

Carola Lentz

Elites or middle classes?

Lessons from transnational
research for the study of social
stratification in Africa

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Carola Lentz: Elites or middle classes? Lessons from transnational research for the study of social stratification in Africa

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Arbeitspapier will ich zur künftigen Forschung über soziale Stratifikation in Afrika beitragen, indem ich die theoretischen Implikationen und empirischen Herausforderungen der Konzepte „Elite“ und „Mittelklasse“ untersuche. Diese Konzepte stammen aus teilweise miteinander konkurrierenden Theorietraditionen. Außerdem haben Sozialwissenschaftler und Historiker sie zu verschiedenen Zeiten und mit Bezug auf verschiedene Regionen unterschiedlich verwendet. So haben Afrikaforscher und -forscherinnen soziale Formationen, die in anderen Teilen der Welt als Mittelklasse kategorisiert wurden, meist als Eliten aufgefasst und tun dies zum Teil noch heute. Elite und Mittelklasse sind aber nicht nur Begriffe der sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschung, sondern zugleich Kategorien der sozialen und politischen Praxis. Die Art und Weise, wie Menschen diese Begriffe benutzen, um sich selbst oder andere zu beschreiben, hat wiederum Rückwirkungen auf sozialwissenschaftliche Diskurse und umgekehrt. Das Arbeitspapier setzt sich mit beiden Aspekten auseinander: mit der Geschichte der theoretischen Debatten über Elite und Mittelklasse und damit, was wir aus empirischen Studien über die umstrittenen Selbstverortungen sozialer Akteure lernen können und über ihre sich verändernden Auffassungen und Praktiken von Elite- oder Mittelklasse-Sein. Weil ich überzeugt bin, dass künftige Forschung zu sozialer Stratifikation in Afrika außerordentlich viel von einer historisch und regional vergleichenden Perspektive profitieren kann, analysiert dieses Arbeitspapier nicht nur Untersuchungen zu afrikanischen Eliten und Mittelklassen, sondern auch eine Fülle von Studien zur Geschichte der Mittelklassen in Europa und Nordamerika sowie zu den neuen Mittelklassen im Globalen Süden.

Abstract

This paper contributes to future research on social stratification in Africa by discussing the theoretical implications and empirical predicaments of the concepts 'elite' and 'middle class', two analytical categories that originate from potentially competing theories of social stratification. Furthermore, there are regional as well as historical variations in how scholars have applied these terms. Social formations that in most parts of the world are discussed under the label of middle class were, and to a certain extent continue to be, explored in African studies as 'elites'. At the same time, elite and middle class are categories of social and political practice. The ways in which people use these categories in order to describe themselves or classify others, feed back into scholarly discourse – and vice versa. This paper will discuss both aspects, namely, the history of scholarly debates on elites and middle classes as well as what empirical studies tell us about the contested self-categorisations of people, and how their understandings and practices of being elite or middle class have changed over time. This paper argues that future research on the dynamics of African social stratification has much to gain from a regionally and historically comparative perspective. This is why the paper not only looks at the history of research on African elites and

middle classes, but also reviews a broad corpus of literature that includes studies on the history of the Euro-American middle classes and contemporary middle-class formation in the Global South.

Zur Autorin

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Introduction

'Africa rising: can the middle class drive growth?' Under this headline, the BBC World Service organised one of its recent 'Africa Debates' in a stylish cinema in a new shopping mall in Ghana's capital Accra.¹ In addition to the panellists who included, among others, the African Development Bank's country representative Marie-Laure Akin-Olugbade and Ghana's Minister of Finance Seth Terkper, the BBC journalists had invited a broad cross-section of 'middle-class' Ghanaians, ranging from food-sellers, shopkeepers and teachers to university lecturers, doctors, lawyers, civil servants and entrepreneurs. According to the African Development Bank representative, everyone who spends the equivalent of between 2 and 20 US \$ per capita per day belongs to the middle class, a category into which 46% of Ghana's population falls, as against an average 34% in Africa as a whole.² Many in the audience objected to this definition. 'We may earn and spend that much, but we don't feel middle class'; 'I am barely scraping through, this money would not even be enough for paying my kid's school fees and the necessary fuel'; 'This sum does not allow any savings, and how can you be middle class without savings?', were some of the comments. A real estate manager insisted that instead of the daily per-capita expenditure, house ownership provided a more reliable indicator for middle-class status. He suggested that everyone who could afford a decent two-bedroom flat in Accra was at least 'on his way' into the middle class. One comment in particular drew considerable laughter and approval: 'Middle class is defined by the ability to mask poverty, by the capability to get through the month without looking dirty or poor'. The discussion then turned to the difficulties that young start-up entrepreneurs faced in Ghana and the question of which role the state should play in providing more reliable infrastructure that would allow people to spend less on, for instance, generators and transportation, and that would boost the development of new firms, and thus contribute to the growth of the middle class.

The BBC debate clearly showed that despite disagreement on whom exactly to include in or exclude from this category, middle class has become an important concept, not only in contemporary international policy discourses, but also in the way people in African countries, like Ghana, think and speak about their own position in society. Furthermore, the debate revealed the problems of any simple objectivist, economic definition of this social category. Implicitly, the discussants pointed to the importance of 'boundary work', as Michèle Lamont (1992: 4) has called it, for the making of a middle class.

World Bank economists and policy makers have heralded the rise of the 'new' middle classes around the globe as a stimulus to economic growth, modernisation, and political stability. Journalists have begun to report regularly on the lives and predicaments of middle-class men and women, as the BBC 'Africa debate' mentioned above, and a BBC feature series on the global new middle class demonstrate. Social scientists, too, have turned their attention to this new, or (as many would argue) not so new, but recently revived, social category, and the number of studies on the global middle classes grows by the day.³ Many believe, as Göran Therborn has provocatively put it, that the twenty-first

1 The debate was first broadcast on 28 June 2013, and was accessible online until June 2014: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01b35m7 (last accessed 24 Sept. 2013).

2 For the study to which Marie-Laure Akin-Olugbade referred, see African Development Bank 2011. The figure of 34.3 % middle class (for 2010) includes a lower middle or 'floating class... vulnerable to slipping back into poverty' (2011: 2); without this relatively low income group, 13.4 % of Africa's population, and 19.8% of the Ghanaians, can be counted among the middle class. According to World Bank economists, who define middle-class membership by earnings between 2 and 13 US \$ per day, the middle class grew, on a global scale, by 1.2 billion persons between 1990 and 2005 (see Ravallion 2009). For a critique of these simplistic economic definitions of middle class, see Melber 2013.

3 With regard to the policy makers' interest in the global middle classes, see for instance Easterly 2001, Ravallion 2009, and the critical discussion of this literature in Darbon & Toulabor 2011, and Neubert 2014. For examples of media attention, see the overview of BBC radio programmes on the global middle class, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01bnn18> (last accessed 1 Oct. 2013), Enandeau 2013, and the insightful book on the African middle class by Gaus 2011. See Heiman et al (2012) and Lopez & Weinstein (2012)

century is 'the age of the global middle class', and that the 'project of universal emancipation led by the proletariat' in the twentieth century, which was 'clearly the age of the working class', is now 'replaced by universal aspiration to middle-class status' (2012: 5, 15).

With regard to Africa, however, in-depth studies of the emerging middle class(es) are still scarce, and scholars are barely beginning to catch up with global research trends.⁴ Furthermore, the conceptual confusion in the study of social stratification (in which the study of middle classes can be regarded to form a subfield), particularly with respect to the analysis of the 'upper' end of the social scale, seems considerable, and scholars of Africa have hardly engaged with recent debates on class theory, let alone their implications for the study of social stratification on the continent or the middle classes in particular. With the exception of South Africa, where studies of the middle class have a long tradition, those highly educated, professionally successful, and relatively affluent men and women that in other parts of the world would be discussed as middle classes, often continue to be categorised as elites, a category that gained prominence in research on the newly independent African states in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵ Quite typical, for instance, is G. K. Nukunya's recently revised introduction to Ghanaian sociology (2003) that still analyses social stratification in terms of a rather simple opposition of elites versus masses and posits the absence of classes in Ghana. Christine Oppong's book on Ghanaian senior civil servants, which was first published as *Marriage among a Matrilineal Elite* in 1974, was reprinted in 1981 as *Middle Class African Marriage*, but in the text continues to speak of elite, without any explanation for the change in title. More recently, the term middle class has gained currency, particularly when scholars have sought to link their African case studies with global discussions, as, for instance, Luckham, Boadie, Ahadzie and Boateng (2004) who discuss the role of the Ghanaian middle class as 'drivers of change'. The overall conceptual framework of their paper, however, remains quite contradictory, first defining the 'elite' as political decision-makers, then equating elite and 'upper class' to which 3% of the population belong, and finally counting among this upper class persons with postsecondary education which the paper had previously categorised as part of the middle class (2004: 11, 21).

This conceptual quagmire in part reflects shifting academic fashions that shape the language of empirical studies, with various ups and downs in the popularity, and debates on the applicability, of class concepts, instead of or alongside with elite concepts.⁶ At the same time, the changing scholarly uses of elite and class concepts echo the socio-economic development of the continent where middle-income groups, sharing certain 'middle-class' values and lifestyles, have only rather recently come to the fore. These changes in the social composition of African societies are, in turn, reflected in the concepts that the societal actors themselves summon when discussing their own position. When I conducted my first interviews in the 1980s among older educated Northern Ghanaians, for instance, they tended to refer to themselves as elite when speaking about their relationship with their rural relatives and illiterate peers and emphasising their leadership roles (Lentz 1994). When I later interacted with members of the younger generation of educated Northerners, I observed that they found middle class a socially much more acceptable term than elite, because they felt the latter emphasises social distance (Behrends & Lentz 2012: 141–3). Furthermore, and challenging any sim-

for overviews and case studies of recent research on the history and contemporary lives of middle classes worldwide.

4 For a useful critical overview, see Darbon & Toulabour 2011.

5 The comprehensive Online Catalogue of the African Studies Centre (Leiden) renders 2,072 hits for articles and books relating to Africa with some reference to 'elite' as against only 426 hits for 'middle class'. 'Middle class' literature is focused on South Africa, while mention of 'elite' is spread evenly over the entire continent. Furthermore, the number of references to middle class peaks in the 1950s and 1960s, ebbs again thereafter, and then peaks again only in the 2000s, while hits for elite are distributed evenly over time (<http://www.ascleiden.nl/?q=content/asc-catalogue>; last accessed 24 July 2013).

6 Particularly in the 1980s, scholars of Africa have indeed debated on the usefulness of classical Marxist class concepts, as I will show below. However, the contemporary discussions on the middle class rarely engage with recent advances in class theory and, more generally, the analysis of social stratification, and the (problematic) relationship between class and elite concepts is virtually ignored.

ple 'objectivist' analysis of social stratification, both terms seemed relevant to my interlocutors only in some situations and with respect to some aspects of their lives, while in others they would regard membership in ethnic or religious communities as more important.

Like many key terms in history and the social sciences, then, elite and middle class are at once categories 'of social and political *analysis*' and categories 'of social and political *practice*' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4) whose development were, and continue to be, entangled in complex ways. Both terms were initially coined by societal actors and have since the end of the eighteenth century become catchwords in political discourse, well before scholars defined them in any systematic fashion. Once they had become more or less well-established conceptual tools of research, however, they began to take on an academic life of their own, with scholars also using them to describe people that did not themselves invoke these categories for their self-description. But scholarly terms could, and indeed did, also feed back into folk understandings of social stratification. Particularly the recent global popularity of the term middle class seems to be at least in part a result of the appropriation of academic categories by policy makers. How people categorise themselves influences the ways in which they experience their social location, and may have important consequences for political action. Scholars of elites and middle classes should therefore examine these folk categorisations, and be sensitive to the complex feed-back processes between social science and political-cum-social practice. In order to do so in a comprehensive manner, however, scholars also need to go beyond folk terminologies, develop their own analytical categories, and critically engage with the baggage that received theoretical concepts, such as those of classical Marxian class theory or those of Pareto and Mosca's theories of elites, bring with them. Elite and (middle) class are terminological tools that open particular windows on the societies that we study; while they help us ask some questions, they conceal other issues, and scholars should be aware of these limitations. Furthermore, working definitions of our concepts of social analysis, beyond folk terminologies, are also necessary when we want to compare processes of social stratification between various African countries and place research findings in a broader, global perspective. Last, but certainly not least, findings from these empirical studies, in turn, can also contribute to further revising and developing our theoretical framework.

In this paper therefore I discuss, on the one hand, theories of social stratification and the theoretical genealogy of the concepts of elite and middle class. This engagement with elite and class theories helps to clarify and develop working concepts that may be useful for future empirical research. Furthermore, it allows us to better engage with the empirical studies which implicitly or explicitly bear the mark of certain theoretical frameworks. On the other hand, the paper reviews a broad range of empirical studies on the histories and contemporary developments of middle classes and elites, many of which also discuss how members of these social formations understood and categorised themselves. Much general theorising on social stratification has been undertaken on the basis of empirical material from the Global North. But studies on the Global South often demonstrate that processes of social stratification may be considerably complicated by, for instance, cross-cutting, multi-class networks of kinship or ethnic and religious loyalties. Ultimately, such insights can shed new light even on past and present processes of class formation in Europe and America.

The major focus of this paper is on the middle class, and in part even more narrowly: the upper middle class. In the main section, I explore a broad range of case studies on the making of the (global) middle classes with an interest in 'the historical practices of what it meant to be—and live—the middle class in a variety of geographical locations' (López 2012: 21). However, since middle class is an eminently relational category, it is necessary to also look at discussions of social stratification more generally which is what I do particularly in the sections on elite theories and class theories. Furthermore, because studies on upwardly mobile, educated and well-to-do men and women in Africa often used, and sometimes continue to use, the term elite rather than middle class which would be how these groups would mostly be labelled elsewhere, I also review studies on African elites. Why scholars of Africa have usually preferred the concept of elite rather than middle class has much to do with the smallness of this social formation and the change in its social position after the end of the colonial regime, as I will discuss in the relevant section of this paper. In any case, I suggest that if we want to learn about the past of the newly emerging African middle class, we need to engage with this body of literature, too. I would even argue that bringing together both strands of research—on elites and

on middle classes—in a more systematic fashion may be desirable beyond the African context as well. In other regions, too, the differences between these two social categories are not always clear, and scholarly terminologies sometimes oscillate. Yet, so far, the emerging anthropology of middle classes seems to have taken little notice of the existing anthropology of elites, and vice versa.⁷ I think that it may be high time to (re)connect these two fields of study. However, for pragmatic reasons—the body of literature reviewed in this paper is already rather voluminous—I have decided to limit my review of empirical elite studies to Africa.

With regard to research on the history of the Euro-American middle classes and on contemporary middle-class formation in the Global South, I have consulted a large corpus of case studies because I believe that future research on the middle class in Africa can benefit immensely from broadening the historical and regional perspective. Looking at processes of nineteenth-century middle-class formation in Europe and America allows us to discover surprising similarities with contemporary developments, but also to discern the latter's specificities. Furthermore, the current making of the middle classes is shaped by the past of this social formation, and the concepts that scholars and societal actors employ to make sense of these processes carry not only a theoretical, but also a historical baggage. Broadening the regional perspective is useful, I argue, because it will eventually allow us to address the issue of 'African exceptionalism'.⁸ Discovering the similarities as well as differences of contemporary processes of social stratification in Africa with middle-class formation elsewhere may help to reopen the debate about, for instance, Jack Goody's (1971a, 2010) dictum of the 'Eurasian miracle' and classlessness in Africa. This paper cannot yet answer the question under which historical configurations which kinds of middle classes may arise, or outline different types of middle-class trajectories. However, it raises these concerns and provides an overview of existing studies that may eventually help to tackle these issues.

In sum, the major aim of this paper is to discuss existing theoretical approaches and empirical studies that may be useful for future research on African middle classes. The paper engages with theoretical debates on elites and middle classes, and explores what empirical studies tell us about the making of the middle classes under different historical and geographical conditions as well as about how people's own understanding and practices of being middle class (or, with regard to Africa, elite) have changed over time. I argue that future research on the dynamics of African social stratification has much to gain from a comparative perspective. This is why the paper not only looks at studies of African elites and middle classes, but also reviews a broad corpus of works on the history of the Euro-American middle classes and contemporary middle-class formation in the Global South.

The first part of the paper discusses major developments in elite theory, including the recent anthropology of elites, and reviews empirical studies of African elites from the 1960s to the early 2000s. The second part begins by examining broader theoretical debates on class, with a focus on the treatment of the middle class. It then presents key findings of research on the history of European and American middle classes, followed by a discussion of important insights from studies on middle classes in the Global South, mainly with regard to Asia and Latin America, but also including some few studies of African cases. The conclusion outlines the challenges that future research on African middle classes will have to confront. I suggest that it may be useful to adopt a more restricted definition of elites and keep questions of leadership roles ('elites') and social origins ('class') conceptually separate. I examine the predicaments of grasping the dynamics of social positioning and belonging in African societies with conventional 'groupist' and totalising understandings of class. And I conclude that it is still useful to retain the concept of middle class for further studies, but also necessary to study this social formation with a special focus on the politics of difference and practices of 'doing being middle

7 See, for example, on the anthropology of elites Shore & Nugent 2002 and Abbink & Salverda 2013, and on middle classes Heiman, Freeman & Liechty 2012 and Lopez & Weinstein 2012; these works do not take note of each other's existence. A similar observation obtains for the sociology of elites that rarely engages with the sociology of the middle classes, and vice versa.

8 On 'African exceptionalism' see e.g. Christopher Davis, 'Africa: The frontier continent', *The Guardian*, 13 June 2005; <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/jun/13/comment> (last accessed 26 June 2015).

class'. Finally, I return to the question raised above, namely, in how far the literature on the global middle classes allows us to discern what historical configurations give rise to particular types of middle-class trajectories.

The study of elites

When describing the upper echelons of educated professionals, civil servants, military, clergy and politicians in Africa, scholars have usually spoken of elites, not upper or middle classes. In the 1950s and 1960s, these groups formed such a tiny minority that the term middle class seemed intuitively inappropriate. Furthermore, scholars were interested in their role as modernisers and 'mediator[s] between western and traditional influences' (Lloyd 1966a: 51), something which elite theory seemed to capture better than class theory. The 1970s and 1980s saw vivid debates on whether African workers and peasants constituted a working class in the making.⁹ Studies of the now growing strata of politicians, administrators, and other white-collar employees, however, usually continued to rely on the term elite. Often, these studies used the term routinely, without much reflection on its theoretical implications, simply because it had become a convenient established category. Closer inspection reveals, however, that scholars from different disciplines applied the term to somewhat different phenomena. Political scientists, for instance, were interested mainly in political elites which they generally understood as ensembles of decision-making, influential individuals (e.g. Daloz 1999, Francis 2011).¹⁰ Sociologists and anthropologists, on the other hand, focussed on elite families and their lifestyles (e.g. Oppong 1974, Mann 1985), or examined strategies of elite group cohesion and rituals of distinction (Cohen 1981). These thematic variations reflect, in part, different strands of elite theory. Before discussing some milestones of empirical research on African elites, therefore, I will briefly look into the history of elite theory(ies), and their ambiguous relation with class concepts.

Elite theories

Historically, writes Michael Hartmann (2006: 2), 'the concept of the elite was developed in the eighteenth century by the aspiring French bourgeoisie as a democratic rallying cry in the struggle to break the hegemony of aristocracy and clergy'. Leading positions in society were to be awarded according to individual achievement instead of as an inherited status. In the nineteenth century, Hartmann argues, the strategic use of the concept shifted, now emphasising the distance towards lower social strata, namely the working classes and the urban poor. Early elite theories responded to concerns that industrialisation and urbanisation would lead to mass criminality, social disorder and political unrest.

The works by Gaetano Mosca (1896), Vilfredo Pareto (1916), and Robert Michels (1911) as well as Gustave Le Bon's (1895) study of the psychology of the masses, developed as critiques of Marxist class theory, and the utopian vision of a classless society. The central opposition on which early elite theorists focused was that of elites versus masses, instead of capitalists versus proletarians. They were especially interested in political power and the question of how political leaders were recruited. Against Marx's idea of an almost automatic congruence between capitalists and the ruling class, Pareto argued that there was no stable, consolidated and closed ruling group, but rather a continuous 'circulation' of elites, an incessant struggle of power holders against upcoming, aspiring individuals or groups. Elite leadership needed to be legitimated by achievement, but, as Pareto observed, the ruling elites attempted to entrench themselves in power. Using the terms ruling class, political class, upper class, or ruling minority interchangeably for 'elite', neither Pareto nor the other early approaches to

9 For prominent Ghanaian examples of this trend, see, for instance, Jeffries 1978 on the railway labourers, and Konings 1986 on peasants and rural labourers. Beyond Ghana, see, for instance, Gutkind & Waterman 1977.

10 An early example of this approach is the study by Gerhard Grohs (1967), a political sociologist, who traced the biographies of several generations of West African leaders.

elites developed a clearly defined terminology. They did agree, however, that throughout human history societies needed leadership, and thus ruling elites, to control the intellectually inferior and emotionally unstable masses (Hartmann 2006: 18–21). Early elite theories, thus, were developed in opposition to ‘socialist doctrines’ and were generally sceptical of, if not outright ‘hostile to democracy’ (Bottomore 1964: 18).

By contrast, C. Wright Mills’ (1956) theory of the ‘power elite’ was not principally opposed to Marxist class theory. However, Mills was critical of the economic determinism of Marxist theory and the consequences this had for the term ‘ruling class’ in Marxist models of social change. To speak of ‘ruling classes’ assumed that the dominant property-owning groups automatically controlled the political sphere, while the term elite, which Mills preferred, did not make such suppositions. For Mills, how the influential men at the top of big corporations, the state machinery and the military interacted, and how decisions in one domain influenced developments in the others were, at least in principle, empirically open questions. In post-war North America, Mills claimed, the economic, military and political elites had indeed become ever more closely integrated, forming a ‘power elite’ that used its members’ respective institutions in order to further their shared interests. ‘The power elite’, Mills explained, ‘is composed of men whose positions enable them... to make decisions having major consequences’. Their ability to shape politics at the national level and influence the lives of the masses had increased considerably since the beginning of the twentieth century because their ‘facilities of power’ had ‘enormously enlarged and [become] decisively centralized’ (1956: 3–4, 23). In his discussion of the recruitment of the national power elite and its relations with local or regional decision-making circles, Mills also employed the terms ‘upper classes’ or ‘strata’ (e.g. 1956: 30–1), and extended his analysis to include the powerful men’s educational trajectories, lifestyles, and values. Indeed, Mills argued that the cohesion between military, political and economic elites was facilitated by their common educational background in elite institutions, infusing them with shared aspirations and visions of society, and by multiple marital ties—an argument that was to become influential in the anthropology of elites.¹¹

Although Mills distinguished different fields in which elites wielded their influence, such as the economy, the political sphere, and the military, his theory of the ‘power elite’ was firmly wedded to a focus on the vertical differentiation of society, distinguishing a hierarchy of strata with more or less wealth and potential influence. Theories of ‘functional elites’, on the other hand, that gained prominence in the 1960s and continue to play an important role in current political science and sociology, tend to privilege aspects of the horizontal, functional differentiation of society. Their focus is less on hierarchy, but rather on the division of labour and the specialisation of roles in societal subsystems such as economy, politics, science, arts, and religion.¹² Unlike Mills, proponents of ‘functional elites’ approaches do not posit the emergence of a unified ‘power elite’, but believe that the increasing internal differentiation of modern industrial societies results in the growing autonomy of the various functional elites that differ with respect to their organisation, professional standards and moral values.¹³ Furthermore, theories of ‘functional elites’ focus on individuals, not factions or networks. Indi-

11 The role of education and, concomitantly, lifestyle for class distinctions and elite reproduction has also been a major concern in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984a, b) work; however, since Bourdieu himself neither uses the term elite (but rather speaks of ‘ruling class’) nor focuses on questions of political power, it is more useful to discuss his approach in the section on class theories. Some overviews on elite studies, however, do include Bourdieu in their discussion (e.g. Hartmann 2006: 46–53).

12 The genealogy of the idea of functional differentiation can be traced back to Émile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and, prominently, Niklas Luhmann. Of course, all ‘functionalists’ would readily admit that vertical stratification can still play an important role; for instance, access to the specialised elites is only in principle, but not in fact open to everybody. However, they would insist that the central feature of modern society is its organisation in specialised functional subsystems, each with their leading experts, without a ruling centre, stratum or class that would coordinate and dominate the entire society. To discuss this in detail, is beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to keep in mind this broader theoretical background of the ‘functional elites’ concept.

13 Suzanne Keller, for instance, distinguishes between different types of ‘strategic elites’, i. e. elites who not only exert influence in rather restricted local circles (‘segmented elites’), but whose decisions and actions

viduals hold elite positions because of their achievements, not because of their family background and membership in an upper social stratum; even if the latter may facilitate their access to elite positions, the focus of ‘functional elites’ approaches is on the education, knowledge and skills necessary to actually play elite roles. Modern elite positions, then, are regarded as in principle open to anybody who attains the requisite qualifications, and members of the elites no longer necessarily share the same social background, and thus values and lifestyles. These two basic assumptions—the rising autonomy of specialised elites, and their increasing social heterogeneity—explain why ‘functional elites’ approaches generally regard the question of how the necessary consensus of values and societal cohesion are achieved as a central task of elite research (Hartmann 2006: 36–40).

In sociology and political science, there have been few, if any new theoretical contributions to elite theory in the past two decades or so. Recent empirical research seems to have accepted the basic tenets of the ‘functional elites’ approach, and focussed mainly on the social recruitment of elites and intra-national as well as international comparisons of different functional elites.¹⁴ In a recent plea for a renewal of elite studies, the British sociologist John Scott (2008) exhorts scholars to sharpen the concept against its inflationary use for the description of all kinds of upper-middle-class groups or professional categories. Scott follows classical ‘functional elites’ approaches by suggesting to separate the question of the exercise of power from the social background of those in command. The term elite, Scott argues, is ‘most meaningful and usefully applied to those who occupy the most powerful positions in structures of domination’ while ‘wealthy or propertied classes and honoured status groups are, in analytical terms, quite distinct from elites’. Elites are ‘recruited from social classes and social estates’, Scott claims, but do not necessarily belong to the same strata. Whether they actually develop ‘common forms of outlook and social consciousness’ is an open question, not one that should enter into the definition of the concept itself. ‘As occupants of a purely formal category’, Scott insists, ‘the members of an elite need have few bonds of interaction or association and may not exist as a coherent and solidaristic social group’ (2008: 34–5).

However, it seems that Scott’s advice has not been heeded even by fellow sociologists across the Atlantic. In a recent research overview, Shamus Rahman Khan once more suggests a very broad definition of elites ‘as those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource ... that advantage[s] them’ and who therefore become ‘engines of inequality’ (2012: 362). These resources may be ‘political, economic, social, cultural, and knowledge capital’ and, importantly, can be converted into each other (2012: 365)—an idea that Khan imports from Bourdieu, without, however, further engaging with Bourdieu’s concept of upper class (rather than elite), or addressing the relationship between ‘elite’ and ‘class’ in any systematic fashion. Khan seems more concerned with issues of inequality than with questions of leadership and influence, and from his discussion of recent studies one gets the impression that American elite sociology is still more influenced by C. Wright Mills’ concept of power elite than by functional elites approaches.

In anthropology, too, it is rather C. Wright Mills’ neo-Marxist approach to elites that continues to be influential. Mills has certainly inspired George Marcus (1983) whose reflections on the challenges and potential of an ethnography of elites can still be regarded as the discipline’s ‘state-of-the-art’ text on elites. In the mid-1950s, in the context of decolonisation, social anthropologists had begun to examine the careers and lifestyles of Western-educated men whom they regarded as agents of change in, as S. F. Nadel put it, ‘backward communities’ (1956: 413). Nadel described these men as ‘elites’, but suggested to define the term sufficiently broadly so as to include ‘traditional elites’,

have consequences for many members of a society (1963: 20). ‘Strategic elites’ are composed of ‘external elites’, comprising political, economic, science, military as well as diplomatic elites who define a society’s goals and provide the means to achieve these goals, and ‘internal elites’ such as religious specialists, philosophers, artists and entertainers who define moral values and guarantee the population’s every-day contentment (1963: 96–100). On other approaches to ‘functional elites’, for instance by Karl Mannheim, Howard Lasswell and Ralf Dahrendorf, see the useful summary in Hartmann (2006: 22–40).

14 See, for instance, Michael Hartmann’s own empirical studies, summarised in chapters 5 and 6 of Hartmann 2006. See also Scott 1990, and Savage & Williams 2008.

namely chiefs and others in leading positions thanks to an inherited status. Nadel's suggestion that anthropologists should analyse the relations between modern and traditional elites was certainly inspired by functionalist assumptions of a plurality of elites as characteristic of modern societies. However, Nadel also insisted—and this was more in line with a neo-Marxist reading of elite theory—that elites were not simply individuals 'with high status and a superior position', but had 'some degree of corporateness, group character and exclusiveness' (1956: 415). Interestingly, Nadel's call for a new anthropology of elites was published in the same year as Mills' *Power Elite*, in 1956. Not many anthropologists heeded Nadel's call, however, and it was only George Marcus' (1983) collected volume *Elites: Ethnographic Issues* that (re)kindled the discipline's interest in elite studies.

Like Nadel, Marcus, whose own research examined dynastic business families in North America (Marcus & Hall 1992), adopted some tenets of functionalist elite theory, but was more inclined towards a neo-Marxist approach. His introduction to the *Elites* volume (1983) offers an insightful discussion of the historicity of elite as analytical category. It was no coincidence, Marcus claims, that Mosca and Pareto developed their theory 'in the midst of agrarian capitalism where market expansion outpaced centralized state formation' (2003: 15). Elite theory works best, Marcus argues, in 'societies where state or class formation is weak' (2003: 21). At the same time, elite theory is a powerful tool for the analysis of power in 'complex societies', because the concept of elite, focussing on 'agency' and attributing 'responsibility to persons rather than impersonal processes', is less abstract than class (2003: 7, 10). Studying elites allows developing 'holistic analyses of complex societies from a focus on small-group processes' and to explore 'inequality in a highly visible, personal form' (2003: 22, 9). Like Nadel and Mills, Marcus insists that elites are more than 'collections of individuals' and that it is important to examine the 'internal processes of elite organization' (2003: 25). Research in modern societies, where 'elites are creatures of institutions', needs to explore the elites' relation to 'corporate institutional organizations such as states, firms, and bureaucracies' (2003: 16). In addition, however, scholars should examine the ways in which elites 're-create a domain of personal relationships that extends across functional and official boundaries' (2003: 16). This is where the particular contribution of anthropology—a discipline trained in examining informal networks and people's 'cultural organization'—to elite studies lies. Marcus emphasises, however, that this focus on elite networks can only be a complement, not an alternative 'to class and institutional levels of analysis' (2003: 22).

Recently, Tijo Salverda and Jan Abbink have observed that despite Marcus' plea the ethnography of elites has 'not been very fashionable' in the past decades and anthropologists still preferred to study 'subaltern and marginal groups' (2013: 3).¹⁵ Had Salverda and Abbink looked at the growing (anthropological) literature on middle classes, they might have discovered that some of the questions formerly discussed in elite studies have 'migrated' into middle-class research. However, they do not address the relation between elites and classes. Following Marcus, they insist that an elite should be understood not as a collection of individuals, but as 'a social group within the societal hierarchy that claims and/or is accorded power, prestige, or command over others ... and aims to preserve and entrench its status' (2013: 5). Research on elites should therefore include the 'wider group' to which 'those in command are linked', by which they may be influenced and with which they share 'a way of life and a variety of interests', and it should to pay particular attention to elite networks (2013: 6).

In his contribution to Salverda and Abbink's volume, Huibert Schijf (2013) defends such a wide, groupist understanding of elites against John Scott's (2008) above mentioned narrow, positional definition. When sociologists examine horizontal ties between different functional elites, Schijf argues, they do not analyse informal networks but study the connections created by individuals who hold different elite positions consecutively or simultaneously ('interlocking directorates'). Similarly, political scientists, focussing on political decision-makers, understand elites as influential individuals, but lose sight of their families ties, friendships and networks that may be crucial for building up, and

15 The articles in the volumes edited by Pina-Cabral & Pedroso de Lima (2000), and Shore & Nugent (2002) are based on conference contributions that were mostly not part of larger studies on elites, but by-products of research on other themes. Studies on African elites are discussed in the next section.

maintaining, power. Anthropologists (and historians), by contrast, focus precisely on these elite networks and cultural resources. Schijf concedes that such a broad approach to elites begs the question whether ‘a concept such as upper class’ would not perhaps ‘offer more opportunities’ (2013: 41), but then advises that instead of engaging in further terminological reflections, scholars should rather produce more empirical studies. Indeed, as we will see in the next section, in research on African elites, too, the tensions between functional and power elite approaches and terminological slippage between ‘class’ and ‘elite’ remain unresolved, and often even go unnoticed.

African elites

In studies of Africa, elites came to the fore in the context of decolonisation after World War II.¹⁶ Colonial officers, but also anthropologists, political scientists and other scholars wanted to know who the upcoming African political leaders and public servants were, and what qualifications and visions of society they brought to their new tasks. Western-educated Africans working in the colonial (and later post-colonial) administrations and African politicians in post-colonial governments stood at the centre of attention, but scholars also discussed the overlap or separation, antagonism or mutual support between these ‘modern elites’ and ‘traditional chiefs and rulers’ (Lloyd 1966a: 14).

Optimism and normativity: Peter Lloyd’s ‘New Elites in Tropical Africa’ (1966a)

A landmark study that was to set the tone of much subsequent research was Peter Lloyd’s edited volume on *The New Elites in Tropical Africa* (1966a). It published case studies on a broad selection of African countries that had been presented at a conference of the International African Institute in Ibadan in 1964. Lloyd’s comprehensive introduction clearly set out the political agenda behind the conference and the publication, namely that knowledge on modern elites was important because ‘future political developments in African states will be strongly influenced by the composition and characteristics of the elites, and the degree of their cohesiveness or internal rivalries’ (Lloyd 1966a: 1).

Lloyd’s very definition of elites expressed the widespread hope that Western educated African politicians, civil servants and professionals would play a crucial role as modernising agents in the newly independent states. Lloyd, like many of his contemporaries, regarded African elites as the ‘superior group in an open society’ and ‘an imitable body of persons’ who influenced the ‘behaviour of the masses’. Elites were ‘creator[s] of new ideas and values’, ‘prime movers of change’, and ‘mediators between western and traditional values’ (1966a: 50–1, 40). This normative emphasis on the elites’ leadership role stood in a peculiar tension with the descriptive elements of Lloyd’s definition of elites, which simply claimed that elites were ‘persons who were western-educated and wealthy to a high degree relative to the mass of the population’ (1966a: 4)—a definition that could obviously include persons without leadership roles. According to Lloyd, elites had a high level of education (graduation from secondary schools and usually also university) and worked in occupations that generated a minimum annual income of 250£ (and often much more); they enjoyed a ‘style of life comparable with that of men of similar affluence in Western Europe’, lived in ‘commodious residences’ and put on show ‘ostentatious status symbols’ that were usually ‘copied from local expatriates or from those seen in the metropolitan country’ (1966a: 4, 12). In the 1960s, African elites were still ‘of recent growth’; they usually came from rural homes and were children of non-literate farmers or of headmasters, government clerks and catechists, that is: ‘an earlier local and provincial elite’ (1966a: 27). Lloyd therefore discussed at length the new elites’ home ties and their loyalty towards ‘tradition’—their support for rural relatives, engagement in ethnic associations and interest in the affairs of their home communities—as well as the rising tensions that they experienced between the exigencies of a modern urbanised lifestyle and the expectations of their extended rural families (1966a: 27–40). In

16 Particularly French and Belgian authors discussed African elites as early as in the late 1940s; see, for instance, Domont 1948, Roussel 1949, and Dekoster 1949. British scholars seem to have come to the scene somewhat later.

another section, Lloyd examined the new elites' 'achievement motivation' and asked whether they could develop a Weberian 'Protestant ethic' that 'stresses planning, risk-taking, and ... self-denial of immediate awards in favour of reinvestment'—a set of values that participants of the Ibadan conference regarded as 'somewhat alien to Africa' where 'acceptance by the group' and 'loyalty as opposed to individualism' seemed to be more characteristic (1966a: 41, 46).

The tension between normative and descriptive elements in Lloyd's definition of elites resulted, in part, from his conviction that a class terminology was inappropriate for an analysis of social inequality in Africa. For Lloyd, therefore, the concept of elite served, on the one hand, as key term in an examination (with normative overtones) of the functional differentiation and leadership roles in African societies; on the other hand, it worked as a cornerstone of an analysis (in a more descriptive vein) of an incipient vertical stratification. African societies, according to Lloyd, were still characterised by high rates of social mobility through education, networks of kin that cross-cut status boundaries, out-marriage, as well as relative cultural homogeneity and persisting ethnic loyalties across differences in occupation and wealth. In order to grasp these social dynamics, class theory appeared unsuitable—no matter whether one adopted a Marxist understanding of 'classes as economic or political-interest groups largely hereditary in character and logically opposed to one another' or a Weberian conception of 'classes as status groups, hierarchically arranged, but not clearly divided one from the other' (Lloyd 1966a: 55).

Lloyd regarded the example of the Yoruba in Nigeria that he had studied as typical for how social inequality in Africa had not yet congealed into fully fledged classes. Wealthy, educated elite men stood 'individually at the apices of groups consisting of kin and followers with whom is most of the interaction' (1996b: 332), while horizontal ties with other elites were less important. Thus, to speak of an 'upper class' (instead of elites) would be inadequate. Furthermore, there was little, if any, 'class awareness', neither among the upper nor among the lower classes. The term elite, by contrast, was 'spreading among Africans, and may well aid them in identifying the group' (Lloyd 1996a: 58). And finally, as Lloyd argued, both class and elite concepts implied relational models of society; it was not sufficient that just one term fitted the social reality, its terminological counterpart also had to make sense—which was not the case for 'class'. In the colonial period, Lloyd explained, African administrators and professionals were often regarded as a 'middle class' because they 'were situated between the expatriate colonial officials and the mass of the population' (1966a: 49).¹⁷ Furthermore, there were hardly any African entrepreneurs or businessmen. With the demise of colonial governments, these western-educated African administrators and professionals now stood at the top; but if they were to be called an 'upper class', Lloyd asked, who was their counterpart? Peasants and urban workers were 'ethnically oriented' rather than identifying as lower or working classes. They were thus better described as masses and their counterpart as elites (1966a: 60).

However, Lloyd did not fail to notice that this simple dichotomy of elites versus masses was too vague to capture the composition and social dynamics of African societies even in the 1960s. Lloyd therefore introduced further categories such as 'the traditional elite', 'the early westernized elite', 'holders of traditional offices who are educated', 'wealthy traders who tend to be but ill-educated', and the 'sub-elite' who were 'less well educated' and worked as clerks, primary school teachers and artisans (1966a: 12–4). Furthermore, there was the question of scale: 'elites' at the local level did not necessarily qualify as members of the national elites on which Lloyd's attention was focused. The latter's internal coherence, in turn, was encumbered by ethnic loyalties, differences in generation and conflicts between 'different functional groups' (1966a: 14–5). Interestingly, Lloyd himself suggested that the relevance of the term elite for the description of African societies 'may be short lived'. 'If the African elite becomes more hereditary', he argued, 'if hostility towards its privileged

17 This may also be the reason why Michael West's study (2002) on educated urbanised Africans in colonial Zimbabwe uses the terms middle class and elite more or less interchangeably, mostly speaking of 'elite' when looking at these upwardly mobile urbanites' relation with their poorer and less educated fellow black Africans, and of 'middle class' when considering their position in the colonial hierarchy, with the white settlers at the top. However, West does not explicitly discuss these relational categorisations.

affluence increases, and if ... the second and subsequent elite generations lose touch with the rural communities of their origin', highly educated, wealthy Africans could no longer be adequately termed 'elite' (1966a: 61–2). Here again, the normative implications of the term become obvious: when elites close their ranks and no longer 'influence the masses' or serve as innovators and role models, they no longer 'merit this designation' (1966a: 50).

Modernity, privilege, and power: elite studies since the 1970s

I have discussed Lloyd's seminal introduction at some length because it prefigured much of the subsequent discussion on social stratification in Africa. One can distinguish three different strands of analysis that all relate back, in one way or another, to Lloyd's ambiguous understanding of elites: (1) detailed descriptions of the lifestyles and modernist aspirations of specific African educated elites; (2) discussions on the further development of social stratification in African societies and how to capture it theoretically; and (3) debates on the characteristics of African political and state elites.

(1) Throughout the past decades, anthropologists and sociologists have produced a number of ethnographic case studies of specific African elites and their projects of leading modern lives while also honouring traditional values—not very many studies, but also not as few as some scholars deplore.¹⁸ Without any claim to offer an exhaustive overview, it is worth mentioning some of the themes on which these studies focused. There is a series of works on formal education and its role in elite formation. Some of these works discussed individual biographies and educational as well as subsequent professional trajectories (e.g. Grohs 1967, Behrends 2002, Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, Behrends & Lentz 2012); others focused on school cultures and the formative role particularly of boarding schools with regard to specific values, visions of society and modern lifestyles (e.g. Simpson 2003, Göpfert & Noll 2013); still others examined the stratificatory effects of secondary education (e.g. Foster 1965, Clignet & Foster 1966, Scudder & Colson 1980). Secondly, a number of studies explored the educated elites' marriage strategies, changing family ideals and redefinition of relations within the extended family (e.g. Caldwell 1968, Oppong 1974; Harrell-Bond 1975; Imoagene 197; Mann 1981, 1985; Dreyer 1989; Pauli 2009); there is some overlap with some of the biographical studies mentioned above, and one could include here also works like that of David Cohen and Otieno Odhiambo (1992) which looked at funerals as sites of constructing an elite status and struggling over the obligations of kinship (see also e.g. Dreyer 1989; Lawuyi 1991; Smith 2004; Fumanti 2007; Lentz 2009). Thirdly, there is a body of research on 'big men in small towns', to use the title of Joan Vincent's study (1968) of what she called the 'strategic elite' in an Ugandan medium-sized municipality. These studies explored the composition of and networks among influential individuals or groups such as teachers, civil servants, chiefs, and big landowners in specific localities as well as their functions as power brokers between local politics and national institutions (e.g. Jacobson 1973, Fumanti 2003). Local-national relations and the role of mobile educated elites in the transformation of the countryside are also discussed in the fourth set of works in ethnographic elite research, namely studies of the educated men's and women's activities in associations, both those formed among themselves ('old boys' associations, social clubs, etc.) and those created along ethnic lines, cross-cutting distinctions of education and social status (hometown associations, etc.) (see e.g. Little 1965, Lucas 1994, Lentz 1995, Nyamjoh & Rowlands 1998, Trager 2001).

In the majority of these thematically diverse studies, elite was used as a descriptive term, and there was little explicit discussion of the relationship between class and elite concepts. However, the list of

¹⁸ See, for instance, Werbner's complaint about the 'dearth of anthropological research in Africa on national elites and their upward mobility' (2004: 7). For an overview of different trends in anthropological studies of African elites, see Behrends & Pauli 2013. My discussion here does not include the growing number of studies on African pre-colonial and colonial elites; for some examples of studies on African professionals and wealthy merchants in the centuries preceding colonial rule, see Mark 1999; Doortmont 2006, 2007; Heintze 2011; on African 'intelligentsias' and employees of colonial governments, see e.g. Zachernuk 2000; Lawrence, Osborn & Roberts 2006; Eckert 2007; Keese 2007.

themes reveals that this body of research in fact often explored social phenomena that in other parts of the world would have come under the heading of middle (or upper) classes.¹⁹

A ground-breaking ethnographic study of an African elite that cut across the above mentioned themes and did explicitly discuss conceptual questions was Abner Cohen's analysis of Creole public servants and professionals in Sierra Leone. Cohen argued that the term class would be too wide and vague for his own micro-sociological case study of this specific 'power group' (1981: 232–3). While Lloyd could be characterised as proponent of a functional elites approach, Cohen was strongly influenced by C. Wright Mills' ideas. Cohen defined elite as 'a collectivity of people who occupy commanding positions in some sphere of social life, who do not overtly form a distinct group, but are nevertheless covertly a group, cooperating and coordinating their strategies of action informally' (1981: 233). Cohen insisted that an elite should not only be described 'in terms of criteria shared by individuals', such as income and academic qualifications, but analysed with regard to 'patterns of interaction, cooperation, and coordination of corporate activities through communal relationships' (1981: 232). Cohen's study focused on the Creole elite's strategies of exclusiveness and entrenchment of their own group in power, namely carefully crafted ties of marriage, specific choices of educational institutions, and membership in exclusively Creole churches and Freemason lodges. Most importantly, the ruling Creole families created 'a mystique of excellence' and developed a universalist ideology that served to justify their leading roles in society while furthering their particularistic interests. Following Mills, Cohen was most interested in how an elite managed to informally close its group boundaries within a modern, liberal, formally open society. His central argument was that this was achieved not only through rational, conscious strategies, but also the use of symbols of eliteness and routine cultural performances, in short: through 'the politics of culture', as the title of his study suggested. Such performances—in lodge meetings, church services, or family festivities—were crucial for developing a 'corporate organization as an elite' in an environment where the elite could not form formal associations because it had to remain 'invisible as a group in public' (1981: 231, 220). Interestingly, Cohen did not discard the usefulness of a class terminology, and even discussed the existence of a growing Creole 'middle class... bridging the gap between the higher and lower sections of Creole society' (1981: 69). However, he felt that the strength of anthropological research was to closely examine not an entire class, but 'manageable groups' such as elites, providing insights into their informal organisation and 'power mystique' that would remain hidden to other social scientists who studied larger formalised structures (1981: 236).

(2) Lloyd's question whether highly educated, wealthy Africans who had entrenched themselves in powerful positions should not rather be regarded as an upper or middle class rather than a meritorious elite, and generally the problem of how to conceptualise social stratification in Africa were issues that were intensely debated in the 1970s and 1980s. Many scholars insisted that even contemporary, and certainly colonial and pre-colonial, African societies could not be understood in terms of social classes. Jack Goody (1971b), for instance, argued that consistent patterns of out-marriage (instead of social endogamy, as in Europe and Asia) continued to militate against the formation of a class system. Others laid more emphasis on ethnic belonging and vertical ties of patronage as factors that retarded the development of 'a bureaucratic bourgeoisie' (Miller 1974: 526), and its counterpart, a lower class of peasants and workers. Some researchers observed an increasing closure of the formerly open educational system, and predicted 'a movement from achievement to ascription' that would 'reinforce the boundaries between what could be legitimately regarded as "social classes"' (Foster 1980: 231, 222). However, many still regarded elite as an adequate concept to describe social inequality and power in African societies. Marxist scholars like Alpheus Manghezi (1976), in contrast, explicitly criticised Lloyd's approach and argued that the term elite concealed the class character of African societies and thus served to entrench power and privilege. Similarly, Irving L. Markovitz (1977, 1987) argued that even pre-colonial Africa, and all the more so contemporary societies, were

19 Interestingly, in the mid-1950s, there were both an international conference on middle classes in 'tropical and sub-tropical countries', and a UNESCO-sponsored symposium on African elites (see INCIDI 1956, and UNESCO 1956); it was only after the publication of Lloyd 1966 that the term elite became much more widespread than middle (or upper) class.

characterised by the existence of classes, only that research on class in Africa needed to take ethnicity and regionalism as well as the peculiar fusion of political positions and economic ventures into account.²⁰ With the exception of Gavin Kitching's study (1980) on the Kenyan 'petite bourgeoisie', however, these class-versus-elite debates remained rather theoretical and did not result in-depth empirical research on specific national upper or middle classes.²¹

(3) In research on African politics, the use of the term elite experienced perhaps the most notable fluctuations. The hope that Lloyd and contemporary scholars had expressed in the 1960s with regard to the leadership qualities of African politicians and public servants, and their role as modernisers and innovators, soon gave way to trenchant critiques of the parasitism of African bureaucracies. To the extent that positive identification with the objects of study faded away, 'elite' was, at least for a while, replaced by structuralist, more anonymous concepts. Accusations of exploitation, corruption, and mismanagement were levelled at institutions and corporate groups rather than at identifiable, responsible individuals. In part, these discussions about the character of political rule in African states intersected with the above mentioned debate on the usefulness of a Marxist or neo-Marxist class terminology. Instead of 'elites', a number of scholars now studied 'state classes', the 'state bourgeoisie' or the 'organizational bourgeoisie' and their role in 'neopatrimonial' political systems (Médard 1982, Elsenhans 1986, Markovitz 1987). If the term elite was still used by these scholars, then it served to distinguish subgroups of the ruling class, as, for instance, in Tetzlaff's (1983: 50–1) discussion of the 'state class' that he classified into five different 'functional elites', namely the higher civil servants, military and police officers, politicians, the 'intelligentsia' and traditional authorities.

Other political scientists continued to use the term elites, but in a less normative, more technical, descriptive manner. Moreover, they employed the term mainly for politicians and leading state bureaucrats. Jean-François Bayart, for instance, explicitly demanded to 'dissociate the analysis of political forms from social stratification', reserving the term 'class' for the latter, although he also insisted that African societies were no 'real class societies' (1993: 153, 178). Bayart focused on the relation between 'old' and 'new' ruling groups and analysed how shared educational trajectories, social activities and political practices resulted in the 'reciprocal assimilation of elites', creating a 'relatively homogenous social bloc' and a unified 'dominant class' (1993: 161, 163). Jean-Pascal Daloz (1999, 2003) shared Bayart's critique of neo-Marxist, dependency-theoretical approaches to African societies, and argued, somewhat vaguely, that he preferred the term elite 'because it has the advantage of subsuming many types of upper groups, including those in social contexts where the concept of class would be inappropriate' (2007: 27, Fn 1). Critical of Bayart's assertion of the horizontal integration and increasing autonomy of national elites, however, Daloz (2003) emphasised their fragmentation and vertical integration with the broader population through patron-client relationships, usually along ethnic lines.

More recently, 'functional elites' approaches have been revived in research on the social background of political elites such as parliamentarians and executive personnel, as, for instance, in Johanna Svanikier's (2007) study on the role of 'elite circulation' in Ghana for democratic stability, or Suzanne Francis' (2011) examination of the members of the Kwa Zulu-Natal provincial parliament. Other studies look at historical developments of political elites, particularly in the context of radical regime change, like Tanja Müller's (2005) research on 'revolutionary' elite women in Eritrea or Jason Sumich's work (2009, 2010) on the national elite(s) in Mozambique under the socialist and liberal governments.

20 There are, of course, also numerous works that simply apply a political-economy class terminology in their discussion of social inequality and poverty in Africa without any discussion of the suitability of their categories; see, for instance, Nafziger 1988. For an overview of studies from the 1960s and 1970s on 'African bourgeoisies', see Allen & Williams 1982: 161–202.

21 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the more numerous case studies on African working classes that were conducted; for two early overviews, see Stichter 1985 and Freund 1988.

A decidedly normative perspective on elites has been reintroduced by Richard Werbner's study (2004) on Kalanga elites in Botswana. Arguing against 'Afro-pessimism' and calling 'for a shift away from the Machiavellian suspicion of elites', Werbner has emphasised the important moral as well as political role that Kalanga business and public service elites have played for the 'public good'. These elites, Werbner argues, keep the state apparatus functioning, negotiate 'power in good governance', and create a 'more civic nationalism' (2004: 2, 8, 9, 191). More specifically, Werbner analyses how informal sociability, friendships, and 'old boys' networks among Kalanga elite men in banks, businesses and the civil service have contributed to establishing certain moral standards that guide conduct in public office and political activities—a research perspective not unlike that of Abner Cohen, albeit with a much more sympathetic attitude towards the elites.²² With regard to the elite concept as theoretical tool, however, Werbner's study has little to offer; once, in a critique of another author, 'struggles between class fractions' are mentioned (2004: 21), but otherwise Werbner prefers the term 'elite' because it is more personalised, without further addressing the relationship between 'elite' and 'class'.

More generally, this overview of studies on African elites has shown how variable and often inconsistently scholars have used the concept of elite. Some have discussed its relation to, or advantages over, class concepts and examined the historicity of the different categories explicitly; others have just more or less intuitively exchanged the terms as they best fitted the phenomena they studied. In the conclusion of this paper, I will return to these conceptual issues and suggest that it may be useful to adopt a more restricted working definition of elites as persons or small groups with leadership roles. For now, I would like to emphasise the striking similarity of some of the themes discussed in studies of African elites—such as the importance of formal education, modern family life, and progressive values, or more generally: the elites' relation to modernity and their role as modernisers—with aspects that studies of the middle classes have highlighted, and this is the topic to which I will now turn.

The study of middle classes

Since the 2000s, interest in the middle classes, once heralded as the main forces behind industrialisation, urbanisation and bureaucratisation but then somewhat neglected by social scientists (albeit not by historians), has experienced a renaissance, this time on a global scale. Middle classes in the Global South are seen as being on the rise, and heralded as bearers of new values and lifestyles. They are believed to boost economic growth, promote desirable social dynamics, and safeguard democracy. In short, they are regarded as modernisers who embody a positive vision of social mobility and a meritocratic social order. With respect to the Global North, however, narratives of deprivation and victimisation of the middle classes in the wake of structural transformation of the world economy dominate (e.g. Zunz 2002; Collins 2013; Groh-Samberg et al 2014; Mau 2015). In a recent paper about 'the tale of two middle classes', Branko Milanovic (2014) argues that these contradictory developments and perspectives are interrelated. Globalisation is 'not a zero-sum game', Milanovic asserts, but it seems to produce more 'losers' among the middle classes in the West and more 'winners' in the Global South, particularly in 'resurgent Asia'.²³

In any case, the term middle class currently has become rather attractive, both for political and market analysts and as term of self-description. Some scholars attribute this popularity to the global conjuncture of neoliberal politics, with its special emphasis on individual achievement and upward social

22 Interestingly, however, Werbner has engaged neither with Cohen's study (1981) nor with Lloyd's (1966a) earlier work on the positive public role that elites can and should play.

23 This is also reflected in trends that the number of people identifying themselves as middle class seem to decrease, as a recent Gallup survey on the US suggests; while in 2000 61% of Americans saw themselves as middle class or upper-middle class, this percentage decreased to 51% in 2008, while identification with the working and lower classes rose [<http://www.gallup.com/poll/182918/fewer-americans-identify-middle-class-recent-years.aspx>; last accessed 19 June 2015].

mobility. Members of the middle class generally see their success as dependent on their own efforts rather than on social networks or 'corruption' (for which they blame the upper class). For Don Kalb, the contemporary 'discourse of the "global middle class" is ... primarily an effort by global and local elites to intervene in ongoing class formations within globalizing capitalism', aimed at neutralising any possibility of popular protest against the wealthy and the powerful (2014: 160). Kalb's urge to 'deconstruct the self-confidence of the liberal narrative' makes him adopt an almost conspiratorial understanding of idioms of middleclassness as false consciousness, produced by upper-class interventions in the class struggle between 'the "1 percent"' and 'subaltern groups' (2014: 158, 160, 163–4). Such a perspective does help to denaturalise and problematise the appropriation of middle-class discourses, but I would argue that we need to move on to more open questions regarding why these discourses were, and continue to be, so meaningful to increasing groups of people around the world. And, as Göran Therborn, who is certainly critical of neoliberalism, has conceded, the growing importance of the middle class may indeed imply 'globalized middle-class consumerism' and political acquiescence, but can also lead to instances of 'middle-class political rebellion' (2012: 26–7). The following review of research on the middle class therefore starts from the assumption that it is important to explore struggles over class labels, and the practices of distinction associated with them, without implicit or explicit assumptions about 'false consciousness'.

But who exactly is in the 'middle', who is declared to belong or declares himself as belonging to the middle class(es)? In popular discourse, it often remains rather vague who precisely is believed to stand 'above' or 'below', and terminologies of these relevant 'others' vary, depending on place and time. Furthermore, the concept of the middle class is increasingly pluralised; ever more often, one finds 'middle classes' rather than middle class, with sub-divisions of 'upper', 'middle', and 'lower'. Is this the result of ever finer scholarly distinctions, or does it reflect the social actors' own diversification of self-designations? Is the heterogeneous agglomeration of occupations, income levels, lifestyles and political ambitions usually labelled as middle class(es) really a social formation 'whose members share situational characteristics, a sense of belonging together, common attitudes and values, as well as a disposition for common behaviour and actions' (Kocka 2004: 37)? Are the contemporary middle classes in the Global South and in the Global North similar formations? And what may the nineteenth-century *Bürgertum* in Germany (Budde 2009), the British 'middling sorts' (Bledstein & Johnston 2001), the French *bourgeoisie* (Le Wita 1994: 23–61), or the American early 'middle class' (Ryan 1981) have in common with twentieth- or twenty-first-century social formations in Latin America, Asia and Africa? Is it really useful to group all these phenomena under the umbrella term 'middle class'?

Scholars have provided different answers to these questions, and the concept of 'middle class' has a long and varied history. Indeed, the middle classes have always confronted researchers with theoretical problems. They constitute, as Jürgen Kocka (2004: 37) put it, 'a conceptual morass' which Marxist class theories could not disentangle, nor did Weberian approaches to class-cum-status groups solve all theoretical problems. As an 'intermediate' and obviously relational category, the middle class defied, and continues to defy, neat class divisions. Discussions of the question of who belongs to this fuzzy category and whether the middle class is not, after all, a 'myth' (Wahrman 1996, Maza 2003), upheld by political discourse but not by social practice, are as old as the appearance of the term in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²⁴ However, despite certain sympathies for the discursive or narrative turn in class theory (e.g. Somers 1992), my approach here is premised on a 'realist' assumption, namely that the middle class is not 'a mere abstraction, a discourse, a metaphor, a rhetorical device', but indeed a social formation 'out there'. It is, as Ricardo López, has convincingly put it, 'a working social concept, a material experience, [sometimes, C.L.] a political project, and a cultural practice' (2012: 20–1), although not all of these dimensions need to be present at the same time to the same degree. Furthermore, I would argue that it is productive to use the term middle

24 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first mention of 'middle class' dates back to the mid-seventeenth century, but it is not before the late eighteenth century that the term is used more regularly in British political discourse (see also Seed 1992).

class both for historical and contemporary social formations because this allows for a comparative perspective.

In what follows, I will sketch past and contemporary debates on class in general, and theoretical approaches to the middle class in particular, before I discuss important findings from research on the history of the Euro-American middle classes which have left their imprint on how we understand the middle class today. With regard to the contemporary emergence of middle classes in the Global South, there are, as I explained in the introduction, as yet relatively few case studies focussing on Africa. Thus, in that section, I will mainly examine research on Asia and Latin America. However, in view of the overwhelming number of studies that have been produced in the past two decades on these continents, my review must remain highly selective. I will first discuss a range of themes that reveal striking continuities of current middle-class formation in the Global South with processes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and America, namely the centrality of 'boundary work' (Lamont 1992); the role of education, 'intelligent' work and meritocratic values; new ideals of domesticity and gender relations; practices of consumption; and middle-class sociability and political engagement. I will then point to three themes which this new body of research on the new global middle classes has explored that were not prominent in studies of older middle-class trajectories: the role of the state in making and breaking the middle classes; the relations between middle-class status and ethnicity or race; and the transnational dimensions of middle-class formation.²⁵

Class theories

A number of scholars have commented on the recent trend of increasing social inequality within nation-states, and pointed to 'the return of class as an ever-more powerful determinant of inequality' (Therborn 2012: 13). Not only the middle class, but class in general is back on the social-science research agenda. In *Rethinking Class* (2005), for instance, a volume discussing the history of research on social inequality in Great Britain, Rosemary Crompton and John Scott warn of the problematic consequences of the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences. They argue that the dominant focus of studies of the 1990s and early 2000s on politics of identity and inequalities produced by gender, ethnicity or race carried 'a very real danger of "winning cultural battles but losing the class war"' (2005: 200). Outside of the academy, too, politics of recognition, often based on a reified understanding of cultural difference(s), tended to replace the politics of redistribution, as Crompton and Scott contend. However, far from developing into a levelled, classless or post-class society, economic statistics show that in Great Britain (and other European countries) differences in wealth and income are on the rise, and the 'endogamy' and intergenerational reproduction of social inequality are increasing. '[T]aking culture (too) seriously', Crompton and Scott believe, risks to obscure such enduring social inequality (2005: 191). Class therefore needs to be studied seriously, with 'culturally sensitive approaches', but no longer be 'virtually replac[ed ...] with discussions of culture, consumption, and identity alone' (2005: 198–9).²⁶

Other contributors to *Rethinking Class* are less critical of 'culture'. Fiona Devine and Mike Savage, for instance, insist that the 'cultural turn' has been beneficial by forcing analysts of social inequality to

25 Because of my interest in the boundary work and social practices constitutive of middleclassness, I will focus on studies from scholars of anthropology, history and qualitative sociology; for discussions of middle class(es) by economists, see e.g. Easterly 2001, and Ravallion 2009. Banerjee & Duflo 2008 share the usual economist definition of middle-class membership by per capita expenditure (between 2\$ and 10\$ at purchasing power parity), but offer interesting statistical material from household surveys in thirteen 'developing countries' on further criteria such as employment, consumption and investment in health and education.

26 Sherry B. Ortner (1991) was one of the first anthropologists who, after the 'writing-culture debate', called for a return of the study of class, not only ethnicity and cultural identities. For a radical critique by German social scientists of the 'culturalisation of structural inequality' and the 'uncanny alliance between intellectual advocates of the "New Right" and (post-)critical theoreticians of modernisation', see Klein, Landhäußer & Ziegler 2005: 45 (my translation).

move beyond the neo-Marxist 'structure-consciousness-action' formula that had become 'a straight-jacket' (2005: 21). They advocate Bourdieu's 'sociology of practice', and argue that an analysis based on his concepts of social fields, economic, cultural and social capital as well as habitus will go a long way towards a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of social inequality and the boundary work involved in the construction of social classes. In Devine and Savage's eyes, Bourdieu's post-structuralist approach allows scholars to appreciate that identification with a class is 'not based on recognising oneself as belonging to a given position, but as differentiating oneself from others in a field' (2005: 14; Bourdieu 1984a). Furthermore, Bourdieu does not posit that economic capital necessarily constitutes the most central dimension of social inequality, but allows for a variety of differences in 'a multiplicity of fields, with no clear, predetermined relationship between them' (Devine & Savage 2005: 15). Unlike traditional stratification theory, therefore, Bourdieu has no problem in explaining 'the complex and fractured nature of class-consciousness'. For Bourdieu, Devine and Savage assert, 'the fact that people may not see themselves as members of classes' does not make class unimportant, but is rather evidence of the 'overarching power' of dominant groups to structure the social field (2005: 15–6). In any case, despite some criticism, for instance of Bourdieu's tendency to treat culture reductively, his difficulty of explaining where 'discursive and critical consciousness arises from' and his methodological nationalism (2005: 17), Devine and Savage insist that Bourdieu's approach helps to reinvigorate class theory. And Devine (2005) herself has employed his approach in a comparative analysis of middle-class identities in the United States and Great Britain.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, neither *Rethinking Class*, nor other recent calls to revitalise class analysis, and most certainly not scholars interested in the middle class, have argued for a straightforward return to Marxist class theory with its simple two-class model of capitalists versus proletarians. In his political writings, such as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1907), Marx himself developed a much more refined analysis of social groups and their political interests. In his works on political economy, however, he defined classes exclusively with respect to the production process and the ownership of the means of production or of labour power. Rather than striving for a description of the social structure of nineteenth-century European societies, Marx's opposition of the capitalist and the working class was a model aimed at the future, expressing the expectation that the capitalist system would eventually develop towards a radical confrontation of these two central, antagonistic classes (e.g. Marx 1887, chs 15, 25 and 32).

Marx' prophecy did not materialise, and his class theory has been accused of economic reductionism as well as political teleology.²⁸ However, in modified versions, Marx' approach to class still plays a role in some analyses of social stratification, and Neo-Marxist approaches continue to regard the production process as the most important generator of social inequality. However, they also try to account for the resilience, and growth, of intermediary groups such as managers, highly qualified employees or professionals who are neither capitalist nor proletarianised. Erik Olin Wright (1985), for instance, maintains that exploitation and value transfer are still central concepts for the explanation

27 In the 'Great British Class Survey', a large social survey undertaken in 2011 with support from the BBC, Devine and Savage combined Bourdieu's concepts with Erikson and Goldthorpe's (1992) more classical definition of class on the basis of occupational structure. Based on people's occupation and their specific combination of economic, cultural, and social capital, the survey distinguished seven social classes in Great Britain, namely elite, the established middle class, the technical middle class, new affluent workers, emergent service workers, the traditional working class, and the precariat. Major findings concern the importance that the composition of a family's various forms of capital has for class reproduction; particularly children of middle-class and elite families, for instance, may still retain their class membership despite repeated educational failures, if their families continue to support them economically. Furthermore, the survey revealed a clear polarisation between the 'top' and the 'bottom' of the class system, and an increasing fragmentation of the 'middle'. In a recent paper, Devine (2014) also pointed to the importance of the (welfare) state for the intergenerational reproduction of social classes. For the 'Great British Class Calculator', see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/0/21970879?print=true> (last accessed: 20 Oct. 2014).

28 For an interesting overview of the revisionist debate between Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein about the role of 'white-collar employees' in Marxist class analysis, and how this debate fed into later research on social stratification, see Wacquant 1992.

of social inequality in capitalist societies. In order to grasp the special position of the resilient middle class, however, he proposes a broader understanding of ownership rights, including the ownership not only of the means of production, but also of organisational rights (the right to decide about the use of the means of production), and of knowledge and qualifications. Members of the middle class, such as managers, experts, or supervisors, thus own some important resources (although they do not hold the material means of production) which makes them stakeholders in the capitalist system and thus undermines the confrontational relationship that Marx conjectured existed between the bourgeoisie and the capitalist class. In Wright's view, their class position is therefore contradictory, being both victims and privileged agents of exploitation.

For most scholars of the middle class, however, Max Weber's writings have been more attractive than such neo-Marxist approaches. Weber (1968: 302–7, 626–39) defined classes not according to their position in the production process, but on the market, distinguishing 'property' from 'commercial' classes (*Besitz-* versus *Erwerbsklassen*), depending on whether people's dissimilar chances to procure goods, 'gain a position in life' and find 'inner satisfaction' (1968: 302) are determined by differences in income from property (rents) or from the marketing of goods and skills. 'Middle classes', including for example entrepreneurs, managers, peasants, artisans, or state officials, can appear in both 'property' and 'commercial' classes. Most importantly, these economically defined categories only become 'social classes' when their members develop mechanisms of social closure and some sense of community, in short: class-consciousness. For Weber, there is no automatism that economic classes necessarily evolve into social classes. If they do, membership in a social class is likely to be closely associated with belonging to a particular status group (*Stand*) that is defined by social esteem founded on a specific lifestyle, education, or hereditary or occupational prestige. However, people in the same economic class do not always belong to the same status group, and, conversely, one's economic position and class membership do not guarantee membership in a specific status group (1968: 935–8).

It is this idea of complex, non-deterministic combinations of economic and social classes with status groups that made Weber's approach a valuable starting point for researchers of social mobility and status incongruence in Europe and America (e.g. Lipset & Bendix 1959; Erikson & Goldthorpe 1992) as well as for scholars of middle-class formation in regions where race or caste played an important role for social stratification.²⁹ Jeremy Seekings (2008), for instance, has shown how Weber's thoughts on class, status groups and 'castes' inspired research in the 1950s and 1960s on the emerging South African black middle class (e.g. Kuper 1965). One could also argue that even recent attempts to open up class analysis for a nuanced study of social milieus—that is, configurations defined only in part by economic factors, but rather by shared normative orientations and lifestyles—are an outgrowth of Weber's non-deterministic approach to class and status groups.³⁰

Most contemporary scholars of social inequality would agree that class needs to be 'considered as more than simply an occupational or economic category', and that 'symbolic and cultural forms' play an important role in 'class inequality' (Lawler 2005: 804). However, scholars remain divided on the question regarding the respective weight economic or cultural factors should be accorded in class analysis, and what role ascriptive processes, based on race, ethnicity and gender, play for class membership and social stratification. Furthermore, there is a fundamental disagreement on whether class should be employed as an explanatory concept that assumes that class membership indeed produces social inequality, or as a descriptive concept, which simply categorises members of society according

29 For an extended discussion by an anthropologist of the usefulness of Weber's approach for an analysis of middle-class cultural practice, see Liechty 2003: 11–21.

30 It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these lifestyle and social milieu concepts in detail. See Vester 2005 for one of the few examples of a text on milieus written in English; milieu concepts seem to have been discussed mainly by German sociologists, and range from neo-Marxist theories inspired by Bourdieu (e.g. Vester 2005) to more descriptive, neo-Weberian approaches based on the idea of gradational status groups (e.g. Hradil 1987). For a general discussion of (German) lifestyle and milieu approaches, see Otte & Rössel 2011.

to a set of criteria that may reflect, but not necessarily explain social inequality (such as income, education, or prestige). In German sociology, the first school would speak of *Klassen*, the second of *Schichten*, while in English-speaking scholarship both ideas are usually rendered by the term class. As David Grusky puts it, scholars of the first approach proceed ‘by mapping individuals or families into mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories (i.e. classes) ... [while] the implicit claim underlying gradational approaches is that such dividing lines are largely the construction of overzealous sociologists, and that the underlying structure of modern stratification can, in fact, be more closely approximated with gradational measures of income, status, or prestige’ (1994: 17).

Such a gradational approach, however, relies more or less solely on the observer’s decisions as to which criteria to privilege in the delimitation of classes (*Schichten*) and does not take the actors’ self-positioning into account, except perhaps indirectly by establishing ‘occupational scales of prestige’ as part of the definition of class membership (Grusky 1994: 17). It does not explore the active politics of difference and the ‘boundary work’ (Lamont 1992) that go into the making of class distinctions.³¹ Most of the historical and anthropological studies of middle classes discussed below, therefore, go beyond gradational approaches. They tend to understand class as ‘something which is done ... rather than a system into which we are slotted’, and as ‘dynamic ..., continually being re-made in the large- and small-scale processes of social life’ (Lawler 2005: 804, 797). Or, as Loïc Wacquant puts it, ‘class identities, practices and “lived experience” are not “afterthoughts” tacked onto pre-existing classes; they enter into the very making of these classes’ (1992: 51). In this vein, many contemporary scholars of class would also agree with Margaret Somers’s appeal to ‘liberate the study of class action ... from the constraints of the a priori independent variable’, namely the assumption that large-scale historical transformations, captured in master narratives of ‘the rise of capitalism’, ‘proletarianisation’ or ‘modernisation’, produce specific economic interests that become ‘the foundational causal factor’ of social action (1992: 616–7). Instead, Somers suggests, researchers should engage with the multiple, and sometimes contradictory, individual and public narratives that social actors and institutions create in order to make sense of their lives and projects.³² Somers developed this advice out of her critique of research on the English working class, but it reflects a perspective on class that has influenced many studies on the history of the European and American middle classes, to which I will now turn.

Historical approaches to the European and American middle classes

Central insights into the formation of the European and American middle classes (*classes moyennes*, *bourgeoisie*, *Bürgertum* etc.) have been developed by scholars of the ‘new social history’, an approach to historiography evolving since the 1960s that has aimed at studying not only the history of political elites and events, or economic history, but also social dynamics, mentalities, and the everyday lives of ordinary people.³³ In this vein, E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1980 [1963]) pioneered a new understanding of class as a ‘historical relationship’ of ‘real people ...

31 For a comparative discussion of concepts of social inequality and theories of class, status groups and milieus, see Grusky 1994, Wright 2005, and Solga, Berger & Powell 2009. For a recent example of research on the problematic transition from ‘heterogeneity’ to ‘inequality’, and on the role that the social actors’ perceptions and evaluations of differences play for mechanisms of exclusion or inclusion and accumulation of privilege, see Faist & Diewald 2011.

32 Many of these post-Marxist and deconstructivist approaches engage, implicitly or explicitly, with the neo-Gramscian theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) who were among the first social scientists to insist that ‘classes’ were not clearly identifiable collective actors but rather temporarily constituted, precarious subject positions in a system of discursive practices. It is beyond the scope of this paper, however, to discuss this and related approaches in detail.

33 The ‘new social history’ developed somewhat differently in the Anglophone world, France and Germany; on German *Sozial-* and *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, see Kocka 1986; on the French *Annales* school, Burgièrès 2009; on American social history, Johnson 2011. For a critical view of ‘social science history’ and a defence of a more interpretive approach based on an analysis of ‘narrative identities’, see Somers 1992.

in a real context': 'class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs' (1980: 8–9). Thompson argued that the experiences which eventually made the English working class were 'largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily' (1980: 9). The middle class, by contrast, was a social formation that comprised people with very different occupations and economic positions, including self-employed entrepreneurs, capitalists and merchants as well as employees, members of the free professions, and public servants. Of crucial importance for the making of a self-conscious middle class were, therefore, not so much 'productive relations', but shared cultural values and a common lifestyle as well as the boundary work with which the new social formation set itself off from the aristocracy as well as from workers and the poor. Scholars of the middle class have explored the complex social processes that 'integrate larger or smaller parts of the middle classes into specific communities of common action and shared orientation' (Lepsius 1987: 72; my translation). However, as Jürgen Kocka cautions, '[to] have common opponents and to share a culture defines those concerned only to a limited degree. In everything else, they differ: interests and experiences based in occupations and economic status, gender and region, religion and ethnicity. At any particular time, the middle class has been heterogeneous' (2004: 19).

Different trajectories of middle-class formation

In his overview of the history of the middle classes in nineteenth-century Europe, Kocka emphasises that this social formation was highly influential, but always very small, at least as far as the upper middle class was concerned. Its composition as well as the dominant target of its boundary work (those 'above' or those 'below') differed according to regional variations in the economic and political systems, and it changed over time. In Germany, for instance, the *Bürgertum* comprised not more than five per cent of the population in the early period, growing only towards the end of the nineteenth century (Kocka 2004: 16). It grew out of groups of townsmen (*Bürger*) of different local origins, developing into a post-corporate, urban, supra-local social formation whose members 'shared a sense of social distance from the privileged aristocracy', stressed achievement and education, and propagated visions of an enlightened society (Kocka 2004: 17; also Budde 2009: 5–14). In the course of the nineteenth century, distinctions against the nobility blurred while boundaries vis-à-vis the working class and urban poor as well as against the *petite bourgeoisie* (*Kleinbürgertum*) hardened (Budde 2009: 92–107). The German middle class was characterised by a close association of *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* (economic middle class) and *Bildungsbürgertum* (educated middle class), linked through multiple ties of marriage and shared sociability. The *Bildungsbürgertum* was small in numbers, but culturally influential and socially recognised; its members defined the values and lifestyle that the economically more powerful and wealthy groups of merchants, industrialists and businessmen embraced.

Other regions of Western, Central and Eastern Europe were characterised by different relations between the intellectual and the economic middle-class segments, and by distinct patterns of boundary work.³⁴ In England, for instance, the economic middle class, comprising merchants, bankers, manufacturing entrepreneurs and industrial managers, was much stronger, and its chances of entering the ranks of the nobility and gentry bigger, than in Germany (Kocka 2004: 19–20, 22; Seed 1992). In nineteenth-century France, too, aristocratic and middle-class elements tended to blend, 'both by certain flexibilities of the old order and by its revolutionary end' (Kocka 2004: 20), but the French middle class was strongly dominated by public servants, not the economic bourgeoisie (Maza 2003). In Central and Eastern Europe, as well, educated groups, in particular state officials, played an important role, and thus ideals of political autonomy and the image of economic power independent from the state did not feature as highly as among the English middle class. However, despite some mingling of

34 For an insightful discussion of commonalities and differences in the role of state employment versus industrial capitalism, and rural-urban relations in the formation of the English and the American middle classes, see Barry 1994.

bourgeoisie and aristocracy through marriage and cooperation in the growing state bureaucracies, 'the dividing line between nobility and middle classes remained, to the latter's disadvantage, more clearly marked ... than in the West, idea right into the twentieth century' (Kocka 2004: 22). More generally, where the intellectual middle class dominated, the emphasis on qualifications and social mobility as well as claims to middle-class status through individual effort instead of property or family background were particularly pronounced; at the same time, these ideas supported exclusionary boundary lines vis-à-vis the *petite bourgeoisie* and the working class.

In North America, middle-class formation developed in a different setting. Industrialisation set in rather late; the frontier in America's West offered unique opportunities of social mobility; the civil war militated against the emergence of a national middle class, and strengthened regional networks and loyalties; and last, but not least, issues of race and ethnicity haunted the creation of homogenised middle-class identities from the very beginning.³⁵ '[D]istrust of elite traditions', 'a pervasive repudiation of the past' and opposition to nobility were a uniting factor in the early nineteenth century (Archer & Blau 1993: 31). In later periods, middle-class boundary work was increasingly influenced by the growing self-confidence of workers who regarded themselves as the producers of national wealth. The 'middling sorts' therefore had to present themselves as rendering equally valuable service to the common good. As Burton J. Bledstone argues, the 'line between working classes and the middle, both in neighborhoods and at work, was often fuzzy and in flux, tempered by ethnicity, nationality, and religion' (2001: 17). Entry into the middle class was not a one-time transition, necessarily embracing all spheres of life, but rather 'piecemeal, through discriminating practices: in family activities, child-rearing procedures, gender relations, techniques of worship, work habits, labor relations, education and health methods, recreation routines, and personal as well as domestic consumption patterns' (2001: 9). Discourses on class eventually shifted from pluralised nouns—the middling sorts or middle classes—to a singularised adjective—middle-class—but 'the multiplying interests of the middle classes, the mobile personal alliances, changing occupational fortunes, and shifting career affiliations dictated against a group consciousness or politics' (2001: 23).

A shared 'bourgeois culture'

If there was anything common to these different constellations of the middle classes in Europe and America, then it was a shared 'bourgeois culture' (Budde 2009: 13; my translation). It was centred on an emphasis on education and 'respect for individual achievement..., a positive attitude towards regular work, a propensity for rationality and emotional control and a fundamental striving for independence, either individually or through their associations and initiatives' (Kocka 2004: 18). 'Be your own lord and servant', this motto on the crest of the archetypical bourgeois Bassermann family in the German city of Mannheim epitomised middle-class meritocratic principles (Gall 1989). 'At the heart of bourgeois culture was a specific ideal of family', writes Gunilla Budde (2009: 25; my translation) that was based on the separation of the private sphere from the work place and public life, and on a gendered division of responsibilities that opposed the housewife at home to the male breadwinner in the outside world. Ideally, families were to be 'founded on sympathy and love, consist mainly of father, mother and a limited number of children. The family was to be protected from the world of work and profession, and geared towards the education of the children whose particular character and needs had just been "discovered"' (Budde 2009: 25, my translation; see also Ryan 1981). The bourgeois woman was regarded as naturally predestined to be responsible, as wife and mother, for the organisation of a respectable domestic life, supported by the husband and father's comfortable income, and by the labour of domestic servants (Budde 2009: 37–42).

35 Bart Landry and Kris Marsh's overview of research on the black middle class in North America leaves no doubt that even today, despite a considerable overall increase in upward mobility and the growing importance of class membership of one's parents, black middle-class achievement continues to be limited by racial discrimination, 'both in institutional settings and in the accommodations of everyday life' (2011: 373). Interestingly, the segregationist legacy is reflected in the fact that research on black middle-class Americans is usually carried out in the context of African-American studies, not the general sociology of social stratification.

In actual fact, however, gender roles were contested, and the division between the female domestic and the male public sphere was not as rigid as bourgeois ideology posited; even ideologically, female subordination was hard to justify in view of universal ideals of equality. Women often played a far more active role in their husband's firms than bourgeois discourse would admit, as for instance Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (1987) have shown for the English middle class. Furthermore, the model of love marriage was regularly supplanted by pragmatic considerations of strategically useful weddings, not least because of the importance of women and marriage for the maintenance and intergenerational transfer of wealth and status. As David Sabean has observed, there was a significant increase in strategic marriages between cousins, and 'class integration went hand in hand with kin integration' (2007: 22).

With regard to lifestyle and patterns of consumption, 'well-groomed modesty' was to distinguish the middle-class home from the aristocratic love of ostentation (Budde 2009: 83; my translation; see also Le Wita 1994: 62–97). Claims to participate in the desirable habitus of middle-class 'gentility' found their material expression in an orderly, but comfortably furnished domestic space. In her comparison of middle-class housing and furniture in nineteenth-century Britain, America and Australia, Linda Young (2003) has shown that the ideas of what spatial design and interior decoration of a respectable home should look like were surprisingly similar even across continents. The middle-class home was characterised by a new functional division of rooms, separating the bedroom of the parents from that of the children, and the kitchen from the dining room, where daily meals shared by all members of the family were to create internal community. The living room, on the other hand, where guests were received, served as an interface between the private sphere of reproduction and recreation, and the public sphere of representation (Budde 2009: 83–91). Modest, but elegant clothing, and an emphasis on bodily hygiene and respectful demeanour were further domains in which middle-class values were to become visible. In their study of the rise of Swedish middle-class culture in the late nineteenth century, Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren insist in the importance of such ordinary practices for achieving cultural hegemony over a 'declining peasantry' and the 'emerging working class': 'the important cultural codes were transmitted more effectively through trivial everyday routines than through cultural preaching and normative statements' (1987: 265, 271).

Middle-class sociability and politics

The middle class 'molded its distinctive identity around domestic values and family practices' (Ryan 1981: 15), but these values and practices were negotiated, exhibited and admired in a new urban public sphere created by salons, clubs and associations, festivities and cultural events such as theatre, concerts and art exhibitions as well as by books, magazines and newspapers. These spaces and media of sociability provided mutual support (Ryan 1981), and they served as a 'school of bourgeois habitus' ('Schule der Bürgerlichkeit'; Budde 2009: 15). They embraced and integrated members of diverse occupations and professions, and thus promoted the development of a sense of middle-class commonality. At the same time, they were exclusive. They reinforced gender and ethnic hierarchies; in nineteenth-century Germany, for instance, most clubs and associations did not admit women and Jews. And they buttressed the exclusion of the lower middle class through the fact that participation in bourgeois sociability required considerable economic means and free time (Budde 2009: 15–24, Kocka 2004: 18–9).

Clubs and associations, as well as newspapers and magazines, offered a protected space in which new visions of the social order could be discussed and political aspirations articulated. Scholars agree, however, that although members of the middle class shared important political ideals, namely demands of civil rights that challenged aristocratic domination, they were, from the very beginning, politically divided into liberals and conservatives (Budde 2009: 43–59). Beyond propagating the autonomy of civil society and freedoms in the public sphere, the middle classes did not champion a common political project. Nevertheless, participation in political debates played an important role for the public perception and the self-definition of the middle classes, as Dror Wahrman (1995) has argued in his study of the political representation of class in Britain. That industrial and other non-aristocratic interest groups were categorised as middle class, and that a liberal-progressive narrative of the productive role of the middle class eventually became dominant, was by no means self-

evident, as Wahrman observes; it was the result of protracted political debates and contestations inside and outside of the British parliament.

More generally, middle-class values and visions of social order were marked by an inherent tension. On the one hand, there was the claim to universality, centred on meritocratic ideals that posited the general accessibility of middle-class status through education and individual effort. On the other hand, there were practices of exclusivity that supported assertions of superiority and hegemonic control. Since the end of the nineteenth century, however, the 'built-in tendency towards universalisation has moved beyond the social segment where it originated... Through this victory, the middle class lost much of its identity' (Kocka 2004: 34).

Middle classes in Europe and North America in the twentieth century and beyond

Kocka (2004) and some other scholars argue that in the twentieth century, and after World War II at the latest, central values of bourgeois, middle-class culture have spread, but that the social formation as such has disappeared (see also Budde 2009: 135–9). They point to a number of transformations that eroded the classical European middle classes. Their socio-economic composition changed, with ever increasing numbers of salaried instead of self-employed persons, which had important political implications for the sense of autonomy from the state that had earlier on been important in defining middleclassness. Furthermore, gender relations were made over by women's claims to take middle-class ideals of equality seriously, and the foundation of middle-class culture, namely bourgeois family life, was transformed in response to these changes as well as to the drastic decline in the number of domestic servants. Other scholars make more recent economic developments responsible for a continual erosion of the 'structural foundations of middle-class work and identity' (Archer & Blau 1993: 25). In North America, for instance, 'increasing economic inequalities, downward mobility... and declining wages and productivity' as well as growing difficulties 'to translate education into good jobs' have undercut the 'certainties of the middle class'. These developments, Melanie Archer and Judith R. Blau argue, threaten to denigrate 'the best tenets of the middle-class culture—tolerance, egalitarianism—... by mean spirited versions of other middle-class values—individualism (anti-collectivism) and conventionality (moral self-righteousness)' (1993: 35).

However, most scholars would not argue so normatively, or predict the complete demise of the middle class in the Global North. Rather, they suggest that despite undeniable transformations, the middle class still constitutes a distinct social category. They observe that middle-class men and women still uphold meritocratic ideals and continue to draw boundaries against those 'above' and those 'below' (Lamont 1992). And they examine how members of the middle class struggle for self-advancement by well-planned investments into education and lifestyle, and are anxious to transmit their status to the next generation (Groh-Samberg et al 2014; Mau 2014). At the same time, these studies draw attention to the fact that the 'fear of falling' which Barbara Ehrenreich (1989) has so trenchantly diagnosed for the American professional middle class, is the flipside of the aspirational project on which middleclassness is based. While the wealthy upper class can nearly always guarantee that their children would also be wealthy, Ehrenreich argues, the children of middle-class professionals whose social position relies on 'brain work' will have to struggle to achieve their parents' status, and may fail, despite hard work and self-denial.³⁶ Middleclassness is thus defined just as much by the fear of downward mobility as it is by prospects for social advancement. It is as much, or perhaps even more, about imaginations of the future as it is about pride over past achievements and current

36 For an interesting ethnographic study of the experiences of downward mobility among different groups of North American middle class men and women, see Newman 1988. The study clearly shows, among other things, that particularly upper middle-class informants who steadfastly held on to meritocratic ideologies were much more traumatised by unemployment and social downgrading than lower-middle class employees who saw themselves as 'victims' of a system beyond their control. For a fascinating biographical study of the coping strategies of Swiss and German 'failed' offspring of academic professionals, see Schmeiser 2003.

realisations.³⁷ This will become even more obvious as we now turn to contemporary middle classes in the Global South.

Contemporary middle classes in the Global South

Kocka's overview of the history of the European middle classes ends with an open question, namely whether 'similar middle classes have existed or will emerge in other parts of the world' (2004: 35). Indeed, even with regard to the middle classes in Europe, the variety of constellations in which they developed and the range of distinct national trajectories are considerable, reflected in different terminologies such as middle class, middling sorts, *Bürgertum*, *Mittelschicht* or *bourgeoisie* that are not precise equivalents. Scholars of Europe and North America have therefore often been hesitant with regard to the analytical value of the concept of middle class. Its purchase and more generally the applicability of class concepts are even less self-evident for countries of the Global South, with different histories of incorporation into the world economy and experiences of colonial rule, a late and often only partial industrialisation, and great internal heterogeneity concerning rates of urbanisation, access to formal education, and configurations of ethnicity and religion.

Doubts whether class concepts are appropriate for the analysis of social stratification and social mobility seem to have been particularly pronounced with regard to Africa. In his critique of the application of Marxist class concepts to African societies, for instance, Jean Copans has argued that class theory was 'in no sense derived from autonomous political experience', but remained 'an imported product in the hands of specialists in the import and export [of] ideas'; it was even a 'luxury product' of limited analytical and political usefulness because it had neither been appropriated by the broader population nor by African 'organic intellectuals' (1985: 37, 36). In a similar vein, Dieter Neubert (2005) has challenged the capability of class concepts to capture the complex dynamics of rural-urban connections, combinations of multiple sources of income, and relations of inequality as well as support within extended families that characterise the social structure of most African countries. Generally, after intense debates in the 1970s on the expediency of class concepts for understanding African societies, scholars shifted their focus to ethnicity, patron-client relations, and the role of the state in the accumulation of power and wealth.³⁸ Since the 2000s, however, 'class is back on the agenda of discussions of Africa', and, more specifically, 'the apparent emergence of the middle is generating interest', as Claire Mercer (2014: 228) observes.³⁹

As already discussed in the introduction of this paper, class terminology, or more precisely: the term middle class, is currently taking hold among broader strata of the African population. Dominique Darbon and Coumi Toulabour (2011) identify three reasons for this development: the recent economic growth that has actually created a broader 'middle'-income segment; the increasing globalisation of categories of social-structure analysis through institutions like the World Bank that search for

37 An interesting ongoing research project on 'Middle classes on the rise' at the University of Bayreuth explores middle-class visions of future and how they shape contemporary lives of middle-class men and women in Kenya; for more details, see Kroeker 2014, and http://www.bayreuth-academy.uni-bayreuth.de/en/teilprojekt/mittelschichten_im_aufbruch/index.html (last accessed 26 June 2015).

38 For some examples of the class debates of the 1970s and early 1980s, see Manghezi 1976, Markovitz 1977, Sklar 1979, Katz 1980, and Kitching 1981: 438–55.

39 Not only the African middle class, also the working class seems to receive renewed attention, if Pnina Werbner's (2014) recent study, inspired by E. P. Thompson's approach, of the Botswana manual workers' union, is anything to go by. Significantly, in studies of South Asia, too, class virtually disappeared from the scholarly agenda in the 1980s and reappeared with a focus on middle-class consumerism in the early 2000s (Donner & De Neve 2011: 1–5). Vivek Chibber (2006) blames 'the decline of class analysis' in South Asian studies on a peculiar alliance between traditional Indology and post-1980s post-structuralist approaches among US scholars, both espousing culturalism. A similar disinterest particularly in the middle class can be observed for Latin America from the 1970s onwards; the reason here is an increasing 'critique of middle-class failure, weakness and conservatism' which disappointed the hopes of politicians and scholars that 'middle sectors' would champion progressive political reforms (Parker 2013: 8–9).

African parallels to the new middle classes in India or China, and introduce this category into African policy discourses; and the advantages that the self-designation as middle class may offer, since it contains the promise of upward mobility and implicitly presents economic advantage as based on achievement and thus as morally legitimate. Precisely because of the increasing globalisation of discussions on the middle class, among scholars as well as among social actors, a closer look at some studies of Asian and South American middle classes can yield useful insights for future research on Africa's 'middle', not least in order to also get a better grasp of the particular challenges of studying African middle-class trajectories (Kroecker & Lentz 2014).

Countering Eurocentric narratives of middle-class formation, discovering global parallels

In his introduction to a recent volume on the transnational history of 'the making of the middle class', Ricardo López criticises scholars who 'presumed specialness of Europe', implying 'that Europe alone would develop a fully realized middle class, which could be, at best, emulated elsewhere' (2012: 5). Scholarly perspectives on the middle class, López argues, are inherently linked to certain understandings of modernity. The 'universalization of Euro-American modernity and ... a teleological narrative of an intrinsically Western modernity' have blocked an adequate analysis of divergent historical experiences of middle classes around the globe (2012: 10). In order to transcend narratives of the histories of non-European middle classes as 'deviations, failure, or, at best, close emulations' of hegemonic models, it is necessary to understand modernity 'as an integrated—indeed, entangled—transnational process' and to study the 'historical formation of the middle class in a comparative, connective and transnational framework' (2012: 12, 11). Beyond the study of specific middle-class trajectories, López suggests, scholars should also work towards constructing new 'grand historical narratives' that use middle-class histories 'to ask fundamental questions about capitalism, imperialism, postcolonialism, and modernity' (2012: 21). Or, as Mrinalini Sinha puts it in her afterword to the same volume, 'a transnational history of middle-class formation' should proceed 'by deliberately tracing the story of modernity as the effects of a globally connected history'; it should explore 'the repertoire of ideas and institutions that form part of the common stock on which middle classes in different parts of the world draw freely' as well as 'the more self-conscious "anxiety of influence" that shadows these formations' (2012: 389–90).

One may disagree with López' confident claim that 'the middle class has been one of the major transnational political projects of modernity through which historical actors have struggled to define themselves as belonging to a social collectivity' (2012: 22). However, on a more modest scale, the parallels that nineteenth-century Euro-American and contemporary middle classes in the Global South reveal with regard to their boundary work, ideals of education and achievement, work and domestic life, patterns of consumption and sociality, and political aspirations are indeed remarkable.⁴⁰ In what follows, I will discuss some findings of research on contemporary global middle classes that support this observation—a review that must remain highly selective in view of the overwhelming number of middle-class studies that have been produced in the past two decades.

Middle-class boundary work

Virtually all historical and anthropological studies on the global middle classes agree that economic definitions of the middle class through its location in the occupational structure or its income and expenditure do not suffice, and can even be misleading. Most scholars emphasise that it is necessary to explore the material and symbolic struggles over class boundaries, and to analyse the middle classes' dynamic, shifting and contested relational self-categorisations as different from 'upper' and 'lower' classes—in terms of education, occupation, but also of lifestyle, values, and political aspirations. Mark Liechty, for instance, argues that one common feature of middle-class groups that are otherwise 'separated widely in space and time' is the 'explicitly locational language' they employ,

40 See, for instance, Michael Pinches' observation of a striking similarity between 'early popular representations of bourgeoisie and middle class in western Europe ... and the labels and cultural constructions of the new rich that have emerged in industrialising Asia' (1999: 43).

typically placing ‘themselves in a socio-moral middle ground while locating their class Others in morally comprised social locations “above” and “below” themselves’ (2012: 271). Not all middle-class boundary work necessarily foregrounds moral issues. Indeed, the criteria along which class boundaries are drawn can shift significantly over time. In his overview of studies on Latin America’s middle class, for instance, David Parker observes that since the late 1980s, when the continent entered into an era of ‘neoliberal globalization’, middle classes have defined themselves ‘less by education and stable employment in the public sector and more by ... income and possessions’ as well as ‘rampant consumerism’ (2013: 13). However, these ‘shifting standards’ are not agreed upon by everybody; rather, there is ‘competition among diverse groups for recognition as the class’s standard-bearers’ (Parker 2013: 12). With regard to India, Henrike Donner and Geert de Neve discern a similar trend. With unprecedented economic opportunities, ever larger groups are able to engage in middle-class lifestyles and consumption patterns, and ‘values such as material austerity, earlier important to urban middle-class identity, do not carry the same weight today’. At the same time, this ‘inclusive moment’ has prompted intense contestations over ‘what makes middleclassness, and who can claim such a status’ (Donner & De Neve 2011: 4–5).

None of these studies takes explicit note of Michèle Lamont’s suggestion to distinguish different kinds of symbolic boundaries that middle-class men and women draw vis-à-vis other classes, namely ‘moral boundaries... centered around such qualities as honesty, work ethic, personal integrity, and consideration for others’; socioeconomic boundaries that contain ‘judgments concerning people’s social position as indicated by their wealth, power, or professional success’; and ‘cultural boundaries ... drawn on the basis of education, intelligence, manners, taste, and command of high culture’ (1992: 4). Lamont has developed these distinctions in order to compare French and American upper-middle-class groups, but they may be useful for closer analyses of the boundary work of middle classes in the Global South as well. Such analyses will have to keep in mind, however, that boundary work, as Lamont has noted, does ‘not consist of voluntaristic processes guided by autonomous individual or existential programs’, but depends, to a large degree, on the available cultural repertoires and on historically formed ‘structural situations’ that shape, for instance, educational and employment opportunities (1992: 135, 130).

Another important aspect of the middle class’s boundary work is the reference groups on which people draw when defining their social location. Understanding reference groups as ‘groups whose perspectives are assumed by the actor’ (Shibutani 1955: 563), the sometimes surprisingly diverging definitions of who belongs to the ‘middle’ can be seen as resulting from the different frames of reference that people adopt. In a survey of the social structure and use of class labels in South Africa’s largest township, Soweto, Mosa Phadi and Claire Ceruti (2011) have found that 66 % of their respondents were comfortable with placing themselves in the ‘middle class’, although many of them would not qualify as middle class by any hard socio-economic standards. In a film that explores the lives and perspectives of some of these Sowetans and shows an encounter between two self-declared middle-class women with extremely different educational and economic backgrounds, these women even vehemently denied that their counterpart could possibly belong to the same class (Peimer 2013). All of Phadi’s and Ceruti’s interviewees saw ‘affordability’, ‘ability to consume’ and ‘self-sufficiency’ as central characteristics of middleclassness, but judged their own capacities in these respects in comparison to different reference groups, ranging from a narrow range of even poorer neighbours to a much larger social world of well-to-do South Africans or even groups of cosmopolitan professionals. The lack of agreement on class terminology and social location seems to be particularly pronounced in societies like South Africa that are characterised by separated spheres of life and consumption with little interaction or overlap. However, the co-existence of different reference groups is characteristic for many societies in the Global South. Furthermore, frames of reference and concomitant self-designations may shift over time, as Andrea Behrends and Carola Lentz (2012) show in their analysis of three generations of educated, upwardly mobile men and women from north-western Ghana; first-generation social climbers tended to understand themselves as an ‘elite’ within their home communities, while the younger generations rather consider themselves as part of a Ghanaian ‘middle class’.

Erving Goffman suggested that social integration depends on a 'working consensus' and 'adequate communication about conceptions of status', but that symbols of class status tend to 'serve not so much to represent ... one's position, but rather to influence in a desired direction other persons' judgment of it' (1951: 294, 297). He pointed to devices that are aimed at restricting the 'misrepresentative use' of class symbols, ranging from moral constraints and scarcity of prestige products to restrictions through socialisation and changes in physical appearance that need long-term investments. However, Goffman further argued, there is no restriction 'which is not regularly and systematically circumvented in some fashion' (1951: 302). Attempts to manipulate class symbols in order to 'rise to social eminence' after having acquired power and wealth, or to 'retard the fall' after having lost it, may even be supported by a specialised 'curator personnel' (1951: 302–3). Eventually, Goffman observed, the 'systematic circumvention of modes of restriction leads to downward and upward circulation of symbols' (1951: 303). Taking this further, I would argue that the boundary work of contemporary global middle classes is characterised by multiple contestations, both concerning the overall architecture of class positions in which people place themselves and others, and concerning the systems of symbols that are used to demarcate class membership and boundaries.

Education, work, and changing sources of prosperity

The middle classes' boundary work depends, of course, not least on the economic and social contours of this social formation, and thus on changing historical configurations of educational opportunities, occupational structure, levels of income, distribution of wealth, state legislation concerning inheritance, social security, and so forth. While recent anthropological studies of the global middle classes often focus, sometimes almost exclusively, on patterns of consumption, works by historians are generally more attentive to the long-term shifts in the economic bases and composition of the middle classes. In many cases, such transformations are understood, by both scholars and the social actors themselves, in terms of the partial displacement of the 'old' by emerging 'new middle classes' (Heiman et al 2012: 12–5). However, what precisely is regarded as 'old' and 'new' can vary considerably, depending on the country and period under study. According to Ezra Vogel's (1963) study of a middle-class family in Tokyo in the early 1960s, for instance, Japan's 'old' middle class comprised mainly independent businessmen and landowners, while the 'new' middle class consisted of bureaucrats and white-collar employees of large corporations. More recent research on Asian middle classes, by contrast, generally regards 'salaried bureaucrats and professionals' as well as 'employees in private firms' as the 'old middle classes', while the 'new middle classes' that emerge in the 'post-liberalization period' comprise various categories of 'newly rich' with a much broader range of occupations and often less educational credentials than the established middle-class stratum (Donner & De Neve 2011: 3–4). In a similar vein, Latin America's 'old' middle class, as David Parker observes, had 'deep roots in the state', encompassing 'occupational groups closely tied to state-supported industries and mushrooming public bureaucracies'; since the 1980s, when state-led development models eroded and 'neoliberal globalization' set in, this old middle class was eventually side-lined by a "'new" middle class of self-employed entrepreneurs large and small, particularly in importing-exporting, computing, telecommunications, and services' (2013: 12–3).⁴¹

The close association of 'economic' and 'intellectual' middle-class groups that Jürgen Kocka (2004) discerned in nineteenth-century Western Europe was apparently a unique historical configuration that cannot be found in contemporary trajectories of middle classes around the globe.⁴² However, a

41 For further discussion of 'new' versus 'old' middle classes, see also Heiman, Liechty & Freeman 2012: 12–15.

42 Whether another of Kocka's observations, namely the relatively small size of the historical middle classes, is paralleled by current developments, remains open to debate. All scholars working with qualitative methods reject World Bank definitions of the middle class by per capita expenditure (by which standard the global middle class has grown by 1.2 billion persons between 1990 and 2005 [Ravallion 2009]), but they are usually reluctant to offer alternative figures. However, it seems that even today the groups that can creditably and stably claim middle-class status remain rather small; Parker (2013: 2) suggests a proportion of 10% to an exceptional 40% for Latin American countries; Zhang (2010: 6) calculates the allegedly very fast growing Chi-

certain level of educational credentials seems to be regarded as necessary in order to legitimately claim middle-class status even by those ‘new rich’ (Pinches 1999) who demonstrate middleclassness mainly through their participation in ‘new public consumer cultures’ (Donner & De Neve 2011: 4). At the very least, education, and the respectable work to which it gives access, serve to legitimate one’s social position as earned through one’s own effort. As Mark Liechty puts it, ‘education both marks off a conceptual space of middle-class privilege (“achievement”) and constitutes a key element of middle-class cultural practice’ (2003: 264). Similarly, in her study of young urban professionals in Kenya, Rachel Spronk (2012, ch. 2; 2014a) examines how these highly educated men and women working in the ICT sector, as accountants, lawyers, journalists, or bank managers, take pride in having earned their social position through continuous investments in education and through hard work, instead of relying on patronage and ethnic networks. As Boris Nieswand’s (2011) research on the status paradox faced by relatively affluent, but not highly educated return migrants to Ghana shows, education may continue to serve as stronghold of the dominant status hierarchy even when hopes of school and university graduates to access the desired jobs are increasingly frustrated. In the same vein, Maureen O’Dougherty (2002: 22) argues that in the face of inflation and devaluation, her Brazilian middle-class informants upheld education and ‘culture’ as the most valuable ‘means of reclaiming honor and distinction’, rather than defining themselves mainly through home and car ownership and other consumer goods.

At the same time, middle-class discourses regard education not only ‘as key to an individual career and personal success in life’, but also ‘as the means to build a moral community of virtuous and responsible citizens’, as Mattia Fumanti (2006: 97) has argued in his study of views on education in post-apartheid Namibia. In a similar vein, middle-class Ghanaians insist that ‘true education’ is not merely a matter of ‘holding a school degree, but also of living up to certain standards of courtesy and respectfulness’ (Lentz 1994: 154, 158–9). They, and many others in the middle class, believe in education as the universal remedy for poverty and marginalisation.

However, education is not only a symbol of a meritocratic order and a community of responsible citizens that the middle class invokes in order to set itself off from the unmotivated poor or the undeserving upper class. In much of the Global South, education has been, and still is, indeed the most important tangible instrument of upward mobility.⁴³ In spite of the increasing inflation of educational credentials (e.g. Foster 1980, Parker 2013: 14–5), education is still an investment that does, by and large, improve one’s access to better-paid employment. Many studies show how middle-class as well as aspiring middle-class parents therefore devote much money and energy to supporting their children’s education. To give just a few examples: in her study of class formation in South-Western Nigeria, Sara Berry (1985) analysed how prosperous cocoa farmers, instead of using their profits to expand their own commercial agriculture, invested heavily in their sons’ education, which enabled them to move into non-agricultural employments. The expectation that expanding the opportunities of formal education for women would produce future ‘mothers as educators’ has been a staple of nationalist agitation and modernisation narratives in India, as Henrike Donner’s study of the Bengali middle class shows (2008: 123–4). The involvement of formally educated middle-class mothers as well as grandmothers in children’s pre-school and school education has become all the more important, Donner argues, with the deterioration of public schools and the trends towards the privatisation of education services. ‘Education tales’ also play a major role in the narratives of South Korean women about their struggles to ‘ensure class reproduction or mobility’ for their children, as Nancy Abelmann (2003: 100) has documented. Particularly the management of after-school English education has been a major concern of mothers who want to support their offspring’s careers in a country

nese middle class at a maximum of 16% of the population; and Brosius (2010: 3) classifies 15% of the Indian population as middle class.

43 See, for instance, the study of Bossuroy & Cogneau (2008) on social mobility in five African countries; the authors also show that state education policies, starting from the colonial period, have long-term effects on intergenerational mobility.

where ‘the mastery of English [has become] an index of cosmopolitan striving’ (Park & Abelmann 2004: 650).

Just as important as education for middle-class formation, reproduction and boundary maintenance is work. ‘Nothing seems more middle class than the fact of having a steady well-paying job’, assert Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo in their comparative analysis of household surveys from thirteen African, Asian, and Latin American countries. Of great importance is ‘the sense of control over the future’, they argue, ‘that one gets from knowing that there will be an income every month—and not just the income itself’; it is these well-founded hopes for the future that allow ‘the middle class to focus on building their own careers and those of their children’ (2008: 26). Work stands at the centre of middle-class images of dignity and worthiness. Like education it is a building block of middle-class identities and legitimisation towards both the lower and the upper classes. However, middle-class work is of a particular kind. As Barbara Weinstein puts it, the middle class often regards itself as ‘the thinking class: freed from the dulling effects of manual labor but not corrupted by a leisured existence’; the ideal middle-class man (or woman) is the ‘professional—the educated, modern individual whose knowledge is power, and who plays an indispensable role in pressing the ruling elite to meet to their responsibilities and in teaching the laboring classes proper discipline in the workplace and good hygiene at home’ (2012: 108–9).

Despite its centrality for middleclassness, however, relatively few recent anthropological studies have focused on work.⁴⁴ One reason for this may be that consumerism has indeed recently become a more important marker of middleclassness than occupation (see below); but it is also perhaps a result of how and where much middle-class anthropological research seems to have been carried out: in shopping malls, gated communities, bars and pubs, cinemas, theme parks, or festivities. Liechty’s (2003) and Spronk’s (2012) informants, for instance, do explain how important education and employment are for their lives, but the anthropologists’ focus on participant observation in Nepali and Kenyan middle-class youth cultures seems to prevent them from devoting more attention to these themes. There are, of course, important exceptions to this trend. Maureen O’Dougherty (2002: 77–93), for instance, examines how middle-class Brazilians who based their distinction from the working class ‘by classifying their own work as nonmanual [sic] and by staking claims to culture and education’ struggled with the consequences of the economic crisis of the 1990s. As the middle class ‘began to lose its grip on liberal professional options’, particularly women and youth tried to ‘tighten their hold on consumption as an ever more important ... foundation to their identity’ through working in sales (2002: 23). Smitha Radhakrishnan (2011) explores the changing gendered division of labour in India’s neoliberal ‘transnational class’ in the ICT sector (see also Patel 2010), and currently studies the micro-finance and micro-insurance sector, in which the capacity to move confidently in different class milieus is a valuable professional resource for middle-class employees (Radhakrishnan 2014). Jan Budniok (2012) has explored the history of Ghana’s legal profession and its class affiliation from the late nineteenth century until the present day. He shows how being a lawyer was once the exclusive domain of an English-trained elite, often recruited among the sons of wealthy merchants, but after independence became a profession that was accessible to a much broader range of people with diverse regional and social backgrounds, and developed into a typical middle-class profession with multiple career choices and rather diverse income levels.

Looking beyond individual careers at households and families, it is interesting to note that upward social mobility is often aided by the combination of work in different sectors, and by income derived from various types of activity. In his study of Kenya’s *petite bourgeoisie*, for instance, Gavin Kitching (1980) observed that in the 1970s, public servants often used their salaries to invest in commercial ventures or cash-crop production. In a similar vein, Nkululeko Mabandla (2013) argues that throughout the history of the black middle class in South Africa, access to, and wherever possible property rights over, land have played an important role for achieving a certain prosperity that enabled people to lead middle-class lives. Combining salaried occupations with landownership, often associated with

44 For a summary of some historical studies on the role of ‘professionalisation’ for middle-class identities in the Global South, see Vaughan 2012.

a gendered division of labour, enabled, and continues to enable, many South African black middle-class households to invest in the education of the next generation, and to endure various economic and political risks as well as to exploit new opportunities. Similarly, in Ghana in the 1970s and 1980s, many public servants and military officers from the North became wealthy on the basis of commercial rice farming for which they used their kin networks in order to gain access to land and labour, and their political contacts to secure favourable credits (Konings 1986: 163–236). Such advantageous combinations of salaried employment with engagement in agriculture or trade can be found in many African countries, and can probably also be identified in South America and Asia, although they do not seem to have attracted much scholarly attention. In any case, the creation of property, beyond salaried income that is often vulnerable to economic and political crises, is important for transmitting middle-class status to the next generation.

Family life, domesticity, and gender relations

Just like in the sphere of education and work, middle-class practices with regard to modern marriage, gender relations, and family life are rather diverse and do not neatly correspond to the proclaimed ideals, on the contrary. However, globally circulating ideas of romantic love, family planning, and responsible parenthood, and of privileging the nuclear family over extended kin networks, have become part of middle-class imaginaries worldwide. Propagated in movies, lifestyle magazines, and transnational advertisement campaigns, these ideas have fired the imagination of many aspiring youth, and fuelled intergenerational conflicts about gender roles, marriage choices, domestic arrangements, child rearing practices, and responsibilities of old-age care. Contested norms and practices of family life, domesticity, and gender have been a major subject of sociological and anthropological research on the middle classes in the Global South, and I can only present a few glimpses on some of the findings.

There are a number of older instructive studies on changes in household size and fertility patterns as well as the relations between the conjugal family and the larger descent group. Most of them show that contrary to modernist aspirations towards the nuclear family, three-generation households and multiple material as well as symbolic obligations towards extended kin networks are the rule rather than the exception, even among upper-middle-class groups. Where this has been the traditional norm, payment of the bride price and practices of polygyny often continue, as Sharon Stichter (1988) has shown for the Kenyan middle class (see also Harrell-Bond 1975 on Sierra Leone). Loyalties towards the matrilineage conflict with the conjugal families' preference for virilocality and patrilineal inheritance, but are hardly ever completely rejected, as Christine Oppong (1974, 1981) has observed among the senior civil servants of the matrilineal Akan in Ghana. Multi-class households with sometimes numerous poorer relatives sustained by, and partly working for, educated middle-class couples can be found in many places. Of course, much depends on the institutional framework. Where the state does not regularly offer facilities of child care, support during periods of unemployment and illness, and old-age care, extended family networks are of vital importance for individual survival and well-being. However, as Kim (1993) argues with the example of upper middle-class families in South Korea, not only practical considerations, but traditional ideologies such as 'patriarchal Confucianism', too, may play an important role in upholding (neo)traditional domestic arrangements. At the same time, however, changes do take place—sometimes not immediately visible—and middle-class couples do place emphasis on having less children, and often at a later age; they do find ways to circumvent or alleviate some of the extended family's material expectations towards them; and they invest heavily in the upbringing and education of their own offspring. As several studies have observed, these changes take time. And, it is particularly in the third generation of middle-class families – that is, among couples with highly educated parents and grand-parents – that the conjugal family gains more autonomy (e.g. Cespedes & Gibbs 1972).

The complex negotiation of traditional family norms and modernist aspirations continues to be an important theme in more recent studies of middle-class families. Erdmute Alber (2014: 263–316), for instance, analyses how West African, urban middle-class families and their rural relatives draw on well-established patterns of child fostering in order to support educational ambitions and strategies of upward social mobility. Henrike Donner (2008; 2014) shows that Kolkata's rather traditionalist

Bengali-speaking middle-class families tend to live in smaller household units, but social obligations, such as (female) care for next of kin and members of the extended family remain in place. Following the idea that particularly a ‘focus on women helps to see continuity of older norms’ (2008: 180), Donner demonstrates how middle-class women negotiate the tensions between modern ideals of autonomy embodied in the ideal of the ‘New Indian Woman’ that dominates the media and the real-life limitations of female agency. Where female rights to housing and real estate are severely limited due to the fact that mothers are usually not employed and thus have no personal income, while property is owned by fathers and sons, women can gain access to property and shelter in their own name by adding care for their own parents to the customarily expected labour in their affinal home (Donner 2014). Even women who can afford to have their own household, often keep a family-based lifestyle by moving between their own and their in-laws’ households. In any case, these women manipulate the discourse on the joint family and filial obligation, and invest care work, in order to gain control over property.

Research on changing gender roles, and particularly norms of female comportment, has revealed interesting differences between continents. As Michael West’s study of black middle-class families in colonial Zimbabwe shows, there have been repeated attempts by European missionaries and colonial authorities to instil ‘the bourgeois domestic ideal’ (2002: 73) particularly among educated Africans in the colonies. The latter often accepted the idea that being ‘good wives’ meant self-fulfilment through ‘homemaking’ and heeding ‘the sacred calling of home and hearth’ (2002: 98). However, many other studies confirm that, despite these patriarchal ideologies, salaried employment outside the house tends to be the norm for African educated women, just like work on the farm or as traders have been, and continue to be, widespread practices among lower class women.⁴⁵ Rachel Spronk’s (2012) research among middle-class youth in Nairobi explores how young professional women self-confidently challenge gender stereotypes, and claim a right to work in well-paid, respected jobs as well as to engage in egalitarian partnerships with men and enjoy sexual pleasure beyond traditionalist expectations that they should become good mothers.⁴⁶ In South Korea, India, and other Asian countries, on the other hand, middle-class status seems to be more closely connected with the ideal of ‘full-time housewives’, and the new ‘ideology of egalitarian marriage’ has not prevented a ‘new form of patriarchal family’ from taking root that associates the woman with the private sphere at home, and the man with the workplace and the public sphere (Kim 1993: 73). Similarly, Donner shows how the ‘desire for the perfect family’ shapes Bengali ideals of ‘good mothering’ that militate against full-time employment of women (2008: 179). The South Korean women whom Nancy Abelmann (2003) interviewed sought fulfilment more in the educational and occupational success of their children than in their own professional careers.

Beyond the often hidden, everyday negotiations in the domestic sphere, middle-class family relations become highly visible affairs during certain lifecycle celebrations. For urban middle-class families in India, for instance, as Christiane Brosius’ (2010: 272–306) exploration of the Indian Hindu ‘wedding industry’ shows, the traditional marriage ceremony has become a public site for exhibiting their wealth and their ability to reconcile a cosmopolitan lifestyle with respect for cultural ‘heritage’. The ‘big fat Indian wedding’, often organised by specialised wedding planners, Brosius argues, ‘has become a symbol not only marking social relations and financial status, but also a declaration of transnational patriotism and ethnic stereotypification’ (2010: 287). In Africa, it is usually funerals rather than weddings that are made to serve as grand public statements of wealth and middle-class status (e.g. Smith 2004; Lentz 2009). However, here, too, middle-class families increasingly turn wedding

45 For pertinent case studies, see, for instance, Dinan 1977; Stichter 1988; Fuest 1996; Behrends 2002; and Okeke-Iherijika 2004.

46 There is also an increasingly rich scholarship on changing ideas of (middle-class) masculinity. Spronk (2012, 2014b), for instance, also examines the male young urban professionals’ visions of successful and satisfying partnerships. In his study of young men in Mozambique, Christian Groes-Green (2009) argues that poorer young men demonstrate their masculinity towards female partners mainly through bodily strength and recourse to violence, while middle-class men rely on their educational achievements and financial power, and espouse a ‘breadwinner’s’ ideology.

ceremonies into occasions of conspicuous consumption and demonstrations of familiarity with a modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle (e.g. Pauli 2014).

All of these studies on middle-class family life and domestic arrangements show, as Donner (2008: 182) argues, that 'while the construction of the new middle class as a cultural ideal is relatively homogenous, the outcomes of the processes leading to new middle-class lifestyles are often ambiguous and surprising'.

Middle-class practices of consumption

Like lifecycle rituals situated at the interface between the domestic and the public sphere, but of a more durable and solid character, are the diverse forms of middle-class housing. They are also a particular form of conspicuous consumption that has captured the interest of many scholars of the global middle classes. On the one hand, domestic architecture has a pragmatic dimension. It expresses as well as defines the separation of the domestic world from the sphere of work, and prefigures family arrangements, such as the size of the household, the gendered division of labour, or the place of children in family life. On the other hand, the aesthetic dimension of houses publicly demonstrates inter- and intra-class distinctions with regard to prosperity and the owners' imaginaries of tradition and modernity. Middle-class architecture in Tanzania, for instance, exhibits different styles that range from more traditionalist forms of the 'respectable house' to what Claire Mercer (2014) has termed 'the global aspirational house', which incorporates architectural details from European or Arab traditions. Christiane Brosius' (2010) work on New Delhi's middle class not only examines desirable models of individual houses, but also their insertion into modern condominiums and gated communities that are part of real-estate developers' projects to reshape the urban landscape, with 'smart homes' (2010: 98), luxurious shopping malls, entertainment centres and religious-leisure sites. Analysing visual representations and real estate advertisement, Brosius shows how middle-class Delhians are encouraged to develop an 'enclaved gaze' (2010: 65) and fantasies of belonging to a 'world-class city' (2010: 40) that combines the amenities of a modern global city with carefully selected, beautified elements of India's Hindu traditions.

The recent boom of private homeownership in the wake of economic liberalisation in post-Mao China, Li Zhang argues, not only expresses the middle class's quest for a 'private paradise' and social distinction, but creates 'a tangible location for a new class to materialize itself through spatial exclusion, cultural differentiation, and lifestyle practices' (2010: 3). This is all the more important as the sources of personal wealth among middle-class Chinese are often 'business transactions ... outside the parameters of the law and official rules' that need to be shielded from the public gaze, while 'conspicuous material consumption serves as a viable way to assert and maintain one's class status' (2010: 9). At the same time, to create these ideal living places middle-class citizens have to engage with a gigantic real estate industry. Widespread conflicts with developers and property management agencies become sites of 'public sphere activism' through which middle-class homeowners defend their 'private paradise' and develop a sense of collective interests and rights (2010: 2, 4).

'[A]cquisitive but cultured consumerism' has also played a major role in forming what Anna Paretzkaya has called a 'quasi-middle class' in Soviet society since at least the 1960s, in some respects even earlier (2012: 45). She argues that the new consumer orientation in official discourses of 'late socialism' and the media's promotion of 'fashionable clothes, smart-looking appliances, funky furniture and uniquely painted cars was supposed to demonstrate ... the extraordinary achievements of the Soviet way of life', but in actual fact reinforced post-collective values and contributed to social stratification along different economic capacities and styles of consumption. Consumption continues to be central to post-Soviet middle-class identities, as Jennifer Patino (2008) shows in her study of teachers in St. Petersburg in the 1990s, who were formerly identified as 'mass intelligentsia' (2008: 62), but then came to understand themselves as part of the middle class. They perceived their relative material impoverishment in the wake of the economic crisis in the 1990s as threatening to their dignity which was premised not only on higher education and professionalism, but also on a cultured lifestyle expressed in certain patterns of consumption.

More generally, scholars exploring the 'new' middle classes in the neoliberal era have often focused on consumption practices as a central field in which middle-class politics of distinction, 'regimes of pleasure' (Brosius 2010: 14), and global-local imaginaries can best be observed. The 'reality of class', Mark Liechty argues, 'is always produced in local cultural practice', and he regards 'processes of consumption, mass mediation, and youth culture' not only as privileged sites of research, but as constitutive of middleclassness (2003: 265, 7). Or, as he put it in a recent article, 'middle classes are intrinsically consumer formations' (2012: 278). Moreover, consumption practices are explored as an arena where global images of a desirable life are circulated and, in complex negotiations, domesticated by local norms of respectability and legitimacy. The title of Liechty's study, *Suitably Modern*, expresses the anxiety of the new middle-class subjects in urban Nepal to reconcile global goods and ideas with local norms of morally sane consumption and comportment. Liechty almost celebrates the Nepali middle class as 'pioneers' of 'a new space of cultural "betweenness"—between high and low, global and local, new and old, "tradition" and "modernity"' (2003: 25). Similarly, the young professionals in Nairobi studied by Rachel Spronk (2012) seek to avoid any semblance of uncritically copying American or British ways of life, and insist on creating a modern, but distinctly African lifestyle that is respectful of 'tradition', but, of course, a tradition that is reimagined and renegotiated. Or, as Brosius shows, India's new middle classes have, in their rhetoric of 'Shining India' and their search for 'authentic Indianness', embraced cosmopolitan orientations as well as selective 'Orientalist projections' (2010: 285).

The recent focus on consumption, both by the middle classes themselves and by researchers, needs to be viewed in historical perspective, as some scholars have cautioned. They see the prioritisation of consumption practices in middle-class boundary work as typical of the era of neoliberal globalisation and the concomitant rise of 'the new rich' for whom 'consumer items operate as the principal signifiers of [social] standing and achievement' (Pinches 1999: 32). 'Compared to their parents' generation', Parker argues with respect to Latin America, 'this [new] middle class was defined less by education and stable employment in the public sector and more by their income and possessions' (2013:13). In a similar vein, Donner and Neve (2011) concede that 'consumerism' indeed plays an important role in the lives particularly of the newly upwardly mobile groups that have benefited from India's post-socialist economic liberalisation. However, Donner and Neve also warn that research on this new middle class should not be reduced to the study of consumption practices. 'Consumerism', they observe, has become 'the trope through which all other relationships, including those of the middle class with the state, with the poor, with globalization and with its own past, are discussed and understood', but scholars should be aware that consumption is 'not the sole interpretive and experiential framework of India's middle-class subjects' (2011: 9).⁴⁷

These warnings are pertinent to, and also hold for studies of middle classes beyond India. However, as research on nineteenth-century middle-class formation in Europe and America and on the 'old' middle classes in the Global South has shown, the importance of consumption is not a recent phenomenon. In India, and many other countries, morally correct consumption played a key role, for instance, in colonial resistance, supporting ideals of middle-class respectability that had important consequences for claims to political self-determination (Trivedi 2007). In what ways middle-class consumption practices and consumer ideologies have changed over time, and in how far the neoliberal era is characterised by conspicuously extravagant consumption, while previously middle-class propriety was rather tied to well-groomed thrift and modesty, are questions that await further research. In any case, patterns of consumption have been, and continue to be, an important field of intense discussions, not only among scholars, but also among members of the middle classes themselves who constantly appraise their consumptive behaviour against the backdrop of their own group's past practices, as well as those of people 'below' and 'above' themselves and, increasingly, those of other middle classes around the globe.

47 For an interesting set of articles that look at middle-class consumption in India and China, its centrality for class formation, and its political implications, see Jaffrelot & Van der Veer 2008.

Furthermore, it is important not to lose sight of the hard economic realities of consumption. As David Parker observed, ‘a class defined by lifestyle ... was more than ever at the mercy of the ups and downs of the market’ (2013: 14). Maureen O’Dougherty (2002: 22) has analysed how in Brazil, ‘under wildly fluctuating inflationary conditions’ in the 1990s, not only working class, but also middle-class households were obliged ‘to dedicate enormous amounts of time and concern to money’ and to develop shopping and stockpiling strategies that could mitigate the effects of inflation rates of 2,000 per cent and more. Deborah James (2012; 2014) has drawn attention to the massive levels of indebtedness, with often very high interest rates, into which South Africans, and particularly the ‘upwardly mobile and fast-growing African middle class’, have been drawn in recent years. The ‘black diamonds’, as they are sometimes jokingly called, borrow considerable sums of money, not so much in order to acquire ‘flashy goods and branded clothes’, but to invest in higher education, marriage and bride wealth, and funerals (James 2012: 20). The (re)distributional effects of borrowing and lending have increasingly become a policy concern, not only in South Africa, but in many other countries as well. In Mexico, for instance, as Louise Walker (2013) shows, legislation on consumer credit and the protection of consumers from business malpractice have been at the centre of policies of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that aimed at keeping itself in power by appeasing potentially oppositional middle-class citizens. In Brazil, too, governments have had to confront middle class ‘resentment ... of their failure to achieve stability’ (Dougherty 2002: 22). The importance of consumption for middle-class lifestyles, then, can have important political ramifications and even contribute to the overt politicisation of this group that is usually believed to defend ‘political moderation and social conformity’ (Walker 2013: 8).⁴⁸

Middle-class sociability and politics

That the multiple challenges and anxieties of middle-class lives congeal into collective concerns and inspire political debate and activities has an important condition, namely the emergence of spaces of communication and sociability beyond the household. The media obviously play an important role in creating shared middle-class agendas. As Maureen O’Dougherty (2002: 132–66) has shown for Brazil, newspapers and journals not only offered their middle-class readers advice on safe investments and shopping methods or ‘horror stories on middle-class decline’ and repulsive upper-class luxury consumption. They also published critical reports on corruption scandals and misguided government policies, thus contributing to the development of middle-class protest against the regime (2002: 24). There are numerous studies that discuss the role of videos, television series, and art cinema for the negotiation of desirable and respectable (middle-class) lifestyles; Zakir Hussain Raju’s work (2015) on Bengali Muslim middle-class consumption of, and discussions about, cinema films in their quest for a distinctly national, ‘indigenised’ version of modernity is just one recent example of how media feed into the self-fashioning of the middle classes.

Just as important for the construction of the middle class as a self-aware as well as self-confident social formation and potential political force, however, is face-to-face communication. It may occur in informal circles of friends who regularly meet in private homes or in public places such as cinemas and theatres, cafés, bars, or churches, as well as in more formal, institutionalised clubs or voluntary associations. Some of the studies of middle-class consumption practices discussed above actually explore urban youth cultures and examine how new norms, lifestyles and political visions are negotiated among peers and friends. Liechty (2003) has conducted much of his fieldwork among young middle-class Nepali. Rachel Spronk (2012) has accompanied Kenyan young professionals in their leisure-time activities. Nicholas Nisbett, another example of this approach, has followed a group of young middle-class male friends in internet cafés in an Indian city and observed how they develop a collective sense of proper middle-class lives and fine social distinctions by constantly circulating ‘shared moral narratives’ on gender relations, consumption, work, and class status (2007: 944). So-

48 Timothy Burke (1996) offers a fascinating study of the contested practices and politics of consumption in colonial Zimbabwe, and shows how commodities became markers of social distinctions at the interface of race and class (see esp. 180–193).

ciability of married middle-class men and women seems to take place more in clubs and voluntary associations—or at least this is where scholars have studied it. Voluntary associations help to create middle-class networks that can be useful in many ways, including individual professional advancement. Moreover, if they are part of an international organisation such as the Rotary Club, these networks may reach well beyond national borders, as Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz (1997) have shown in their research on Rotarians in Papua New Guinea. Furthermore, middle-class voluntary associations usually have not only mutual support on their agenda, but also charity schemes and development projects for the ‘grassroots’. Such commitment to the common good of society may help to justify middle-class privilege in the face of redistributive expectations of poorer relatives (Errington & Gewertz 1997: 339; Lentz 1995: 407–13). At the same time, it may develop into political projects that challenge ruling elites and suggest reforms towards a more inclusive and egalitarian order based on achievement and merit rather than ‘undeserved’ privilege. In any case, voluntary associations provide an effective instrument for members of the middle class to ‘sort themselves out’, as Robyn Muncy (2012: 379) puts it, and to assert a collective understanding of their place in society with respect to other social groups as well as vis-à-vis the state.

In his study of the African middle class’s struggle in colonial Zimbabwe for more spacious, modern and secure housing, quality education, bourgeois domesticity and respect from the white settlers, Michael West (2002) has convincingly shown how informal sociability as well as a rich associational life laid the foundations of what became an increasingly militant nationalist movement.⁴⁹ Propagating the ‘foundational creed of “equal rights for all civilized men”’, the educated black activists first hoped to improve their situation within a framework of ‘racial partnership’. However, the ‘failure of [their] historic quest for nonracial meritocracy’ eventually led the Zimbabwean African middle class ‘to the conclusion that the advancement of its collective interests required taking power from white settlers’ (2002: 239). The struggle for political independence, in turn, required broadening the social base of the movement. What had begun as an interracial middle-class reform project thus developed into black popular nationalism that downplayed distinctions of class.

In Latin America, the middle classes did not have to fight against colonial rule during the twentieth century, but their potential to create a strong civil society and oppose military dictatorships has been at the centre of attention of both (foreign) policy-makers and scholars after World War II. In this region polarised by the Cold War, many set great hopes on the middle classes’ capacity to reshape their fragmented societies by championing moderate social and political reforms that could contain communist mobilisation. The Alliance for Progress, John F. Kennedy’s aid and development programme for Latin America, was premised on the idea that the middle class ‘could fulfill a moderating, modernizing, democratizing role’, and many members of this class were indeed quite aware of these expectations and ‘embraced middleclassness as a badge of honor and a source of distinction’ (Parker 2013: 5, 4). In the 1970s, however, middle-class reformism abated, and middle-class politicians instead turned to the armed forces to defend their interests against an increasingly radical working class ‘clamoring for the very same rights and privileges that the middle class has so recently and precariously won’ (Parker 2013: 9). Researchers now criticised middle-class failure and conservatism, critiques often inspired by dependency theory, and studies of the middle class went out of fashion. It is only recently, with the adoption of less normative approaches to class, that scholars are revisiting the Latin American middle classes as political actors with complex, shifting, and contradictory agendas, ‘split between the advocates and the critics of neoliberalism’ (Walker 2013: 16) that cannot be easily labelled as progressive or conservative.

‘The fundamental precariousness of their privilege’, resulting in an ubiquitous ‘fear of losing class status’ in times of economic instability, seems to be the most powerful motivation of middle-class citizens to take to the streets and demand government policies protecting their investments in education, housing, and employment, as Louise Walker (2013: 14) has observed for the post-1970s history of Mexico. Or, as Göran Therborn has put it, ‘there is nothing inherently democratic about the

49 For a similar case of the politicisation in voluntary associations, including particularly football associations, among the South African black middle class during the 1950s and 1960s, see Kuper 1965: 309–387.

middle class. ... It is “situationally” (opportunistically) democratic—or anti-democratic’ (2012: 18). Whether this is also true for the recent middle-class political activism in the 2011 Arab Spring is controversial. Francis Fukuyama (2013), for instance, identifies ‘the failure of governments to meet the rising expectations of the newly prosperous and educated’ as the major motor behind the massive protests in North Africa as well as lately in Turkey or China. Others argue that current middle-class mobilisation goes far beyond narrow agendas of defending middle-class interests and aims at the recognition of comprehensive civic rights and a new social contract between governments and society (e.g. Sumpf 2014; Schielke 2015).

In any case, just like among the nineteenth and early-twentieth century European *Bürgertum* and middle classes, there are no straightforward connections between social formation and politics, but middleclassness can support a broad spectrum of political orientations. At the same time, just like scholars have showed for the nineteenth century, the political uses of the term middle class in contemporary public discourse is often ‘infused with heavy doses of mythology and moralizing’ (Parker 2013: 16). This, in turn, plays an important role in amalgamating the heterogeneous ‘middle sectors’ into a self-conscious, albeit politically heterogeneous social formation.

New themes: the role of the state, ascriptive differences, and the transnational dimension of middle-class formation

Most fields of enquiry with regard to the new global middle classes discussed so far can also be discovered in research on European and American middle-class formation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Liechty even writes of a ‘middle-class déjà vu’ (2012) that seems to connect places as far apart in time and space as Victorian England and contemporary Kathmandu. However, contemporary scholarship on middle classes in the Global South has also discerned several novel themes that may even raise new questions for studies of older middle-class histories: (1) the role of the state in the making and breaking of the middle classes; (2) the importance of regional, ethnic, and religious differences in the formation of a national middle class; and (3) the transnational dimension of middle-class trajectories.

(1) With regard to relations between the state and the contemporary middle classes in the Global South, most researchers would concur that even though neoliberal policies have provoked ‘a certain disengagement of the middle classes from the project of the developmentalist state ... a majority of middle-class households still depend—directly or indirectly—on services and opportunities provided by the public sector’ (Donner & Neve 2011: 15). What role state employment, for instance as teachers in education, civil servants in state institutions, or in the military, played for European nineteenth- and early twentieth-century middle-class formations has been discussed controversially, and it certainly differed from region to region. Jürgen Kocka (2014), for instance, has raised doubts whether public servants should be regarded, or saw themselves, as members of the German *Bürgertum*, not least because they lacked autonomy from the state, which was one of the important characteristics of bourgeois culture and self-understanding. In the contemporary Global South, however, as in the case of middle-class formation in nineteenth-century Central and Eastern Europe, the public sector was, and often continues to be, one of the major employers of upwardly mobile educated men and women, and it would be difficult to imagine a middle class without these public servants. At least the ‘old’ middle classes, formed during the colonial and early post-colonial periods, emerged precisely from among state employees and were often key actors in nationalist projects. But even currently, public servants still form a sizeable group in middle-class formations in the Global South. Furthermore, even where middle-class careers depend on the state employment, members of the middle class may still develop their own political ideas that can be critical of the regime in power. Political independence, so to speak, is not necessarily premised on economic autonomy.

Apart from the question which role state employment, the free professions or entrepreneurship play for the ongoing formation of middle classes in the Global South, their economic and social trajectories were, and continue to be, significantly affected by governmental policies with respect to taxes, inheritance laws, credit, social services, and so forth. Particularly the educational system, still one of the most important sites that (re)produces social status and class membership, is usually regarded as

a major responsibility of the state; the costs of higher education, for instance, have an immediate effect on middle-class parents' capacity to provide their children with the minimal requirements for middle-class careers. Members of the middle class thus have vested interests in how, by whom, and to whose benefit the state offers its services. The question of middle-class 'capture' of the state has been debated extensively and controversially with regard to the future of the welfare state in the Global North since the 1980s,⁵⁰ and is now beginning to make its way into scholarly discussions of the global middle classes. The concept of 'capture' can mean that state-provided benefits are disproportionately beneficial to, and appropriated by, members of the middle class. But it can also imply the argument that the very policies concerning education, social security, and other welfare provisions are strongly influenced by middle-class interests. One could argue that this influence works through the recruitment of middle-class personnel into parliaments, governments and state administrations, implying that middle-class politicians and bureaucrats make policies in the interest of their own group. Alternatively, one could claim that independent of their social background, political decision-makers need to secure majorities (at least in democracies), and growing segments of middle-class voters will induce politicians to cater to their interests. However, as already discussed in the previous section, there seem to be no straightforward connections between the growth of a middle class and democracy, and it seems that there are not, as yet, many examples of straightforward 'state capture' by the middle class. On the contrary, at least for a number of African as well as Southeast Asian states, one would rather have to speak of authoritarianism, patrimonial rule, and state capture by the 'elites' and upper classes, with considerable rates of political disengagement by the middle classes (Welsh 2008: 57–60, Melber 2013).

Much seems to depend on the specific empirical cases that researchers have in mind when embarking on general statements. Some scholars, for instance, not only highlight the role that state policies play for middle-class lives, but even regard 'state privileging of middle-class subjects' as a strategic project of 'booster states' that aim at coordinating 'class containment' (Heiman et al 2012: 18, 15). Like Don Kalb (2014), Rachel Heiman, Carla Freeman, and Mark Liechty believe that the 'states' promotion of middleclassness, with the (false) notion that a majority of people belong to this category, is in part to dispel class tensions between working and capitalist classes' (2012: 17). They see one of the central dynamics of contemporary states in policies of 'shifting the desires of marginalized groups *away from* liberatory politics ... and *toward* relatively depoliticized aspirations for middle-class goods and lifestyles' and containing 'discontent (including demands for public education, health care, infrastructure, and so forth) within the confines of never-ending private quests for the consumerist "good life"' (2012: 19; emphasis in original). Such an almost conspiratorial interpretation (for which they provide little if any empirical evidence), however, does not prevent these anthropologists from also conceding that in some cases, 'middle-class politics may represent progressive political agency' (2012: 26). In any case, as these different strands of discussion and competing arguments show, the middle classes' relationship with the state is becoming an important field of (ethnographic) enquiry.

(2) Questions of race and ethnicity have rarely been addressed by research on nineteenth-century middle-class formations, but new studies on their role with regard to contemporary middle classes in the Global South suggest that ethnic (and linguistic) homogeneity may have been an important precondition for the formation of nineteenth-century middle-class culture. In the Global South, ethno-regional origins and race have often determined access to educational institutions and thus access to more lucrative employment and other kinds of economic capital. Class status thus regularly implies, or is even built on, ascriptive differences. In Latin America, for instance, the middle class is predominantly white (e.g. O'Dougherty 2002; Garguin 2012). In South Africa under Apartheid, the black middle class's position in the social hierarchy was mitigated by the colour bar (e.g. Kuper 1965; Seekings 2008), and even the current middle-class status of black corporate managers, for instance, can be

50 For an early overview of the debate, with special reference to New Zealand, and an insightful analysis of various aspects of the concept, see Bertram 1988.

significantly influenced by their working-class backgrounds in poorer black neighbourhoods (Modisha 2007).⁵¹

Case studies on India in particular have explored how caste and religion are articulated with the emergence of the middle class(es). Margit Pernau (2008), for instance, has investigated the transformation of Delhi's traditional Muslim elites into a modernising bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century. While the status of these middle-class-in-the-making Muslims was traditionally based on descent, demonstrated by a lifestyle of courtliness and conspicuous consumption, they now selectively appropriated a new set of values centred on education, industriousness, and self-restraint. Most importantly, they translated Western knowledge into Indian vernaculars, and held fast to the religious rhetoric of a reformed Islam. C. J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan (2014), in turn, show how Indian Hindus translated Brahman caste status into middle-class lifestyles and, more generally, how caste and class have intersected in Indian history. Donner and De Neve (2011: 10), too, have argued that 'persistent identities of caste, religion, language and region are... central to the formulation of contemporary middleclassness in India'—and, one could add, to many other nation-states of the Global South.

In this vein, for instance, Michael Pinches (1999) has explored how new constructions of 'Oriental essentialism', and particularly Confucian ideology, have fed into the self-fashioning of South-East and East Asian middle classes. Keith David Watenpaugh, in turn, has examined how the predominantly Christian middle class in Aleppo (Syria) in the early twentieth century negotiated its social standing around notions of 'modernity' that created distance to the ruling Sunni Muslims, but also aimed at refuting 'the political and cultural hegemony of the West' (2006: 5). Central to this project was 'the grafting... of the key middle-class concepts of respectability, mannered behavior, and probity in public and business dealing to the core of "traditional" [Arab] *adab*, loosely defined a manners, good taste, and humaneness' (2006: 303, 23).

Mary Kay Vaughan (2012) has interpreted such 'traditional' cultural identifications as expressions of the deep anxiety that 'modernity' breeds everywhere. As Vaughan argues, middle-class anxieties result from the experience of a very rapid pace of societal transformations, and ultimately 'derive from the sense that modernity cannot entirely meet our emotional needs'. Consequently, 'the sense of loss and lack of fulfilment ... create[s] nostalgia' and 'will fortify—at least for some time—traditional ways of doing or thinking things that enable survival and mobility in a rapidly changing world' (2012: 229). Not all scholars would attribute the persistence of apparently older distinctions and memberships to the existential challenges of modernity that may engender a growing nostalgia for a (re-imagined) past. Some would argue that continued, and even revitalised, membership in cross-class institutions such as kin networks, caste, religious communities, or ethnic associations remain relevant to middle-class lives for rather pragmatic reasons, for instance, because the incomplete or unstable state provides inadequate social security and welfare, or because non-middle class kin and peers exert pressure by forcing obligations on their middle-class brethren. However, all would agree that it is necessary to examine more closely how class is articulated with these other identifications and memberships.

(3) These aspects, finally, are closely linked to the question of how transnational, national, and local spaces of middle-class formation and reproduction intersect. What seems clear is that globally circulating discourses on and concepts of middleclassness play a much more important role in middle-class formation today than in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Furthermore, through global migration and migrants' remittances to their home families, transnationally generated income has come to play a crucial role in the making of national middle classes. At the same time, middle-class boundary work may transcend national borders, and those 'above', 'in the middle', or 'below' may no longer necessarily reside in the same locality or country. Mark Liechty has proposed the con-

51 For recent general reflections on the role of migration, ethnicity, and 'whiteness' in the contemporary making of European (middle) classes, see, for instance, Anthias 2005 and Edwards et al 2012. For an interesting comparative case study of upward mobility among youth from working-class German and Turkish immigrant backgrounds, see El-Mafaalani 2012.

cept of 'interjacency' to capture these complex intersections between space and class. He argues that the 'current global order produces an unprecedented level of class spatialization in which the interproductive interjacency of class communities occurs less and less *within* localities or even nations and more and more *across* national borders and even hemispheres' (2012: 276). However, as Liechty concedes, such global class geographies may well coexist with more local forms of middle-class boundary work. Or as Donner and De Neve put it: 'While middleclassness is increasingly shaped by transnational movements and interdependencies, the homogenizing tendencies are counterbalanced by the simultaneous promotion of regional and communal distinctiveness, often most strongly mobilized by the very communities that have become global players' (2011: 17). Indeed, in most studies on contemporary middle classes that I have consulted the nation-state still seems to constitute the most important framework within which people negotiate their own place in society, and imagine a desirable, just social order. Nevertheless, it is imperative to pay attention to the transnational dimensions of these negotiations and imaginations.

Conclusion: lessons for future research on social stratification in Africa

In this paper I have engaged with theoretical approaches to studying elites and (middle) classes, and reviewed a large corpus of literature on the history of the middle classes in Europe and America, the development of elites and/or middle classes in post-independence Africa, and the lifeworlds and perspectives of the 'new' middle classes in Asia and Latin America. I have discussed the challenges of conceptualising the middle class, a particularly fluid social formation that many scholars define not so much by objectifiable economic criteria, but rather by values and lifestyles, and by its social location 'in between' those 'above' and those 'below'. All theories of social stratification and class have to address, in one way or another, the question of in which ways the observers' categories engage with, or disregard, the social actors' self-categorisations. However, this issue seems particularly acute in the case of the middle class for which self-confident social 'boundary work' is often regarded as a defining characteristic. The middle class's 'boundary work' was indeed one of the central themes discussed in the empirical research that I reviewed, and there were striking parallels in the history of the middle class in nineteenth-century Europe and America, and recent developments in the Global South. Further, surprising similarities that the comparison of studies of the historical and contemporary middle classes revealed concerned their meritocratic values, perspectives on education and work, their concern with new forms of domesticity and respectable consumption, their investment in new forms of leisure and social associations as well as, sometimes, political activities. At the same time, research on the contemporary global middle classes explored themes that had not featured prominently in studies of earlier periods, namely the central role of the state in the making and breaking of the middle classes, the continued importance of regional, ethnic, and religious loyalties, and the transnational dimension of the formation of the new middle classes.

One of the major aims of this paper was to discuss these theoretical approaches and empirical studies in order to provide some orientation for future research on social stratification and the emerging middle classes in Africa. What, then, are the lessons that we can learn? In what follows, I will first return to the thorny theoretical issues and make some suggestions on how concepts of elite and class, as well as, more specifically, middle class may be further developed in order to enhance fruitful empirical research. Secondly, I will discuss which questions for future research on Africa can be taken from studies on the middle classes in other continents, and whether we can discern any specific continental or regional patterns of middle-class formation. Third, I want to ask what specific challenges social dynamics and lifeworlds in Africa may hold for using middle-class concepts that have been developed for rather different historical configurations. I will conclude by claiming that studies of social stratification in African may contribute to problematise conventional class categories, develop a more nuanced understanding of middle-class formation and thus enrich social theory in general, far beyond Africa.

Conceptual issues: elite, upper class and/or middle class?

In African studies, elite has been the most widely used term in order to describe highly educated and relatively affluent men and women working as politicians, in the public service, the free professions, and, occasionally, as entrepreneurs, traders, or businessmen. The debate on class in the 1970s and 1980s concerned rather the lower end of the social scale, discussing whether a working class was emerging. If the term class was applied to the upper echelons of society, then mostly with an interest in the close connections between political office and the accumulation of wealth, speaking of a 'ruling class' or 'state class', rather than more generally an 'upper class'. After the 1980s, research on class generally went out of fashion for quite some time. Instead, scholars focussed on lines of division and allegiance created by regionalism, ethnicity, or religion. Some continued to be interested in questions of social stratification and explored ethnicity as an arena for debates about the legitimacy of social inequality and the necessity of redistribution (e.g. Lonsdale 1996). Others concentrated on intra-ethnic patron-client relations as instruments of gaining access to, and justifying, wealth and political power (e.g. Schatzberg 1993, Daloz 2003). When these scholars addressed questions of social inequality, they would invoke the concept of elite rather than (upper) class.

Currently, we are witnessing the re-emergence of class on the scholarly agenda, in African studies as elsewhere—a development that seems to reflect the recent economic growth, resulting in increasing social inequality on the whole and an unprecedented expansion of middle-income groups. Some scholars of Africa continue to speak of elites, even when referring to members of these 'middling sorts', while others reconfigure their studies under the heading of 'middle class'. Which windows do the different concepts open on the societies under study, and what working definitions may be useful for future research?

With regard to elite, I observed that scholars of Africa have used the concept in two different ways: on the one hand, as key term in the analysis of the functional differentiation of society, and, on the other hand, as cornerstone of the study of social inequality and vertical stratification. This twofold usage often went hand in hand with a problematic mixing of descriptive and normative perspectives. Furthermore, some scholars tended to focus on elites as powerful, influential individuals, while others examined elites as quasi-corporate groups, held together by family ties, friendships and other informal networks. I would suggest that for future research, it may be useful to adopt some tenets of 'functional elites' approaches. This would imply a rather restricted definition of elite, understanding elites as individuals in leading positions in the political sphere or other societal fields with regular influence on decision-making that affects larger groups. It would keep questions of management roles ('elites') and social origins ('class') conceptually separate. Focusing on 'elites' helps to address questions of agency and leadership as well as the associated discourses of legitimating power, as George Marcus (1983) has convincingly argued. However, the concept is not so useful, I would argue, for an analysis of social stratification. As John Scott (2008) has insisted, the question of in which social strata the holders of influential expert, management, and leadership positions are being recruited is, at least in principle, an empirically open one, and the term elite should therefore not automatically be associated with upper or upper middle class.

There are further issues beyond social recruitment and reproduction that future studies of elites could fruitfully address, such as, for instance, the question of scale and the relationship between elites at the regional or local level and in the national, or even international, arena. One may explore in how far elites active in national politics or other social fields may, or may not relate to elites at the local level, and vice versa. This question could be extended to issues regarding the non-elite constituencies whose respect or acknowledgement is seen as a necessary basis for elite status, and, of course, one would have to ask what precisely is meant by 'influence'.

My preference for a rather 'functionalist' definition of elites, and for keeping questions of their social recruitment conceptually separate, pertains, of course, only to the analytical use of the term. As a concept used in social and political practice, scholars will still need to be sensitive to the broad range of meanings that social actors and policy-makers may associate with the term elite. In any case, I suggest that the study of elites, in the sense outlined above, can and should be combined with class analysis (or other approaches to social stratification)

Class is a comprehensive and relational concept, and most class theories would assume that the entire society is divided into classes. To speak of a middle class therefore entails positing the existence of other classes, such as upper, lower, or working class. Classes and class boundaries, however, do 'not exist ready-made in reality', as Wacquant has put it, but 'must be constituted through material and symbolic struggles waged simultaneously over class and between classes' (1992: 57). Furthermore, despite the continuing debate on the precise weight of economic and non-economic factors, the concept of class always invokes economic standing, social status, and similar distinctions that are not determined by biological criteria. Finally, membership in classes is usually thought of as relatively permanent, comprising not only individuals, but the entire family or at least the household, and, incidences of individual mobility notwithstanding, as being transmitted to the next generation.

Methodologically, the concept of class can be employed in three different ways. First, class can be used as a taxonomic or analytical concept, 'from an external vantage point to describe the make-up of society and to analyze social process' (Goldstein 2005: 89). Secondly, class may be understood as a bundle of social practices that may or may not be conscious, but that create and mark differences between social groups, in other words: an embodied and experiential sense of class ('doing/undoing class', Kalthoff 2006). Thirdly, the concept of class can imply conscious self-identification and become part of a 'social imaginary' (Castoriadis 1987); class then works as a discursive construction and political language that certain groups in society use in order to define their social position and interests and further their projects of social order (Furber 1985; Somers 1992).

As the case studies on middle classes reviewed in this paper have shown, these three understandings may, or may not, be combined, and some scholars would question whether it makes sense to speak of middle classes if only the first, but none of the other two dimensions are present. Personally, I would argue in favour of a fairly wide understanding of middle class(es) as social formations that can embrace a broad variety of socio-economic situations and lifestyles. At the same time, I would agree that some element of conscious 'inbetweenness' and active 'boundary work' is necessary in order to transform a socio-economic category of people with some degree of education, a certain range of occupations, and specified levels of income and/or wealth, into a middle class. Some scholars have suggested that middle class should best be understood as an 'aspirational category' and a 'category of self-identification' that is increasingly used because 'middle-class membership becomes a powerful, life-altering goal for many of those poised on the margins' (Heiman et al 2012: 19). In this perspective, the term middle class would imply a normative dimension, premised on aspirations of social mobility through education, diligent work, and achievement, and on certain ideals of professionalism, domestic life, and, more generally, respectability. Research on the middle classes should indeed explore why and how such normative discourses become an attractive means of positioning oneself and expressing one's social aspirations. At the same time, however, if middle class is to serve as an analytical term that enables historical and transnational comparison, some of the 'hard' criteria mentioned above, regarding education, occupation, and income will also have to enter the definition.

However, the heterogeneity of the social strata thus grouped by scholars, or grouped by the actors themselves, under the umbrella term 'middle class' is impressive, both in Africa and elsewhere. It constitutes a challenge for any classical 'groupist' and totalising understanding of class. Members of the middle class may indeed share some supposedly distinctive values and practices with non-middle class groups, and they exhibit such a range of different lifestyles that the idea of shared class membership may appear spurious. Some researchers have therefore suggested to complement, if not altogether replace, the concept of (middle) class with that of social milieu, as the latter seems to allow for a more nuanced analysis of such heterogeneity (Otte & Rössel 2011). When social milieus are understood along the lines of class concepts, as comprehensive, consistent, and long-term formations, however, they would still not be able to capture the fluidity and flexibility that middle-class biographies and lifeworlds typically exhibit. This is why Dieter Neubert, for instance, has suggested that for the analysis of social stratification in African societies, it would be useful to complement the idea of 'macro milieus' with a concept of 'micro milieus'; the latter embracing only certain aspects of people's lives, and allowing for multiple memberships, that is: people can simultaneously belong to various of these 'part-time lifeworlds' (2014: 31; also Neubert & Stoll 2015).

Whether milieu concepts, macro, micro, or combinations of both, will indeed be able to inspire theoretically convincing and empirically rich analyses of contemporary African societies remains to be seen. In any case, I would argue that we should (also) retain the concept of middle class, not least precisely because it embraces such a broad variety of socio-economic situations and lifestyles, and because it forces us to examine the ways in which it has become such a powerful resource in social and political practice. I would suggest, however, that the analytical concept may need to be developed further by infusing it with elements of practice-theoretical approaches to the politics of difference (Hirschauer 2014). Rogers Brubaker's (2004) critique of the naive reproduction of ethnic 'groupism' by social scientists can fruitfully be extended to social classes. Instead of thinking of classes as large social groups to which one and one's family belong (or not), it seems more useful to explore social dynamics in terms of 'doing being middle class', as bundles of discourses and performances that can, in specific situations or even over longer periods, be mobilised or demobilised, emphasised or de-emphasised.

Different trajectories of middle-class formation and the question of 'African exceptionalism'

In how far do the findings from research on the global middle classes that I have reviewed in this paper allow us to discern specific trajectories of middle-class formation? Do certain historical configurations give rise to particular types of middle classes? Are such configurations likely to differ according to continents or regions, or should we rather develop typologies across geographical boundaries? Is there anything specific to the emerging middle classes in Africa, or more specifically: regions or groups of states within Africa, that distinguishes them from middle classes in other parts of the world? Are contemporary middle-class trajectories so closely tied to global economic conjunctures, and transnationally circulating policy discourses, that it will be more useful to distinguish between different periods of class formation than between specific regional configurations? I cannot yet answer these questions, but would like to point to some issues that future discussions may take into account.

To begin with, we need much more research on African middle classes in order to have a sound empirical base for global comparisons. Taking clues from research on the history and contemporary development of middle classes in other parts of the Global South, the following lines of enquiry suggest themselves: (1) Since the middle class is a social formation particularly concerned with 'in-betweenness' and boundary work, how have the 'others' above and below against which it defines itself changed over time? How have the politics of distinction changed with the transition from colonial to the post-colonial regimes and in the contemporary context of increasing transnational migration and a new international division of labour? (2) Historically, the middle classes in Europe (and some other parts of the globe) were characterised by a conflict-ridden, but powerful association of 'economic' and 'intellectual' segments (*Wirtschaftsbürger* and *Bildungsbürger*), uniting, among others, entrepreneurs, businessmen, managers, professionals, artists, and public servants in a shared 'bourgeois culture'. What is the composition of the established and the new African middle classes, and how do they relate to each other? How are the 'nouveaux riches', often with lower educational credentials, regarded by more established and highly educated, but perhaps less affluent professionals? To what extent do the various middle-class segments share sociability and, for instance, intermarry? (3) The middle class, both historically and contemporarily, is premised on certain ideas of modernity and values of individualism, work, merit, and achievement, usually associating respectability with modest demeanour rather than conspicuous consumption (although the latter may be contested by the 'new rich'). How does this play out among African middle classes? Are middle-class ideals of, for instance, the internationally adept business man or the renowned professional eventually supplanting the dominant model of the wealthy and ostentatiously redistributing politician?

These are just some open questions, and the list of desiderata could certainly be extended. With regard to future comparative research, it is useful to recall Jürgen Kocka's (2004) convincing attempt of developing a historical typology of middle-class formation in nineteenth-century Europe, based on specific combinations of and alliances between the 'intellectual' and the 'economic' bourgeoisie. It could be rewarding to develop similar comparisons for current middle-class formation in the Global South. One important element could be the type of capitalism, or more broadly: economic system, in

which the middle class develops. It seems that post-socialist and still strongly state-controlled economies offer a different framework than countries and regions with more established liberal capitalism, or with recent strongly developed neoliberal policies. A second element would certainly be the role of the state. There seem to be considerable variations in the role that state employment plays in the composition of the middle classes, with important consequences for political orientations. At the same time, the scope of services that states offer, ranging from social welfare to education and general security, may greatly affect the degree to which class boundaries may become tighter or remain very porous. Middle-class formation may take on a rather different shape where ethnic loyalties beyond class membership remain relevant because the state cannot provide peace and security, or where family networks across class boundaries have to complement or substitute lacking state provision of social security. Developing comparisons along these lines may effectively run counter any stereotypical idea of 'African exceptionalism'.

Research on Africa and theorisations of class

There are a number of challenges that existing research on African elites and middle classes has revealed and that future studies will have to confront. These challenges result, not least, from unresolved tensions that are intrinsic to class concepts in general, but become particularly obvious when these are employed in the analysis of African societies. At the same time, I would suggest, these challenges bear innovative potential beyond African studies as they encourage researchers to develop more nuanced understandings of middle-class formation and social stratification in complex societies in general.

Conventionally, class is understood as an enduring membership that embraces all aspects of life. When looking at typical biographies of educated and well-to-do Africans, however, one may ask whether belonging to the middle class necessarily involves all domains of life and the entire life course. Could not someone be 'middle class' for most of his working life, while living in an urban environment, but behave as a traditionalist elder, appreciating rather different values and styles of consumption after retirement to his home region, or even during his regular visits to the natal village? Similarly, could he or she not participate in rather different circles of sociability even when living in the city, by, for instance, belonging to an employees' union, a posh tennis club, a Catholic lodge, and a popular ethnic association at the same time? How do such multiple loyalties and different registers of behaviour affect class membership and styles of middleclassness?

Similar questions arise from the relationship of class and family relations. Conventionally, social classes are considered as comprising not individuals, but households and families. But what does this mean, for instance, for African first-generation middle-class men who married less educated or illiterate village women? How large a section of the family needs to be included to allow individuals or couples to lead middle-class lifestyles? How does solidarity within extended kin networks that cross-cut class boundaries affect middle-class lives, and what does this mean for social mobility? How do state regulations affect the intergenerational transmission of social status and resources, and how does this interact with the transfer of resources and liabilities between (kin) related persons and households? In any case, particularly among recent social climbers, we often find 'multi-class' households and families. Furthermore, class positions may change in the course of a lifetime, depending on demographic, economic, and other contingent developments, and on the mitigating effects of social security systems. Research on the formation and reproduction of middle classes thus needs to pay attention to both individual biographical, family, and historical time (Hareven 1977), and their complex interrelations.

Finally, moving from the individual and his family to the wider social formation, we should ask which reference group or framework becomes relevant, and when, in middle-class boundary work. Class theories tended, and still tend, to take the nation-state as the self-evident framework in which to study social stratification. All statistical analysis of social inequality, and even complex approaches to social milieus ultimately remain within the paradigm of methodological nationalism. However, both historical and contemporary African examples remind us that class formation may have important 'subnational' as well as transnational dimensions. Most African countries are characterised by pro-

nounced regional and ethnic heterogeneity. This has important consequences for the rhythm of social change which may occur unevenly across a country, opening specific windows of opportunity or disadvantage at different times in different regions. National and regional criteria of what constitutes middle-class status may therefore differ—if we concede that class distinctions can at all be defined within a regional framework. To what extent, then, are regional trajectories of social stratification eventually ‘synchronised’, and can we observe the formation of comprehensive national middle classes? In what ways do sub-national ‘horizontal’ memberships and loyalties, organised around locality, region, ethnicity, or religion, defy, intersect with, or drive the emergence of national middle classes? How and to what degree have the different segments of national middle classes developed a shared culture (ideals of family life, standards of worthiness and respectability, patterns of consumption) and a common public sphere?

With regard to the transnational dimension, we may ask what role the involvement in global flows of resources and images plays for middle-class formation. To what extent, for instance, can educational achievements and material resources acquired abroad be converted into social status ‘back home’, and how do they impact social inequality and class membership within a nation-state? What reference groups for class status become relevant in transnational family networks, or among highly mobile professionals participating in global social circles? In what ways are the aspirations of African middle classes inspired by global discourses on middleclassness and imaginaries of ‘good’ middle-class lives?

As Donner and De Neve have suggested, it is productive to ‘substitute the question of what constitutes the middle class... in favour of an exploration of when, where, how and why being middle-class becomes an option, a possibility, desirable or a problem’ (2011: 8). They propose the term ‘middleclassness’, referring ‘simultaneously to class location at an individual level and to the experience of class as a broader category’, in order to capture everyday practices of (re)producing class and on-going struggles over symbolic boundaries (2011: 12). As I have discussed with reference to the shortcomings of the present state of the art in the study of class, and the middle class in particular, such a more open perspective on how and why people ‘do being middle class’ will provide an important corrective on all too reified and deterministic theorisations of class. At the same time, I would argue that we must go further and integrate this into more rigorous analytical conceptions of class.

And yet, the analytical difficulty of defining middle classes lies, not least, in one of their characteristics. Much more than other class cultures middleclassness seems to embody not only actual socio-economic achievements and actually practised lifestyles, but desires and aspirations; it is as much a bundle of lived social practices as a project that many embrace although they may lack ‘the symbolic and economic capital needed to realize it in a lasting manner’ (Donner & De Neve 2011: 13). In any case, middle class is a multi-dimensional concept that refers to a socio-economic category, a cultural world, and a political discourse. It remains to be seen what further research on African middle classes can contribute both to the knowledge of social stratification and its dynamics on the ground and to the theoretical instruments of scholarly analysis.

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