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**MELBER, Henning (ed.). 2016. The Rise of Africa's Middle Class. Myths, Realities and Critical Engagements. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute / London: Zed Books. 219 pages. ISBN 978-1-78360-713-6**

*reviewed by*

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This book makes an important contribution to the ongoing revival of class analysis, after a notable decline between the 1970s and 1990s. This decline was partly attributable to retreating of academic efforts from engaging the public on the meaning and practice of class (Savage, 2016), and partly due to what Flemmen (Flemmen, 2013) sees as the rise of alternative discourses such as post modernism, and what Jeffery (1988) refers to as 'cultural turn'. Adopting a bold posture, this volume contends with the notorious income based class analyses which are obsessed with quantitative measurements and which have shaped middle class discourse as part of the economism movement, together with the likes of GDP, poverty, and development as a whole. The book lives up to its title, given that it challenges dominant myths held in the scholarly field, about Middle classes as follows:

**Myth One: Middle Classes (MC) should be understood in terms of incomes**

The introductory chapter alludes to the argument made by Goran Therborn, who points to possibilities of a (21<sup>st</sup>) middle class century, following the dominance of the 20<sup>th</sup> by the proletariat. On the possibility of a 21<sup>st</sup> century as a middle class century, the book launches itself.

The volume takes on the varying monetary definitions of middle class, ranging from the UNDP \$10-\$100 to the African Development Bank \$2-\$20, citing that these income variations should be seen in light of the unfinished business of defining middle classes. It further goes on to rebuke the dominance of reductionist methodological analyses of class pointing out examples such as Kharas and Gertz (2010) who uses income and consumption levels in measurement of the middle class. In chapter 2 Tim Stoffel (2016) argues that income and consumption are too narrow for any meaningful understanding of middle classes and suggests the need to consider human development indicators such as health, life expectancy and education. By the same token, from the very outset the volume questions

the optimism presented by income based definitions, which, perhaps romantically, suggest that by 2030 over three quarters of MCs will reside in developing countries, with paltry 2% residing in SSA.

**Myth Two: Middle Classes hold particular values that are more liberal/progressive**

In debunking this myth, the book argues that middle classes are anything but homogeneous. On this, the authors follow Hsiao (2006) Hong Kong study which concluded that middle classes tend to be situational in political behaviour. My Ph.D work which I completed in 2016 made similar conclusions.

Responding more directly to the homogeneity myth, the volume infers the following: "On balance, one can conclude that neither economic growth nor the proclaimed rise of a middle class automatically heralds the spread of democratic values" (Melber, 2016:7). In this line of argument, the authors contest a popular tradition advanced by scholars such as Lipset (1959);

Kenny (2011); van de Walle (2012) and perhaps most notably Barrington Moore's (1966) mantra, 'no bourgeoisie no democracy'. Countering this long standing tradition, the authors almost arrive at Therborn's conclusion, that no democracy should make itself dependent on the middle class. By this token the authors suggest that the hopes attributed to the rise of middle classes might be at least wishful thinking, at most ideological smokescreen.

In one of the offensive (rather than defensive) arguments made in the book, in chapter 4, Hellsten goes as far as suggesting that the notion of shared democratic values among African middle classes serves (western) individualism and capitalism agenda (2017). She questions the arguments which advance that African middle classes should or might hold politically liberal views, when the massive immigration into Europe has dismantled widely defended theories of Europe as a middle class society and therefore politically liberal. She argues that European (so called middle) societies now hold increasingly hostile and conservative political views. Why should African Middle Classes be seen as different, she asks. Hellsten further holds that consumption habits are probably driven by spatial contexts more than income, which easily links to what Dieter Neubert, (citing Mangin, 1970) refers to as peasants in the city.

Reinforcing Hellsten's argument, Neubert (who authors chapter 5 of this volume) also reminds us that European fascism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was largely supported by middle classes (2016).

### **Myth Three: African Middle Classes have suddenly appeared**

Lentz (2016) tracks the inter-play between elitism and middle class concepts, arguing that these two have historically intersected. And she is right. In 1956 for example, writing for UNESCO's International Social Science Bulletin titled African Elites, several Africa-based scholars made enlightening contributions. In this Bulletin, writing about South Africa, Ngcobo interchanges these terminologies as if they were the same. Lentz therefore warns against ahistorical approaches on African Middle Classes, which might suggest that the middle classes have recently appeared from nowhere. She warns that while scholarly interest might be recent, the middle classes themselves have been around all along, perhaps in different labels. Notwithstanding, Lentz suggests the need to perhaps differentiate between Elites (management group) and middle classes (social origin) in future research. Future research according to Lentz should also critically look at comparative studies around the sorts of capitalisms under which middle classes form, and how middle classes interact with the nature of the state. This sort of research, she argues, might place African Middle Classes alongside middle classes everywhere, and if it does, it will dispense with the notion of African exceptionalism on class analysis.

### **Critique:**

First, while the volume does address the question of size, the authors could have gone further to differentiate between Fukuyama's (2014) middle class society and society with middle classes. Could it be that African Middle Classes are unpredictable (politically or otherwise) because of their small size? What if, to modify Fukuyama's pointer, African countries were characterized by middle class societies with working class rather than working class societies with middle class?

Second, Akingugbe (2016) and Wohlmuth's (2016) as well as Ngoma (2017) make an important argument concerning Nigeria and South Africa's middle classes located in the private sector. However, both chapters (as do the others) missed an opportunity to elaborate on the essential differences

(whether in type, form or character) between middle classes who are based in the private sector and those based within the state.

Third, on the whole, modern Afrikaner middle classes (in South Africa), European as well as Chinese middle classes formed during processes of industrialization. Perhaps the book could have looked at whether there are similar trends of industrialization based middle class formation in Africa. What might be the consequence in countries such as Kenya and Rwanda which seem to move from agriculture to services skipping industrialization altogether?

Fourth, the book successfully dispenses with orthodox assumptions of middle classes. It however could have been more convincing on what the real character of African middle classes is, rather than what it is not. That African Middle Classes are not necessarily democratic, neither should we hang our economic hopes on them, is clear from the book. But what are they then? On this point, it seems to me that much of the volume remains on the defensive, explaining what the middle classes are not rather than what they are.

In conclusion, in its own right, the book makes a significant contribution to African studies in general and African Middle Classes in particular. This it does through offering some sort of dialectic by balancing currents and unbalancing others at the same time. It beautifully balances between empirical data and theoretical arguments. But also, it unbalances the dominant sorts of analyses of class, which romantically present neat masks on the character of middle classes. The volume shows, successfully so, that underneath the surface, African Middle Classes occupy and maintain a rather untidy if not disorderly social, political and economic territory.

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