Shaping the Post-Apartheid Landscape in South Africa: The making of the Black Middle Class

Garth le Pere

The New Black Middle Class in South Africa

by Roger Southall

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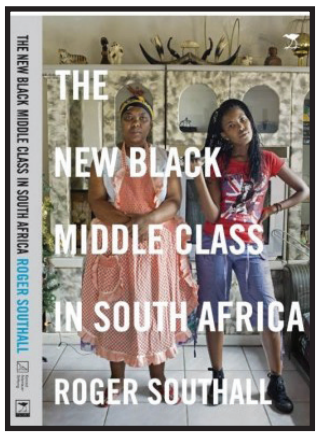
Roger Southall must rank as one of South Africa's most enterprising and provocative scholars. He is not one to shy away from taking on challenging and demanding assignments. Like his book before this one, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party and State in Southern Africa* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013) was path-breaking in examining and exploring the structural anatomy and governance pathologies of liberation movements in Southern Africa. Here he laid bare their loss of moral authority to govern once ensconced in power; only to become authoritarian party machines based on corruption, avarice, and patronage.

In this book, he takes on another important and critical line of enquiry which has not been addressed or attempted with such breadth of comprehension, depth of analysis, and sympathy of understanding since 1965 in Leo Kuper's magisterial book, *An African Bourgeoisie: Race, Class and Politics in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press). In many ways, Southall draws his muse and inspiration directly from Kuper. The post-apartheid landscape has of course changed very dramatically and significantly since Kuper's time, but as Southall says in his preface: '…I have found myself constantly referring back to Kuper, and trust that readers and reviewers will identify at least some respectable degree of continuity with his marvellous work' (p. vii).

And so the stage is set for this *tour de force* which, like Kuper's work, is bound to be both a primer and gold standard on the subject of the black middle class in South Africa for some time to come; or, at least, until another courageous soul comes along to pick up the proverbial cudgels left by Kuper and Southall. All the more so since this book under review is a scholarly masterpiece in its disciplinary eclecticism. It unearths the complexity of the black middle class in both its historical character and contemporary manifestations by drawing on insights as diverse as those from political science, sociology, history, geography, and anthropology.

This eclecticism is richly reflected through his investigative lens but also forms the theoretical, analytical, and empirical bases of rumination throughout the book, from its introduction to its richly textured eight chapters and afterword. The veracity and integrity of a book like this has to rest on a solid academic and scholarly edifice and here future students of South Africa's black middle class will find a rich vein of guideposts across the relevant literature and source material. In addition to an engaging, well-written, and interesting text of 242 pages, there are 31 pages of footnotes, 11 pages of bibliographic references, and a very useful index of 9 pages.

Up front, Southall is very direct and honest about his personal and intellectual motivations for writing the book. He himself is a 'middle class' white South African and as such, is caught in the dialectic of being both an '…insider and outsider, with all the strengths and weaknesses that this implies' (p. xiv). As an outsider, his experience of the existential phenomena that have shaped the black middle class is perforce a vicarious one. With that caveat out of the way, his main task is to understand the 'rise of the black middle class' as an integral part of the social, political, cultural, and economic fabric of post-apartheid South Africa but with particular reference to its character, fate, and future. The forces which define this rise, he correctly observes, have to be located against the backdrop of globalisation and democratisation; new forms of communication and consumerism; a changing division of labour based on financial and service industries; higher incomes and upward mobility as a consequence; and South Africa's own racial dynamics as inherited from the legacies of apartheid.



An important methodological rider is Southall's greater focus, emphasis, and concentration on the 'black African' middle class. In so doing, he does recognise that the two other minority interstitial groups, the Coloureds (those of mixed heritage) and the Indians (settled émigrés from the subcontinent) have been integral parts of the generic 'black' grouping in terms of the ruling African National Congress's (ANC's) non-racial idiom. However and for purposes of his enterprise, while the struggle for freedom was waged on behalf of this generic category, it ultimately was targeted at the emancipation of the black African population who make up just under 80 per cent of the population of the country.

While all three groups might constitute a 'broader collective class entity' (p. xvii), the historical experiences of the Coloureds and Indians from apartheid through the democratic transition have been markedly different. And so, and where relevant for comparative purposes, Southall distinguishes between the 'black middle class' to include Coloureds and Indians and the 'black African' middle class as a separate analytical category. However, and as a bounded entity, the black middle class has been '…a key actor in the process of modernisation and development' and is worthy of study because '…the role of the black middle class in the making of South African democracy has been seriously understated…' (p. xvii).

Having revealed his approach and assumptions (which might not be entirely persuasive to some), Southall then sets out to establish the theoretical foundations for the study with respect to the problems and controversies of definition and he does so through the optics of the two 'grand traditions' of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Through these two classical and influential figures, he finds certain complementarities but also differences in ontology and epistemology in how middle classes take shape across history and society. Strategic problems can be found in their modes of class analysis and neutrality of language; how the middle class is differentiated and for what purpose; how their political identities are shaped; their relations to the state; and crucially, the role which the middle class has played in democratisation. While much ambivalence remains about the applicability of class theory to developing countries since it is based on the Western experiential and ideational canon, Southall reminds us (drawing on E.P. Thompson), that '… "class" is neither a structure nor a category but a historical phenomenon, something in human relations that "happens"' (p. 21).

Having been served the starters of the methodological assumptions and the conceptual and theoretical anchors, we then get into the main course of the book's next six chapters which follow a certain thematic logic. The second chapter is historical in nature and traces the evolution of the black middle class from the time that South Africa became a Union in 1910 until the cusp of its democratic transition in 1994. This is an important prism through which to understand the nature and impact of racial segregation under apartheid and South Africa's brand of white settler-instigated capitalism which 'left little room for a black middle class' and indeed inhibited its growth (p. 24). The chapter provides compelling detail about the problems of racial stratification in a society which was calibrated according to the strictures of settler colonialism but nevertheless takes note of the educational role of missionaries in cultivating the taproot of an emergent African elite or petty bourgeoisie. The missionaries even granted title to parcels of land to those individuals who were co-opted into their proselytising designs, all of which was to change fundamentally when the black middle class found a new *raison d'etre* in participating in the politics of liberation and the various formations which drove this agenda, albeit in a racially skewed manner (p. 41).

This historical treatment is useful in Southall's attempt to impose order on the post-apartheid conundrums and contradictions of the black middle class in relation to its size, shape, and structure. This is taken up in Chapter 3, and he does so with very interesting approaches to the problem. One section of that middle class is consumptionist, which is '… predominantly youngish, overwhelmingly urban, higher-educated, salaried or self-employed, highly aspirational in terms of standards of living and hopes for their children, technologically aware, culturally self-confident and not least, politically assertive'(p. 43). The second is productionist, which is closely aligned with the imperatives of the 'corporate bourgeoisie' that '…had begun entering managerial ranks of the large corporations from the early 1980s and which, boosted by affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment, has assumed a growing presence not only as managers, but as shareholders and directors after 1994' (p. 59).

These mutually reinforcing approaches form an appropriate introduction to the dynamics of upward social mobility under ANC rule since 1994, a topic that is taken up in Chapter 4 under the rubric of black class formation under the aegis of the ruling ANC party. The chapter discerns on the one hand the incremental but highly restrictive and racially-defined forms of mobility under late-apartheid. This was accompanied by some easing of labour-based racial discrimination such as abolishing influx control, allowing black advancement in white-collar jobs, and leaving black business entrepreneurship to its own devices. On the other hand, the advent of the ANC as a party-state opens and unlocks new opportunities for political deployment of loyal cadres in strategic sectors of the economy. This has been propelled by the legal requirements of equity employment and black economic empowerment as essential vectors of a transformation drive to change the nature and character of a once racially-engineered and concentrated ownership in the economy.

The next four chapters then take the reader on a very illuminating, captivating, and thought-provoking tour of key themes that help to define the emerging but changing world of the black middle class in South Africa, namely, education, work, lifestyle, and politics. Thus Chapter 5 is concerned with how education is very crucial to the prospects of upward mobility, given the levels of differential but generally inferior forms of education that obtained during apartheid, but especially for Africans and which '… had long been a major grievance of black South Africans' (p. 98).

Greater class mobility has been enabled and promoted via deep and legally-dictated educational reform and deracialisation of the national system of education, including public and private schools as well as the entire architecture of higher university education. These changes notwithstanding, the ineluctable fact is that black Africans remain disadvantaged. This is a consequence of apartheid's spatial distribution of schools with lower standards and fewer resources which has thereby allowed the '…preservation of privilege' (p. 122). Because of this, black and white access to elite public and private schools as well as 'traditional' universities has given rise to a situation where 'in South Africa to-

day, education remains intimately related to social class' (p. 123).

Next in Chapter 6, Southall shows the middle class at work. This is another very insightful contribution of the book. As the author says, this topic has not received the attention it deserves since it is at work where black South Africans have to confront the intersections of race and class if they are to entertain any hope of moving up the occupational ladder. The author disaggregates the work experiences of his subject into analytical categories of state managers, corporate managers, professionals, semi-professionals, and white-collar workers. What follows is a careful examination of each category's functional and behavioural dynamics in the workplace as well as their political influence and modes of organisation and representation. While these categories have undoubtedly opened up avenues for enrichment and wealth accumulation and represent different and diverse fractions in the economy, Southall argues that 'in the post-apartheid era, the state and capital are locked in a contradictory relationship; both are highly dependent upon each other, yet the relationship is also highly antagonistic' (p. 160).

While there are differences and diversities in work experiences, the different layers of the black middle class are united in a common vision and that is '…to do better for themselves, and to ensure themselves and their families a better standard of living and style of life' (p. 162). How they have fared in this pursuit is taken up in Chapter 7, which deals with the social universe of the black middle class, where lifestyle is a convenient marker. In South Africa, the visibility and mobility of the black African middle class has been captured by the moniker, 'black diamonds', which suggests '…high-spending, hard-living and showy black individuals and "power couples" who have cracked the racial ceiling and who inhabit a world of extravagant lifestyles, tasteless "bling" and over-the-top celebrations and partying' (p. 163).

Sadly, the acquisition of new forms of wealth together with crude consumerism and crass materialism are often associated with corruption, rent-seeking, and having the right political connections. The perverse incentives that come with such behaviour has now become known as 'state capture', where members of the black African middle class face increasing public, judicial, and parliamentary scrutiny and criticism.

In addition, they are also saddled with onerous forms of consumer debt as the years of relative prosperity that characterised the Mandela-Mbeki years have been displaced by an economic downturn and an economy that is mired in a recession. Southall also delves into how this precarious existence has seen members of the black middle class increasingly seeking refuge, solace, and inspiration in religion, especially in redemptive Pentecostal and charismatic Christian churches which have a '… particular appeal to the black middle class' (p. 191).

This brings us to the final thematic Chapter 8, which takes up the problematic challenge of understanding the political orientation of the black middle class, in particular their relationship to democracy and development. Southall attempts to accomplish this task through a thoughtful examination of three propositions, which are: firstly, that the black middle class was a force for democracy leading up to the transition in 1994 which signalled the end of apartheid; secondly, that the black middle class is both the offspring of ANC patronage as well as the main proponent and advocate of its legitimacy and credentials to govern the country; and thirdly, that the heterogeneous nature of the black middle class is vital to the consolidation of South Africa's nascent democracy.

In terms of the logics of these propositions, Southall considers whether the black middle class could be considered a progressive or reactionary force in either advancing democracy or promoting authoritarianism since 'the reality is likely to be far more ambiguous, if not downright messy'; hence, the progressive ethos of the black middle class is not simply a given of social existence and ought to be questioned (p. 219).

The book concludes with a reflective afterword that locates the black middle class in South Africa against the broader discourse in Africa and the Global South, where there have been ascendant middle classes and who are often seen as 'drivers of development' (p. 223). The afterword is also an invitation to proactive, comparative, and transnational research on the characteristics of the continent's middle class, highlighting what has been done in understanding its colonial and post-colonial trajectories, but also revisiting classical debates about how the middle class relates to issues of development or otherwise.

According to Southall, this raises two critical challenges: one is filling major historical gaps in studying the 'middle class' in Africa compared to the established focus on elites, the bourgeoisies, working classes, migrants, and peasants; the second is the requirement of definitional precision which draws on different and contrasting disciplinary traditions and theoretical approaches. Finally, there is Southall's cautionary injunction that any research agenda must guard against treating South Africa as *sui generis* and exceptional while obviously being sensitive to the fact that the country's transitional dynamics after 1994 were profoundly shaped by its black middle class.

Ultimately, Southall has written a very important book which represents a refreshing appraisal of a complex subject. His interpretations are subtle, supported by thoughtful arguments and excellent scholarship. It is thus a fitting and lasting tribute to Leo Kuper.