Africa 88 (2) 2018: 425–42

Reviews of books

Roger Southall, *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa*. Rochester NY: James Currey (hb £25 – 978 1 84701 143 5). 2016, 296 pp.

Southall's scope is ambitious: mapping the rise of the black middle class in South Africa and examining its current sociological, economic and political significance. Taking his cue from Leo Kuper's 1965 book on the 'African bourgeoisie', Southall presents an updated and expanded set of views on the intersection of race and class in South Africa.

The book starts with the argument that the black middle class, although 'relatively small in both absolute terms and as a proportion of the total population', has 'experienced significant growth as a result of the democratic transition' (p. 42). Southall argues that new perspectives are needed on what this group means for the country. The 'newness' of the South African black middle class, although the raison d'être of the book, is contested by the historical perspectives presented in Chapter 2. Although the existence of middle-class blacks was anathema to the project of apartheid, there exists a rich and well-documented history of middle-class lifestyles and ideologies among black South Africans. As such, it is worth asking what it is about this so-called 'new' black middle class that requires special attention.

How is the post-apartheid black middle class, which has been valorized as much as it has been misunderstood, specifically new? As previously disadvantaged South Africans were the intended beneficiary of new laws of redress, affirmative action and black economic empowerment, it can be argued that the post-apartheid state-led imperative was the expansion and entrenchment of the black middle class. In separate chapters for each theme, Southall examines the political strategies implemented to grow the black middle class, the role of education in cementing its position, the kinds of work that the black middle class undertakes, and the ways in which it socializes and orients itself politically.

Around the world, the exact characteristics of the middle class are contested, but Southall presents demographic data to delineate clearer boundaries for defining the South African black middle class: statistics on education (enrolment at universities), occupation and workforce profiles, and earnings, which together flesh out the picture of an inherently contested social category. 'The ambiguities of the black middle class make it immensely difficult to portray, and serve as a guarantee that debate about its social and political characteristics is set to continue for years to come' (p. 224).

From the perspective of critical research into African consumer culture, it is notable that Southall accentuates the relevance of black middle-class consumption patterns. 'It was the spending by the rapidly growing black middle class that was presented as "spurring the South African boom"' (p. 170). The grouping is characterized as being preoccupied with consumption and affluence, as the marketeer-invented label 'black diamonds' implies. Southall's discussion of 'black diamonds' (pp. 171–5) relies to a certain extent on an unproblematized notion of 'conspicuous' consumption that sees new wealth as 'flaunted' rather than as a complex intersection between aspiration, political agency and contested notions of how to achieve economic empowerment. The questions Southall asks about consumption – 'will the middle classes save for productive investment or will they simply opt for unproductive consumption? Will they place personal enrichment above "development"? Can "development" in Africa simply be consumption led?' (p. 241) – bely a theoretical orientation that neglects the role of consumption in

growth processes, and perhaps also implies that consumption is inherently a potentially morally hazardous terrain for African citizenship. As such, some may be disappointed with what the book contributes to critical thinking about consumption in post-apartheid culture specifically, and in the racialized postcolonial world in general (see *Money from Nothing* by Deborah James, and *Consumption, Media & Culture in South Africa*, edited by Mehita Iqani and Bridget Kenny, both also published in 2016, for potentially more nuanced perspectives; one of reviewers should declare an interest here as the editor of the *Consumption* volume).

Another weakness of the book is its attitude towards the status conferred on mass media coverage. Southall often refers to journalistic articles or opinion pieces published in mainstream media spaces as evidence for certain claims. But media texts are not reflections of reality but are carefully constructed representations of it, which need to be treated with more analytical scepticism than Southall sometimes affords them. The possibility that the very notion of the black middle class could be a construction of the media, in tandem with other powerful political and economic actors, does not seem to enter into the discussion.

Nevertheless, the book remains an important contribution to understanding class and race, especially in the South African context, with its racist history and colonial past. It will interest scholars working on South Africa, and also those who think critically about the construction of middle classes around the world.

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doi:10.1017/S0001972018000037

Luke Sinwell and Siphiwe Mbatha, *The Spirit of Marikana: the rise of insurgent trade unionism in South Africa*. London: Pluto Press (hb £65 – 978 0 7453 3653 4; pb £19.99 – 978 0 7453 3648 0). 2016, 224 pp.

Mass strikes have been crucial turning points in South Africa's political and economic history. The mass strikes of black workers in Durban in January and February 1973 laid the foundation for the modern labour movement. Trade unions for black workers were established after these strikes in all the major metropolitan areas of South Africa. These emerging unions approached employers, and later the apartheid state, cautiously at first by winning recognition for their embryonic organizations at plant level before gradually establishing nationwide industrial unions. This strategy led to the reform of the industrial relations system in 1979, allowing for the formal recognition of trade unions for black workers and their right to join the established collective-bargaining system.

If the 1973 strikes led to the reconfiguration of the system of industrial relations and the emergence of an independent workers' movement for the first time in South Africa, it was the massacre of thirty-four striking mineworkers on 16 August 2012 at Marikana that called into question the sustainability of the new post-apartheid order.

The Marikana massacre had an immediate impact on political life. The launch of the left-wing populist Economic Freedom Front (EFF) in 2013, and its ability to win over 1 million voters in the April 2014 general election, and over 2 million in the August 2016 local government elections, has had a dramatic impact on parliament. There, they have put the ANC – and President Zuma in particular – on the defensive and have also overshadowed the official opposition. The decision in December 2013