

Book Review

Africa Spectrum

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Dieter, Neubert (2019), *Inequality, Socio-Cultural Differentiation and Social Structures in Africa*, Cham: Palgrave, ISBN 978-3-030-17110-0 (paperback), xi + 433 pages

A main analytical focus of sociology is to investigate social structures. Dieter Neubert argues that we need to question the existing debates on middle classes if we want to gain a deeper understanding of social structures and persisting poverty in African societies. In a remarkable way, Dieter Neubert's monograph provides an in-depth knowledge of existing academic debates on social inequality, and on social differentiation and its limitations. According to the author, a meaningful investigation of social structures in African contexts should go beyond these academic debates and should "provincialise" theories by considering the respective social realities in Africa. In so doing, Dieter Neubert develops a complex analytical framework against the backdrop of his empirical research on Kenya.

The book is divided into nine chapters. After the introduction (chapter 1), chapters 2 to 6 discuss academic debates on inequality in development politics (chapter 2), class and capitalism in the Global South (chapter 3), sociocultural positioning (chapter 4), individual positioning (chapter 5), and risk and uncertainties (chapter 6). The remaining three chapters discuss extended concepts of social positioning (chapter 7) before developing a new framework for the analysis of social structures in sub-Saharan Africa (chapter 8) and concluding the book (chapter 9).

Dieter Neubert's introduction (chapter 1) starts with the observation that conventional social sciences fail to capture the particularities of African societies. He offers an all-embracing overview of his arguments by highlighting the need to overcome debates on class, drawing from elaborated concepts in sociology such as milieus to provide an understanding of social structures in African contexts and to overcome hierarchies in knowledge production between the North and the South (3).

Neubert brings together debates on development, inequality, sociocultural and class differentiation, but focuses his argument on the middle class(es). He observes that in recent years, a debate on middle class(es) has emerged due to the increase in the number of consumers and entrepreneurs in Africa. Moreover, an interest in global inequalities has been embedded in a developmental discourse using economic definitions of middle class(es) as in the case of the African Development Bank, with arguments based on false expectations of the middle class(es) as drivers of democratic and economic change. The author criticises these debates and shows their limitations (chapter 2). With reference to



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scholarly work on class(es) (chapter 3), Neubert persuasively argues that most academic debates investigate features of class(es) and their impact, but ignore the fact that class(es) are not a stable group: they change in the course of time and face upward and downward mobility (115). Moreover, the class concept does not take account of differences with regard to the mode of production, the lack of homogeneity, or the absence of class consciousness (122). Despite increasing criticism, the class concept still lacks a proper understanding of social structures (120), which are dependent on sociocultural positioning (chapter 4) and individual positioning (chapter 5) in African contexts. Important sociocultural differentiations in the Kenyan context are connected to ethnicity, neo-traditional authorities, patron–client relationships, and lifestyles. Individual categories, such as gender, age, or disability, must also be considered because they make a difference in shared sociocultural positioning. Not least, Neubert argues that upward mobility and uncertainties shape sociocultural and individual positioning (chapter 6). Sickness or unemployment may threaten social and individual positioning, while informal or formal networks are important for coping with difficult situations (261).

Based on this extensive and insightful discussion of social inequality and social differentiation in relation to Africa, Neubert develops an analytical framework, which seeks to overcome blind spots and limitations of existing academic work. By including German work on milieus, which is not referred to in international academic debates on social stratification and differentiation, and by referring to Hradil's concept of social situation as a condition of action and in relation to human needs (social, economic, and welfare needs), the author creates a complex and multi-dimensional analytical tool for comprehending societies in Africa (chapter 7). Neubert carefully works out five categories to describe social inequality in Africa (355–358) - first: poor with no or insufficient assets and with restricted access to support networks; second: the “unstable floating cluster” with some assets, limited entitlements, and medium obligations; third: the stable “middle income cluster”, with some assets, sufficient entitlements, and medium obligations; fourth: the “stable upper cluster” with large assets, extended entitlements, and low obligations, and fifth: the political and economic top elite with large assets, formal power, extensive entitlements, and minimal obligations. In African contexts, it is clear that most citizens belong to the poor or the floating middle cluster.

Subsequently, Neubert argues that people in the same social situation have different lifestyles, which can be explained by the concept of milieus. The concept of milieus describes factors that influence the way people interpret their environment and their attitudes. Based on a multiplicity of social categories, Neubert defines seven milieus in Kenya: neo-traditionalists, conservative Christians, Pentecostal Christians, social climbers, stability-oriented pragmatics, young professionals, and liberal cosmopolitans (366–380). Categories that mark the differences between the milieus are morals, orientation to socioeconomic advancement, social scope of future aspiration, political activity, consumption, and rural links. Neubert argues that milieus are ideal-types, which are not fixed, but which can change during the life course. He explains that all milieus have members in different social situations (391), that all milieus can be found in the so-called middle class(es) (392), and that people may change milieus. The complex framework

shows that social analyses should go beyond simplifying class analyses ; in order to understand societies in Africa, we need to consider social situations (socioeconomic inequality) and milieus (sociocultural differentiation). Neubert finishes his book (chapter 9) by discussing frequently raised comments on the middle-class(es) and by highlighting the need to provincialise existing theories.

Dieter Neubert's book provides a remarkable account of different ways of analysing inequality, social differentiation, and social structures, and of developmental debates and work on intersectionality. The author offers an important and unique analytical tool for analysing societies in Africa. He also provides multiple thoughts and critical reflections on how to develop sociology in the African context by highlighting the limitations of *Western*-oriented concepts, by provincialising existing theories and developing analytical standpoints against the backdrop of in-depth knowledge of Kenya. The book is an excellent academic contribution to sociological research and can be recommended for readers interested in development studies, inequality, social differentiation, and structure in Africa and beyond.

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