



## Program Point Sud 2017

# Middle Classes, Protest and Social Change in Africa and Beyond

17th-21th March 2017

Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study

Report

**stias** STELLENBOSCH INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY  
STELLENBOSSE INSTITUUT VIR GEVORDERDE NAVORSING



# DFG

## **1 Organisers**

Dr Antje Daniel, Development Sociology, University of Bayreuth

Prof Hennie Kotzé, Political Sciences, University of Stellenbosch

Prof Henning Melber, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala

Dr. Florian Stoll, Development Sociology, University of Bayreuth

## **2 Themes and Objectives**

For some years, scholars, media, development agencies and activists have been debating about “middle classes” in Africa. Since 2000, millions of people in African countries could improve their socioeconomic position. Their better off situation also had an impact on lifestyles, political attitudes and activities. The initial discourse on the middle classes was, however, to a large extent shaped and influenced by reductionist, economic interpretations. These were mainly confined to a definition based on a low threshold of monetary income/expenditure and were increasingly questioned for their fuzziness. Since then, there has been a gradual shift of the debate towards more nuanced analyses. These new approaches consider more significant components such as status and political awareness as well. Other studies examine factors related to culture, lifestyle, habitus, ethnicity and/or ‘race’, religion and more, which a proper assessment of the middle classes (rather in the plural to recognize the diversity or more precise, middle income strata) requires. One of the most important but rarely properly studied aspects in this debate is the complex relation between middle income strata, protest and social change. This conference brought, therefore, scholars from several disciplines and continents together with activists. The conference had South Africa as its main focus, while other countries in Africa and elsewhere served as comparative reference points. South Africa is one of the world’s most unequal societies. In South Africa, social disparities provoke massive social protests, considered to be among the most frequent worldwide. They culminated in the Marikana Massacre among striking miners but also in notorious demonstrations of the service delivery sector in several townships, labeled as popcorn protests (Bond 2006, 2015). The recent student protests ‘Fees must fall’ and ‘Rhodes must fall’ underline the diversity of protests. Some of these are class based, and members of the middle classes are often perceived as part or even at the core of such initiatives. However, it is neither in South Africa nor in other cases clear, how stratification – and middle class positions in particular – relate to and translate into protest and political goals for social change. Debates frequently assume that middle class actors are politically active; social movement studies often consider protest in relation to class-consciousness. The conference entered new territory by combining the social movement and middle class approaches.

- I) The first objective was to enact an innovative theoretical approach in the conference program. This new approach aimed at combining theories and empirical studies about stratification, differentiation and social movement theory that had been so far separated.
- II) A second objective was discussing the relation between middle classes, social movements and change with reference to the example of South Africa. One underlying

idea was to come to new insights by focusing on one particular country, test the validity of theoretical assumptions there and taking other contexts as points of comparison.

III) As a third objective, the program brought, for this purpose, scholars and activists from South Africa together with researchers from other African countries, Europe and North and South America. Consequently, this conference initiated a trans-continental dialogue on stratification, differentiation and social movements from diverse perspectives.

IV) The fourth objective of the conference was to examine and criticize widely shared assumptions about the relation between middle classes and social change.

### **3 Methodology and Results**

The conference consisted mainly of thematically sorted blocks with presentations, panel discussions and public lectures. In addition, the reflection on the whole conference on the final day was organized in the form of open working groups in which the participants discussed the outcomes of the previous days. All panels left enough space for discussions. There was also a Young Scholars Workshop in which senior scholars provided young scholars feedback on their research. Regular dinners and an excursion gave the participants an opportunity to get to know the surrounding area and to talk to each other in a less formal setting. Unfortunately, some participants could not attend the conference as planned.<sup>1</sup>

The different days of the conference (March 17-21) focused on particular aspects of the relation between middle class, protest and social change. Friday (March 17) concentrated on the theoretical discussion of concepts and their application in the Global South, in particular, in Africa. After a welcome address by the conveners, Roger Southall discussed in his introductory presentation missing aspects of the debate on middle classes in Africa. The first panel (Wherry/Neubert/Weiss) asked how it is possible to conceptualize middle class in the Global South in contrast to ‘western’ concepts. The second panel (Müller/Randeria) focused on the conceptualization of social movements in the global South with presentations on South Africa and India. Shalini Randeria showed the complexity of conceptualizations in certain contexts and discussed before this background if a distinction between “western” and “nonwestern” approaches is appropriate. By stressing the entanglement of societies in different regions, and by pointing at dangers of culturalist essentialism in a multi-connected global world, she introduced an epistemological standard for the discussions on middle class and social movements. Finally, Peter Alexander discussed with reference to South Africa the relation between socio-economic groups defined as middle class and protesting groups with shared interests that are called in line with Marx also classes. These presentations laid the foundation for the discussion in the following days and were, therefore, a helpful starting point in order to get a shared understanding of the different theoretical approaches, namely the middle class debate and social movement studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Convener Henning Melber was not able to come due to an urgent surgery. Celi Scalon (Rio de Janeiro) could also not come due to a severe injury in advance of the workshop. In addition, participant Amuzweni Ngoma had due to a crime related incidence return home while travelling to the conference and Ibrahim Steyn could also not join as planned.

On Saturday (March 18), activists and scholars jointly considered the relation of middle classes, protest and social change in South Africa (Morgan/Mdlalose/Dsa). The public lecture of Sabelo Ndlovu introduced one of the main discourses in the recent student protests while the panelists Ismail-Sooliman, Nyamnjoh and Moore elaborated the disparities and differences of protests at varying South African Universities and their relation to class and race. On this day, it became clear that scholars and activists from different world regions found a common language. They focused on the composition of specific movements and the question if the involvement of middle classes makes a movement a “middle class movement”. After a critique of a certain type of research, which talks about social movements in a simplified way like ‘objects’ of research, the participants discussed how a collaboration of researchers and activists could look like in which activists are more than just a source of information.

Sunday (March 19) treated the relation between inequality and change in South Africa. After a public lecture on the civil sphere theory and its future development (J. Alexander), a panel treated the connection between social groups, inequality and change (Moraes da Silva/Bond/Praeg). The following panel focused on middle classes as political actors from the perspective of urbanisation (Kotzé/Crankshaw). The presentations demonstrated the variety of approaches on middle class and protest. For instance, Leonard Praeg emphasized the role and impact of supposed traditional norms for middle class actors and social movement activists from a philosophical perspective. Political scientist Hennie Kotzé highlighted the significance of political consciousness and values of middle class actors by using quantitative data. In the afternoon, the conference participants made an excursion to Solms Delta Vineyard where they learnt in a guided tour about the history of the area, did some wine tasting and had dinner. The excursion gave the possibility to build up networks and to continue with the debates in an informal environment.

Monday (March 20) widened the scope beyond South Africa. In the first session, junior scholars got the possibility to present their research to senior scholars at the Young Scholars Workshop (Steffen/Lombard/Manqoyi/Moore/Neubert/Southall). The following double panel examined the relation between middle class and protest in Africa and other parts of the world and stressed once again the numerous entangling and complementing perspectives on middle class and protest. These first presentations had a thematic focus on hegemony and middle classes in South Africa, while other papers added a comparative perspectives with talks on middle class in Zimbabwe (Gava), middle class in Brazil (Scalon; in absence), middle class activism in Angola’s Luanda (Gastrow), middle class and politics in Nigeria (Orji) and middle class in Namibia (Amupanda). This panel demonstrated that there is growth of middle classes in different contexts of the Global South in the shadow of economic prosperity. At the same time, the presentations showed also how different actors articulated protest due to specific local problems.

The last day of the conference (Tuesday, March 21) began with a feedback round on the previous days. In spite of their different backgrounds, the participants agreed that the topic and the composition of the speakers as a mixture of scholars and activists were well chosen. It was a success of the conference that everyone appreciated the different epistemological back-

grounds and the variety of disciplines included. Also, participants shared unanimously the opinion that presentations treated important topics and were in spite of the diverse perspectives well balanced. The participants highlighted the format of the feedback round in small working groups.

Then, the organizers moderated group discussions. All participants got together in groups of 3-4 persons and summed up their main outcomes of the conference. One of the main results of the conference is that the diversity of approaches on protest and middle class can be named and distinguished along academic schools. Cultural sociologists, researchers in the field of stratification, Marxist scholars, Gramscians, political scientists, anthropologists and activists differ in their perspective on protest and middle class and have varying definitions.

Moreover, it was very fruitful to include the perspective of activists in a prominent position in the conference. This was particularly important with respect to the high significance of academic activism in South Africa. It became evident that due to the theoretical premises and empirical findings of the different schools of thought the assumed agents of change differ. Agents of change can belong to middle classes but in many contexts they may bridge socio-economic differences. Additionally, the scope and methodological approach in the debate on middle class and protest are diverse. Quantitative data on stratification face qualitative approaches on the definition on middle class while other studies use middle class just as a social category and starting point for research.

Furthermore, the conference elaborated analytical contradictions between the concept of middle class and social movements. Fragility characterizes social movements because protest events and the need for mobilizing adherents are necessarily bound to a short time frame. In contrast, the concept of middle class refers to more permanent structures of society. Thus, the relation between middle class and protest continuously changes through the fluctuating dynamics of protest.

The last day studied the different positions of the debates on middle class and protest. All participants appreciated the variety of scholars and their different backgrounds. Although it was somehow challenging to bring the different academic schools together, the conference was successful in synthesizing the heterogeneous perspectives. Consequently, the workshop was an important and inspiring step to find a common language and improve the understanding how middle classes and protest are connected. Some scholars argued that the focus was more on middle class than on protest. Their argument was that the middle class debate was the starting point to investigate protests. They related their observation with the claim to take also protest as a ground for researching middle classes.

In sum, the conference underlined and elaborated the variety of different approaches. Likewise, the meeting was a starting point to bring together scholars and activists with different academic backgrounds and manifold epistemological approaches. The diversity of the participants but also the well-balanced discussions and the mutual interest in the perspective of

different speakers, contributed to finding a nuanced understanding on protest and middle class.

#### **4 Sustainability of the Event**

The participants were very pleased how successful the conference was at integrating the different disciplinary approaches and perspectives. It became evident that the relation between middle classes, protest and social change is a very accessible topic. After the event, the conveners created a dropbox folder for presentations and documents related to the conference topic. The participants use also a mailing list on which they are discussing their own work and share new information. Moreover, the participants are still in contact and are planning a set of activities around the topics middle class and protest. The conference was a starting point for further collaboration as some examples prove. Peter Alexander will be visiting Vienna by invitation of Shalini Randeria. Graziella Moraes da Silva will stay in March/April 2017 for two weeks in Bayreuth where she will prepare further joint projects and give a presentation.

Since the event, several papers from the conference were published in journals or influenced academic work in other ways. Anye Nyamnjoh published an extended version of his paper in a peer reviewed journal accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education (“Strategic Review for Southern Africa”). Melanie Müller published an article about South Africa (“SWP Comments”). Henning Melber used some of the ideas received (albeit from a distance) for shorter texts and blog postings in the ongoing debate on African middle classes. He was also responsible for organizing another middle class seminar arranged jointly by the Nordic Africa Institute and Freedom Park at the latter’s location in Pretoria on 9th November 2017. Furthermore, the organizers are currently preparing a special focus in a journal on middle classes and protest. The selected contributions include a programmatic text by the conveners and revised versions of presentations (Ismail-Sooliman/Neubert/Orji). A conference report is going to be published in a journal on African Studies, probably Africa Spectrum. The conveners are planning a follow-up conference for 2019.

#### **5 Participants**

1. Prof Jeffrey Alexander, Sociology, Yale University, USA
2. Prof Peter Alexander, Political Science, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
3. Job Amupanda, University of Namibia and activist, Windhoek, Namibia
4. Prof Patrick Bond, Wits University and activist, Johannesburg, South Africa
5. Quraysha Ismail-Sooliman, Law and activist, University of Pretoria, South Africa
6. Prof Owen Crankshaw, Political Science, University of Cape Town, South Africa
7. Chivimbiso Gava, Cape Town, South Africa
8. Dr Marcus Morgan, Sociology, Cambridge University, UK
9. Prof Sabelo Ndlovu, Development Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa
10. Dr Nkwachukwu Orji, Development Studies, University of Nigeria, Enugu, Nigeria
11. Prof Dieter Neubert, Sociology, University of Bayreuth, Germany
12. Anye Nyamnjoh, Philosophy, Cape Town, South Africa
13. Prof Shalini Randeria, Anthropology/Sociology, Vienna/Geneva, Austria
14. Prof Roger Southall, Political Science, Wits University, Johannesburg, South Africa

15. Prof Anja Weiß, Sociology, University Duisburg-Essen, Germany
16. Prof Fred Wherry, Sociology, Yale University, USA
17. Bandile Mdlalose, Social movement activist, Durban, South Africa
18. Desmond D'Dsa, Social movement activist, Durban, South Africa
19. Dr Melanie Müller, Political Science, Free University Berlin, Germany
20. Dr Graziella Moreas da Silva, Sociology, University Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
21. Prof David Moore, Development Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
22. Dr Claudia Gastrow, Anthropology, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
23. Prof Leonard Praeg, Philosophy, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa
24. Nwasiba Sigaba, PhD-Student, Development Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa
25. Carlos Rivero, PhD-Student, Political Science, University of Valencia, Spain
26. Michael Steffen, PhD-Student, Sociology, University of Bayreuth, Germany
27. Michael Lombard, PhD-Student, Political Science, University of Cape Town, South Africa
28. Ayanda Manqoyi, PhD-Student, Anthropology, University of Cape Town, South Africa