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Conference Report: Middle Classes, Protest, and Social Change in Africa and Beyond

Antje Daniel and Florian Stoll

Abstract: South Africa is one of the world's most unequal societies. Social disparities provoke massive social protests, considered to be among the most frequent worldwide. Some of these are class-based, and members of the middle class are often perceived as part or even at the core of such initiatives. However, neither in South Africa nor in other cases is it clear how stratification – and middle-class positions in particular – relate to and translate into protest and political goals for social change. Against this backdrop, a conference on middle classes and protest, which took place from 17 to 21 March 2017 at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS), explored and discussed how middle classes and social protest are linked in African settings and other contexts of the so-called global South.

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Keywords: Africa, South Africa, conferences/meetings, social sciences, theory formation, middle class, protest movements, social change

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The conference “Middle Classes, Protest and Social Change in Africa and Beyond” was funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) under its Point Sud 2017 programme. It took place from 17 to 21 March 2017 at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS). Applicants and coordinators included Antje Daniel (University of Bayreuth), Hennie Kotzé (Stellenbosch University), Henning Melber (Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala), and Florian Stoll (University of Bayreuth).

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 have been able to improve their socio-economic position. Their better-off situation also had an impact on their 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 that take into consideration more significant components, such as status and political awareness. Other studies examine factors related to culture, lifestyle, habitus, ethnicity and/or “race,” religion, and others required for a proper assessment of the middle classes (the plural form recognising the diversity – although it would be more precise to say “middle-income strata”).

One of the most important but nevertheless understudied aspects in this debate is the complex relationship between middle-income strata, protest, and social change. To address this nexus, this event brought scholars from several disciplines and continents together with activists. South Africa was the main focus of the conference, while other countries in Africa and elsewhere served as comparative reference points. South Africa is one of the world’s most unequal societies. Social disparities often provoke massive social protests, considered to be among the most frequent of any country worldwide. They recently culminated in the Marikana Massacre among striking miners, but have also manifested in notorious demonstrations by the service-delivery sector in several townships. The recent student protests under the slogan of “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 of such initiatives, or even at their core. However, neither in South Africa nor in other cases is it clear how stratification – and the position of middle classes in particular – relates to and translates into protest and political goals for social change.

Debates frequently assume that middle-class actors are politically active; social-movement studies, among others, consider protest in relation to class consciousness. The conference entered new territory by combining social-movement studies and middle-class approaches, focusing on particular aspects of the relationship between middle classes, 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 (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) discussed missing aspects of the debate on middle classes in Africa. The first panel (Fred Wherry, Yale University, New Haven; Dieter Neubert, University of Bayreuth; Anja Weiss, University of Duisburg-Essen) looked at how it is possible to conceptualise middle classes in the global South differently from how they are conceptualised in the “West.” The second panel (Melanie Müller, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin; Shalini Randeria, Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna) focused on the conceptualisation of social movements and civil society in the global South with presentations on South Africa and India. Shalini Randeria showed the complexity of conceptualisations in certain contexts and against this backdrop discussed whether a distinction between “Western” and “non-Western” approaches is even appropriate. By stressing the entanglement of societies in different regions, and by pointing to the dangers of culturalist essentialism in a multi-connected global world, she introduced an epistemological standard for a general academic discussion on middle classes and social movements. Finally, Peter Alexander (University of Johannesburg) discussed with reference to South Africa the relationship between socio-economic groups defined as middle classes and protesting groups with shared interests that are also called, in line with Marx, 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 debates and social-movement studies.

On Saturday (March 18), activists and scholars jointly considered the relationship between middle classes, protest, and social change in South Africa (Marcus Morgan, Cambridge University; Bandile Mdlalose, former general secretary of the shack-dwellers’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, South Africa; Desmond D’Ssa, South Durban Community Environmental Alliance). Sabelo Ndlovu Gatsheni’s (University of South Africa, Pretoria) public lecture introduced one of the main discourses of the recent student protests, while the panelists Quraysha Ismail-Sooliman (University of Pretoria), Anye Nyamnjoh (University of Cape Town), and David Moore

(University of Johannesburg) elaborated the disparities and differences of protests at South African universities and their relation to class and race. On this day, it became clear that scholars and activists from different world regions had found a common language. They focused on the composition of specific movements and the question of whether the involvement of middle classes makes a movement a “middle-class movement.” After a critique of a type of research that talks about social movements in a simplified way as “objects” of research, the participants discussed how a collaboration of researchers and activists in which activists are more than just a source of information might look.

Sunday (March 19) dealt with the relationship between inequality and change in South Africa. After a public lecture on the civil-sphere theory and its future development (Jeffrey Alexander, Yale University, New Haven), a panel discussed the connection between social groups, inequality, and change (Graziella Moraes da Silva, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva; Patrick Bond, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; Leonard Praeg, Rhodes University, Grahamstown). The panel thereafter focused on middle classes as political actors (Hennie Kotzé, Stellenbosch University; Owen Crankshaw, University of Cape Town). The presentations demonstrated a variety of approaches on middle classes and protest: for instance, Leonard Praeg stressed the role and impact of supposed “traditional” norms for middle-class actors and social-movement activists from a philosophical perspective, and political scientist Hennie Kotzé highlighted the significance of political consciousness and values of middle-class actors by using quantitative data.

Monday (March 20) widened the scope beyond South Africa. In the first session, junior scholars presented their research to senior scholars at the Young Scholars Workshop. The ensuing double panel examined the relationship between middle classes and protest in Africa and other parts of the world and stressed once again the numerous entangling and complementary perspectives on middle classes and protest. The presentations’ thematic focus was on hegemony and middle classes in South Africa, while other papers added a comparative perspective with respective discussions on Zimbabwean middle classes (Chivimbiso Gava, University of Cape Town), middle classes in Brazil (Celi Scalón, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), and Namibian middle classes (Job Amupanda, University of Namibia), as well as on the activism of middle classes in Angola’s capital Luanda (Claudia Gastrow, University of Johannesburg) and on middle classes and politics in Nigeria (Nkwachukwu Orji, University of Nigeria, Nsukka). This panel demonstrated that there is middle-class growth in a

variety of different contexts in the global South in the shadow of economic prosperity. At the same time, the presentations also showed how different actors articulated their protests in different ways, depending on their specific local problems.

One of the main takeaways from the conference was the knowledge that different academic schools and disciplines demonstrate a diversity of approaches to the topics of protest and middle classes, and each uses its own vocabulary. Cultural sociologists, researchers in the field of stratification, Marxist scholars, Gramscian scholars, political scientists, anthropologists, and activists differ in their perspective on protest and middle classes and have varying definitions. Moreover, it was very fruitful to give a prominent place to activists' perspectives at the conference. This was particularly important with respect to the high significance of academic activism in South Africa. It became evident that the assumed agents of change differ depending on the theoretical premises and empirical findings of the different schools of thought. Agents of change can belong to middle classes but in many contexts they may bridge socio-economic differences. Additionally, the scope and methodological approaches in the debate on middle classes and protest are diverse. Quantitative data on stratification face qualitative approaches on the definition of middle classes while other studies use "middle classes" as simply a social category and starting point for research.

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

On the last day of the conference, the different positions of the debates on middle classes and protest were explored. Although it was challenging to bring representatives of different academic schools together for a meaningful exchange, the conference was successful in synthesising the heterogeneous perspectives. Consequently, the conference was an inspiring step in the process of finding a common language and improving the understanding of how middle classes and protest are connected. Some scholars argued that the focus was more on middle classes than on protest, contending that the middle-class debate was the starting point from which protests were investigated at the conference. In line with this observation, they advocated an approach that would take protest as the jumping-off point for researching middle classes, rather than vice versa.

Konferenzbericht: Mittelschichten, Protest und sozialer Wandel in Afrika und darüber hinaus

Zusammenfassung: Südafrika gehört zu den Ländern mit dem weltweit höchsten Grad an Ungleichheit. Soziale Gegensätze provozieren massive soziale Proteste, deren Anzahl ebenfalls zu den höchsten weltweit gehört. Protestaktionen können in vielen Fällen bestimmten sozialen Schichten zugeordnet werden und Angehörige der Mittelschichten nehmen häufig daran teil oder stehen sogar im Zentrum solcher Aktionen. Doch weder im Fall von Südafrika noch in anderen Fällen ist klar, wie die Sozialstruktur – und insbesondere die Situation der Mittelschichten – mit Protesten und politischen Zielen zusammenhängt bzw. auf sie zurückgeführt werden kann. Vor diesem Hintergrund debattierten die Teilnehmer einer Konferenz zu Mittelschichten und Protest am Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) vom 17. bis 21. März 2017, welche Verbindungen sich zwischen Mittelschichten und sozialen Protesten in afrikanischen Staaten und anderen Ländern des sogenannten Globalen Südens ausmachen lassen.

Schlagwörter: Afrika, Südafrika, Konferenz/Tagung, Sozialwissenschaften, Theoriebildung, Mittelschicht, Protestbewegung, Sozialer Wandel