Review of The New Black Middle Class in South Africa by Roger Southall

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Coming at a time when South Africa appears to be caught between deepening economic stagnation and rising social unrest, Roger Southall has produced an important study of the changing situation of South Africa’s black middle class. Although the voices of members of the new black middle class themselves are noticeably absent, the book makes up for this in the depth of its historical context and the soundness of its overall sociological framework. It offers a necessary foundation for scholars from across the social sciences to move forward with more targeted research to make sense of the lives of this growing but precarious segment of the South African population, which Southall shows to be intimately connected with the post-apartheid order. The book differentiates members of the ‘new’ black middle class, who had to largely ‘start from scratch’ after the dismantling of apartheid (p.165), from the ‘old’ black middle class, which emerged in a very limited way within the constraints of the colonial and apartheid systems. Focusing on this new middle class, Southall recognizes their ‘extraordinary mobility (upwards in class terms, sideways in residential terms),’ such that influential occupations and comfortable suburbs are no longer restricted to white South Africans (p.163). Focused on ‘Black Africans,’ and consisting of nine chapters, the book is roughly evenly divided between analysis of background literature on the class system in abidingly Euro-American sociology, class in South African history (and in Africa more broadly), and more in-depth analysis of the lives of the new black middle class. Above all, Southall emphasizes the role of the state in the formation of the new black middle class, more specifically the ‘party-state’ that the ANC has sought to build over the last two decades, as the party of liberation has become the country’s largest employment agency (pp.70,130).

In emphasizing the role of the state, Southall’s theoretical approach takes from Weberian sociology the idea of a class system constituted through a hierarchy of occupations, and takes from Marxian approaches an emphasis on class as a question of power, and power as a question of proximity to the state and private capital (p.236). The relationship between the state and private sectors is a recurring drama throughout the book, and fundamentally shapes the structure of the new black middle class. Indeed, Southall demonstrates that the creation of the new black middle class has been a ‘necessary accompaniment’ to the consolidation of the ANC’s
political power (p.126). Noting that the state and private capital are ‘locked in a contradictory relationship’ (p.160), they depend upon each other but deeply mistrust and fundamentally misunderstand each other too. In discussing this relationship, Southall observes that upon gaining power in 1994, the ANC pursued ‘broadly social-democratic’ policies, but that 1996 saw the ‘introduction of the familiar neo-liberal mantras’ (p.86). However, I do not think Southall emphasizes enough how rhetorical these ‘mantras’ were. The term ‘neo-liberalism’ is ubiquitous in South African scholarly and political discourse, increasingly detached from anything resembling actual existing neo-liberalism anywhere on the planet. The great strength of this book is that it emphasizes the role of the ANC party-state so strongly, revealing how strange the idea of ‘neo-liberalism’ in South African actually is. For example, proposed privatizations were quickly abandoned, and outsourcing simply became an opportunity for extending the ruling party’s patronage practices (p.131).

The study recognizes that marketing researchers have been more interested in studying the new black middle class than academics, focusing on the consumer profile of a group labelled ‘black diamonds’ (p.xiv). A popular figure of both envy and ridicule in South African culture, this small but conspicuous upper segment of the black middle class is known for their ‘exaggerated lifestyles, tasteless “bling”, lavish weddings and over-the-top celebrations and partying’ (p.163), which belies the fact that the typical member of the black middle class is an overworked and undertrained schoolteacher. As the analysis of ‘the black middle class at work’ (pp.125-62) makes clear, the lives of the new black middle class are rarely glamorous, Black professionals remain rare, but with the public service more than doubling since 1994, black semi-professionals abound (pp.157-61). The professional/semi-professional divide is briefly discussed (p.144), but the foundational importance of the self-regulation of the classic professions is understated. This is an important complicating factor in the comparative lack of racial transformation in the private sector, compounded by an attitude amongst job seekers that the public and private sectors are divided by race (pp.79-84). The ‘systematic’ inequalities in the education system also impede transformation of the professions (p.103), and the suggestion, that ‘the salience of race per se is beginning to fall away’, revealing deepening class and regional differences among blacks (p.119), is thought provoking given the multifaceted nature of ongoing student protests in the country.

Perhaps the most engaging section of the book is Chapter 7, ‘the social world of the black middle class,’ for it is here that the voices of the new
black middle class themselves come through. When Southall quotes a focus
group participant discussing middle class identity in terms of values and
aspirations (pp.168-9), it places earlier discussions of measuring the middle
class in an interesting new light. The precarious lives of many of the black
middle class are also well illustrated in the discussion on finance (pp.176-
82), drawing in particular on the work of Deborah James (2015), and
discussing the so-called ‘black tax’ (p.180), the expectation that members
of the black middle class will financially support their extended family in
the context of persistently high unemployment. Southall also discusses the
high indebtedness of many miners at Marikana, the site of the notorious
massacre in 2012 (pp.176-7), but could have connected these issues, as the
‘black tax’ is a significant contributing factor to miners’ financial stress.
Such concerns aside, and with the expectation that the general absence of
the voices of the black middle class themselves will be addressed as
scholars begin to make use of this book, this is a very important and timely
study that will help make sense of perhaps the key social actors in
contemporary South African society.

References
James, Deborah. 2015. Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration

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Brian Galligan, Martina Boese and Melissa Phillips, Becoming
Australian: Migration, Settlement and Citizenship, Melbourne

The book explores how migrants and refugees meet the challenges of
‘becoming Australian’, simultaneously transforming Australia. This book is
the culmination of an Australian Research Council Linkage project
investigating the settlement experiences in regional Australia. It offers an
engaging insight into migration, settlement and citizenship processes,
within a wider historical and policy context.

The book is dedicated to Millsom Henry-Waring, a dynamic young
scholar whose life and career were cut short before the completion of this