic class (Lloyd, 1967), the political and intendant class (Cohen, 1972), the bureaucratic bourgeoisie (Shivji, 1976), the labour aristocracy (Rosenberg, 1976), the niziers (Von Freyhold, 1977), the organisational bourgeoisie (Markovitz, 1977) and the managerial bourgeoisie (Sklar, 1979). These are all examples of efforts to come to terms with an emerging formation of social classes, which to some extent in today’s perspectives could be incorporated under the label middle classes.

This earlier discussion focused in the main on an emerging petty bourgeoisie (a term largely absent from the current debate) occupying the echelons of the post-colonial state, replacing the colonial administration and placing its economic tentacles in state-owned enterprises or parastatals. Their class interest was mainly looked at in terms of agency executed in the interest of state-affirmative consolidation of neocolonial economic structures (see i.a. Arrighi and Saul, 1973; Saul, 1974 for Tanzania; Leys, 1976 and 1978 for Kenya). Since then, the social strata were complemented by members of a growing private sector. Beneficiaries of state-centred and dependent gains were in some cases stagnating or even shrinking as a result of reduced public employment opportunities, as documented with reference to Kenya and Tanzania by Simson (2020). Recent engagements with the subject therefore revisit terrain, which had already a place within African Studies earlier on. The rediscovery triggered new investigations of emerging social

formations in Sub-Saharan Africa labelled as middle class (see among others several chapters in Melber, 2016; and Kroeker, O’Kane and Scharrer, 2018).

These explorations have on the one hand criticised the absence of a proper class analysis and are reminiscent of long-held theoretically diverse approaches, linked mainly (but not exclusively) to Karl Marx and Max Weber (see most systematically Southall, 2016: 1–22) while also more generally contextualising the term middle class (Therborn, 2020: 63–67). On the other hand, new undertakings stressed – not least with reference to Pierre Bourdieu – the need to include lifestyle, aspirations and sociocultural milieus to determine the individual belonging and positioning of something simply placed ‘in between’ (see especially Neubert and Stoll, 2015 and 2018; Neubert 2019a, 2019b and 2021), while Spronk (2012) draws attention to complementing aspects of sexual life among the Nairobi younger middle-class members. She has since then recorded some curiosity, ‘whether Neubert’s proposition to replace class with milieu will be taken up’ (Spronk, 2020b: 217) and pointed to the challenges of how a proper class analysis is suitable and applicable to African realities – a matter which provoked a debate among several of the protagonists (cf. Melber, 2017; Noret, 2017; Southall, 2018a and 2018b; Copans, 2020).

A growing social segment drawing attention as a matter of interest for analyses is the new generation of younger urbanites, a trend among others illustrated by the Danish-based project on Middle Class Urbanism, which includes a major focus on African cities (Nielsen 2020). This emphasis on the emergence of an urban middle class at the same time shows that so far, the middle-class debate has to a large extent neglected rural-based social transitions and (trans-)formations, which would deserve inclusion in an all-embracing assessment of social strata unfolding. In her explorations of the new generations of urban middle classes in Nairobi, Spronk (2014: 110) shows that more than merely the quantity of income is required for a proper assessment – such as lifestyle as an essential factor. For her, young urban professionals in higher qualified positions are the vanguard and their lifestyle is an expression of subjective realities. New identities and forms of cultural (re)production reduce the hitherto close bonds to ethnic and regional origins and extended families. Such new forms of middle classness illustrate how education, urbanisation and social stratification have contributed to social and cultural change in African societies. Middle classness as an aspirational category of belonging and the lifestyle associated with it are for Spronk (2014: 111) evidence of forms of (social) capital beyond money, which are of central importance for understanding middle classes in formation.

In addition to the prominent focus on urbanites in Nairobi, younger generations’ middle class (re-)positioning in cities such as Luanda (Schubert, 2016; Gastrow, 2020), Maputo (Sumich, 2018; Nielsen and Jenkins, 2021), Dar es Salaam (Mercer, 2014, 2016 and 2020) and Gaborone (Durham, 2020) illustrate the effects of urbanisation as a relevant factor for middle classness as well as related lifestyle and identities. Trends among segments in the younger urban black middle class in South Africa (Ndlovu, 2020; Oyedemi, 2021) suggest similar shifts. Breines (2021) shows how migration between the two Ethiopian urban centres of Adigrat and Addis Ababa created opportunities for young

people to advance into some kind of upward mobility considered as middle classness. In their exploration of Maputo's urbanites, Nielsen and Jenkins (2021: 177) frame middle-classness as an aesthetic moral community, 'potentially exhausting itself as a social, economic and aesthetic utopian ideal ... founded on the vacuity of middle-classness'. As they argue, 'it is precisely because of the fractured relationship between the concept and its content that it becomes possible for urbanites ... to articulate a new form of urban insurgency' by engaging with land and housing (Nielsen and Jenkins, 2021: 177). Middle classness advances to an urban ideal, but unfulfilled aspirational desires within a process of rapid urbanisation contrast with and thereby underline political-economic weaknesses. Rather than based on income and consumption, middle class is seen as 'a particular ideal of urban living', which faces limitations in the socio-economic realities. Sumich (2018: 159) characterises his middle-class interlocuters in Maputo as an example of 'a complicated web of dependence, alienation, and ambivalence', with little love for Frelimo but at the same time afraid that a future without the party could be even worse. Oyedemi (2021) points out that the post-apartheid youth of South Africa, although 'born-free', have remained as post-colonial casualties in the shadow of coloniality, confronted with a difficult process of decolonisation.

Development Through Middle Classes?

The widely held assumption that middle classes play by definition a positive role in the development of African societies is, at a closer look, a less convincing proposition. Handley (2014: 13) could not identify any sufficient evidence that African middle classes are 'automatically' promoting and contributing to economic growth, as normative models tend to claim. She is rather sceptical as regards the potential for social transformation through these groups. As regards politics and democratisation, her work confirms insights offered by Afrobarometer surveys in several countries: members of the middle classes do not trust those with less formal education. The more educated respondents were, the more they tended to agree with the statement that citizens should not have the right to vote if they do not fully understand everything at stake during elections (Bratton, 2013: 281). Exploring the Kenyan middle-class formations, Neubert (2016: 123) concludes that 'the hope that these groups thrive as middle class for democracy or represent a politically relevant middle-class consciousness is not fulfilled.' Based on data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey, Schotte (2021: 477) confirms that the 'standard of living' alone is no reliable indicator for political attitudes: 'rising incomes and falling poverty rates cannot easily be equated with the emergence of a politically conscious middle class that supports democracy and good governance, and the link frequently made between an expanding middle class and pro-democratic political reforms remains fragile.'

Neither economic growth nor the expansion of a middle class as its result automatically strengthen democratic values or lead to the increase of social welfare state benefits and security for less privileged groups. There is little evidence for a correlation between growth and the stimulation of social advancement, as a Working Paper of the

International Monetary Fund concluded (Martinez and Mlachila, 2013: 22). While economic growth in principle should contribute to the expansion of available resources for social programmes, their implementation depends on a series of political and institutional factors. Middle classes often play at best a minor role in these processes beyond the pursuance of their own interests. Even Birdsall (2010: 11) concedes that in many countries especially of the global South a relevant analysis of the political economy should differentiate between the rich with political influence and the rest but she does not depart from the hope that a growing middle class will be relevant if not a decisive factor for better governance. This is based on her hypothetical assumption that a growing middle class has a greater interest in an accountable government responsive to criticism and that a bigger middle class has an interest in supporting a social contract, according to which they are willing to pay taxes for investments into collective public goods, also to the benefit of the poor (Birdsall 2015: 24). This sounds more like wishful thinking than a realistic assessment and seems far from a reliable general characteristic of middle-class behaviour.

Even the optimistic prognosis of a growth of the African middle classes cannot be taken for granted. The HDR celebrating the rise of the middle classes already predicted that by 2030 some 80per cent of the middle classes would be residents of the global South, but only 2per cent of these would be in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP, 2013: 14). As a result of the end of the exceptional economic growth rates recorded for many countries in Africa at the start of the 21st century, current stagnation and even decline with the corona pandemic, the expansion of African middle classes is at best on hold. As is the case elsewhere, the lower and higher income groups (the poor and the rich) are growing, but not those in between. According to the Pew Research Centre, African countries reported in the first decade of this century some of the most dramatic reductions in absolute poverty. But only a few of these registered a meaningful increase of those in the middle-income category (Kochhar, 2015: 19). As an article in *The Economist* (2015) subtitled, 'Africans are mainly rich or poor, but not middle class.' This points to an essential flaw in the general assumption that economic growth will quasi automatically create a growing middle class. As argued with reference to empirical data for South Africa, economic growth does not guarantee the emergence of a stable middle class: 'Whether economic growth leads to the expansion of the middle class ... will depend on its distributional nature, sustainability and employment intensity' (Schotte, Zizzamia and Leibbrandt, 2018: 102).

Such relevant cautions to the middle-class hype should, however, not lead us to abandon the analytical engagement with the social groups put – rightly or misleadingly so – into such a category. Further exploration is needed to reach more reliable insights as regards their relevance in particular societies. This points to the need for much more micro-analytical undertakings that replace the praise found in initial economic writing.

The soaring expectations and projections into the growing middle classes emphasised the upside of certain social developments but tended to neglect the overall context. The reality is a far cry from the myth of a large, cohesive and progressive middle class. Much of what triggered the (re-)emergence of a middle-class debate was connected to an

economistic, reduced developmentalism. The monetary aspect occupied the centre in the initial deliberations. Already Thurlow, Resnick and Ubogu (2015: 593) observed that most of the absolute and relative measurements presented mainly by economists were insufficient for a rigorous analysis of class. Monetary income and expenditure are relevant criteria, but certainly not enough to make a proper assessment of what characterises or qualifies as middle class. Many of the estimates were meant to assess the consumptive potential emerging in African markets from the point of view of potential investors. As Therborn (2020: 67) sums up: 'The new triumphalism ... was almost exclusively about consumption. 'Middle class' meant anybody who had some money to spend.' This information mattered primarily to companies scouting the markets. The focus on what was dubbed the 'African Lions' was revealing:

Understanding the middle class is important to brands wishing to grow in any market. The concept of a middle class carries with it a sense of financial stability, a developed consumer culture and a clear trajectory of growth (Van Blerk and Mwaura, 2018: 2).

In the meantime, the original enthusiasm over the emergence of a meaningful middle class defined purely in terms of income and expenditure, has ebbed away. Credit Suisse narrowed Africa's 'real' middle class in 2015 down to 3.3per cent (or 18.8 million) of the continent's 572 million adults with one quarter living in South Africa alone (Mwiti, 2015). Original plans for investment and expansion into what was expected to be expanding markets were stopped and many internationally operating companies in the retail and consumption sector made significant downward adjustments. Already in 2015, Nestlé downsized its workforce in Sub-Saharan Africa by 15per cent, and its regional chief executive stated: 'We thought this would be the next Asia, but we have realised the middle class here in the region is extremely small and it is not really growing' (Mwiti, 2015). Since then, economic growth rates in many African states came to a staggering halt. Likewise did the growth of a local middle class. According to the IMF (2020: V), the contraction recorded for 2020 reduced the per capita incomes to 2013 levels and growth forecast for 2021 were markedly lower than the expected global recovery. UNCTAD (2020) prognosed that investment flows in Africa would drop significantly.

With the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ailing juvenile class in the making became chronically ill. With the decline of money available for consumption, the 'shopping mall culture' (Eduful and Eduful, 2021) suffered in as much as the infant middle classes were hit by the regression. The case of South Africa illustrates the point. Home to the continent's biggest proportion of middle-class segments (based on the monetary categorisation), estimates in early 2021 suggested that one-third of its middle-class families fell into vulnerability (BusinessTech, 2021a). Data published by a Cape Town-based think tank suggested that by mid-2020, South Africa's middle class had declined since 2017 from 6.1 million individuals to 2.7 million (BusinessTech, 2021b).

The hope for a middle class fuelled development, for which as indicated above scepticism has always been advisable, has been massively bruised. This does not mean to turn

a back on the analyses of social strata related to such categorisation. Rather, expanding the explorations to add further insights would be a constructive approach. This also should include a focus beyond the urban middle classes in formation to transformations in rural areas, which hitherto seem to have been widely neglected. Instructive is the observation by Ponte and Brockington (2020: 221f.) on developments among smallholders in rural Tanzania, ‘that wealth segmentation has switched from a pyramid structure to a “pointed egg”’. Their findings challenge assumptions that small-scale agriculture offers no socio-economic advances out of poverty. As they stress:

It would be premature to call this group a new ‘middle class’, as the differentiation between these households and those in lower echelons of village society is not that great. We are not making bold claims about changing class relations within Tanzanian villages. We are merely observing that a middle tier of village society is thickening (Ponte and Brockington, 2020: 222).

The Middle Classes Beyond Class Analysis

So, what are the key characteristics of a middle class? The term is not clearly defined. Playing statistical games with income data is all too simplistic. The views of people sharing certain commonalities (such as income) do not end in conformity and shared values but are shaped by widely differing factors. The significance of the informal economy and clientelist relationships require attention too. The truth is that many people who are broadly considered to belong to the middle class have not achieved any kind of stable prosperity. Apart from the support extended families offer, there is a general lack of social protection. Extended families, however, are under intense pressure – not least due to urban–rural and intergenerational divides. Local structures in societies matter, so does the concept of “micromilieus” to analyse politics in greater detail. Such approach takes account of sociocultural factors with a strong impact on political preferences and positions. As Neubert (2019a: 29) argues:

the current debate has not yet developed an appropriate approach to the analysis of inequality, social structure and processes of differentiation. ... Although the simple economic definitions of ‘class’ are widely criticised, there is still no analytical concept for analysis of the ‘middle class’, or of social inequality in general. ... The regular use of the term ‘middle class’ implies a conceptual clarity that is still lacking.

Spronk (2020a: 484 and 485) argues similarly:

Rather than looking at the middle class as a coherent category based on economic characteristics, considering it as a nascent category embraces the slipperiness of the term. (...) A focus on agency and experience shows that structural class categories cannot reveal or explain the differences in people’s lives and trajectories, and thus presents a strong challenge to simplifying categorisations such as the ‘African’ middle classes.

This reiterates the continued stress by Lentz (2020: 459), ‘that some element of active boundary work is necessary to transform a socio-economic category of people into a (middle) class.’³ Any analysis of middle classes must consider more than the levels of income. Assessments must take note of sociocultural dimensions. However, despite the widespread criticism that middle class is mostly defined on the basis of economic data, we currently lack a definition that would be more useful for assessing inequality, social stratification and differentiation in society.

Regardless of many valid objections, it makes sense to pay attention to Africa’s middle classes. Their actual size and substance need to be examined more closely from both an economic and political angle. For doing so, inspiration could be usefully drawn from class theory inspired by Marx and Weber in as much as by lifestyle and milieu studies inspired by Bourdieu. Such an approach – being aware of the boundary work – clearly exceeds economic reductionism translating middle class into a purely monetary category of income and expenditure. As importantly, class analysis proper includes a focus on who owns the means of production, which determines who depends on whom economically. This also directly influences the notion, scope and nature of any development – as well as the role by members of a middle class in its reproduction. Tackling these matters demythologises the concept of middle class.

More recently, empirically rooted and theoretically informed field research-based African case studies have grown in numbers. Similar to comparative perspectives and analyses of social strata categorised as middle classes in societies of the global South elsewhere they suggest that such formations are in flux and display a variety of characteristics and dynamics. This suggests that members of groups sharing some common features, often reduced to monetary income, cannot be pinned down as a class of its own and in its own. In pursuance of further insights, one should keep in mind the sensible pointer by Spronk (2018: 317): ‘Seeing the problems associated with ‘middle class’ in Africa therefore provides a productive starting point to rethink the concept itself, based on empirical investigations *from* Africa and not only with regard *to* the continent’ (emphasis in the original). While considering Africa’s middle classes an ‘elusive reality’, Darbon (2018: 51) seconds by diagnosing that ‘something is at work ... in the “middle” of African societies’ and that ‘African societies are moving. It is time to investigate what is actually happening to their social structures.’

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2. For an overview, see Stoffel (2016: 56) and Sumner (2012).
3. Some examples of such boundary work for South Africa are De Coninck (2018), and with a focus on consumerism as a significant element in identity formation Mnisi and Ngcongco (2021).

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Mittelschichten in Afrika

Zusammenfassung

Seit Anfang des Jahrhunderts wurde den Mittelschichten des globalen Südens verstärkt Aufmerksamkeit zuteil. Doch es war nur ein prekäres Minimumeinkommen erforderlich, um zu den Mittelschichten gerechnet zu werden. Was aber versteckt sich genauer hinter diesen Mittelschichten? Der Begriff (im Englischen „middle classes“) sollte gewiss nicht mit marxistischen Klassentheorien durcheinandergebracht werden. Er verweist in erster Linie auf ein soziales Segment zwischen den obersten und untersten Gesellschaftsschichten. Was eine Mittelschicht ausmacht bleibt allzu nebulös. Dieser Artikel bezweifelt die positive politische und wirtschaftliche Rolle, die dem erklärten Wachstum afrikanischer Mittelschichten pauschal zugewiesen wird. Er argumentiert, dass es sich um ein Konstrukt von Pseudo-Klasse handelt, betont die Unklarheit und Fragilität des sozialen Segments und warnt vor allzu optimistischen Annahmen hinsichtlich der Rolle seiner Mitglieder.

Schlagwörter

Mittelschichten, Lifestyle, Identitäten, Stadtplanung, Arbeit an den Rändern