MIDDLE-CLASS IN SOUTH AFRICA: SIGNIFICANCE, ROLE AND IMPACT

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Middle-Class in South Africa: Significance, Role and Impact

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Reflections on the middle-class dominate global discourse on the emerging socio-economic trends and their implications for political life in the various countries. South Africa has not been untouched by such discourse. It is a regular feature in the country's public discourse.

The curiosity goes beyond the spectacle occasioned by the newness, especially, of the black middle-class, in a country that has just come out of more than 400 years of white supremacist rule. Rather, the interest is also fanned by what this phenomenon portends for South Africa's political, economic and social lives. This is the focus of our paper.

Specifically, the chapter accounts for the growth of the middle-class since South Africa's democratization in 1994. Albeit largely focused on recent history, the preceding years will also receive mention in order to account for why the middle-class has only grown in the last 20 years, and not earlier. The purpose is to answer three, related questions: What does the possibility of social mobility, of blacks into the ranks of the middle-class, implies for the country's potential to bridge inequality; whether or not the gradual, yet notable, de-racialisation of inequalities promises to consolidate South African democracy; and what is the role of the middle-class in South Africa's political life.

2.   DEFINING THE MIDDLE CLASS

The paper defines the middle-class both in terms of occupational status and life-style. It neither owns the 'means of production', nor does it perform manual labour. Rather, the middle-class derives is livelihood from a salary earned on the basis of its specialized skills and expertise. It is made up of white-collar professionals, managers and traders. Not only is the middle-class distinguished by occupational status, but also by behavior, life-style and world-view (Seekings and Nattrass; Southall, 2004; Seekings 2008).

Middle-class values and life-style distinguishes them from, say, the working class. Suburban residence, dress-code, family-life, ambition, tolerance and consumption are some of the markers that distinguish the middle-class. In other words, middle-class status is not purely a function of occupation and income, but is also a subjective cultural phenomenon. It is a way of life, informed by a certain set of values (Archer and Blau, 1993; Gregg, 1998).

Because of its configuration, the middle-class thus offers society two primary benefits: economic development and democratic stability. To be sure, the middle-class is both the cause and effect of economic development. Its growth is a function of economic development, which, in turn, fuels further development. Expertise and skills offered by the middle-class enable further innovation and creativity that propels society forward. Politically, because it is located in the middle of the class structure, between the upper class and the working class, it exercises a moderating influence on society and is a reliable advocate of democracy (Chunlong, 2005).

Conversely, both the upper and lower classes are not consistent supporters of democracy. Albeit the bourgeoisie pioneered democracy, they're not always consistent advocates of a democratic order. Capital doesn't necessarily need a democratic government to protect its interests. It can secure protection through a patron-client relationship with the ruling elite. The latter protects business interests in return for material benefits.

Similarly, the working class can be narrowly focused more on economic interests, and less on political needs. Financial vulnerability, for instance, makes workers susceptible to extremism. This is manifested in their support for populist government. Such support is advanced solely because that government meets their economic interests, regardless of the fact that it may fall short of adhering to democratic standards and norms.

In contrast, the middle-class, by nature, is predisposed to democracy. Because it lacks wealth, it cannot buy protection through a patron-client relationship with the state. The ultimate guarantor of its interests and life-style is a democratic order. Democracy guarantees the right of association, freedom to speak out, an independent judiciary and ability to elect a government of one's choice. All these constitute sufficient protection for middle-class interests. And, because of their education, middle-class is less susceptible to extreme ideologies, tolerant of other ideas, questioning of government and is not easily swayed (Chunlong, 2005).

The extent to which the middle-class is a force for democracy, however, depends on its size in relation to the rest of the population. Democracy consolidates where the middle-class constitute the largest segment of society - that is a diamond-shaped, instead of a pyramid-shape society. Where it is not dominant, it at least has to be numerous. This puts it in a relatively influential position, as a power-broker able to enter into an alliance with either the working class or upper-class.

Most importantly, a preponderant presence of a middle-class stifles radicalism in society. Radicalism is spawned by lack of hope that one's prospects can ever change. Hopelessness builds resentment, especially because one feels denied of any opportunities for advancement, shunted out of the system. Resentment opens disgruntled people to extremism. Because marginalized people don't have

a stake in the system, they are open to its reconfiguration in way that ameliorates their social depravity.

The ease of social mobility, however, underscores the presence of opportunities for one to escape an under-privileged background. This gives hope to those in the lower class that they are not doomed to remain on the margins of society, but society does offer opportunities for self- upliftment (Ibid).

It's worth noting also that it is not just democracy that the preponderance of the middle-class offers, but liberal democracy. The latter is different to electoral democracy. Liberal democracy ensures that voters not only vote – i.e. procedural democracy - but are also granted civil liberties, such as free speech, sexual and religious expression and freedom of association.

And, there's a correlation been the depth of democracy (or freedom status of a country) and the size of the middle-class relative to the population. In un-free societies, the middle-class constitutes around 18% of the population. Conversely, free societies tend to have more than 30% of their population made up of the middle-class (average of 37%). And in partly-free or electoral democracies, the middle stands around 25% of the population.

3. MIDDLE-CLASS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Definition of the middle-class has proven to be contentious in South Africa. Whilst there is consensus that it applies to white-collar, non-manual, professional workers, views vary on its income status. The African Development Bank, for instance, puts the middle-class income at anything above $2 per day (around R20 at today's exchange). Another study suggests that an income between R1500 and R10 000 per month locates one in the middle-class. This classification is problematic, for it includes a significant number of blue-collar workers who may not necessarily meet the educational criterion nor have a world-view that is typical of a middle-class (Visagie, 2013).

4

Conversely, other studies have not only insisted on white-collar employment as part of middle-class definition, but also put income status between R10 000 ($1 000) and R25 000 ($2 200) per month. Based on this classification (which this chapter shares) the middle-class makes up about 17% (roughly 8.3 million, out of 51 million population based on the 2011 Census). Of this number, Africans make up 51%, Whites 34%, Coloureds 9% and Indians 6%. This configuration is a far-cry to 20 years ago, when South Africa became a democratic society. Then Africans made up 3.3%; Coloured 9.1%; and Indians 18.5% (*The Mercury,* 13-05-2013; *Africa Renewal*, December 2013).

In other words, the growth of South Africa's middle-class is a post-1994 phenomenon. The new entrants have largely been black – i.e. Coloured, Indian and African. South Africa's growing middle-class, therefore, is not only a result of democratic reforms, but also of racial redress. A few historical details are necessary at this point to contextualize post-apartheid racial redress.

To be sure, the African middle-class is not entirely a post-apartheid construction. This class, especially in a Weberian sense, dates back to nineteen-century British colonialism. In both the Cape and Natal colonies, colonial officials cultivated an African class distinct, from the rest of the native population, by educational status, dress-code and life-style. Dubbed *amakholwa* and *amogqoboka* (the civilized ones) in Natal and Cape respectively, they were employed in then emerging colonial state and its supporting missionary enterprise as teachers and priests; dressed-up in western clothing; embraced English culture; prided themselves in their command of the English language and familiarity with its literature; and reveled in playing cricket and tennis.

Colonial motivation for creating an African middle-class was not dis-similar to contemporary arguments about the significance of this class. To be sure, creating a "civilized" African class was not out of character for Victorian England. That

was the motif of British colonialism – to "civilize" colonial subjects, turning them into their own image. But, the subjects resisted, especially because civilization also meant land dispossession and subjugation. Officialdom responded by creating an African middle-class to counter native resistance against their "civilizing mission" (Odendaal, 1984; Mokoena, 2011).

The early African middle-class was to serve as intermediaries between the resistant natives (known as *amaqaba* – illiterates) and officialdom, to pacify and ultimately win their native brethren over to embrace British authority and culture. In other words, the African middle-class was created with a view to assuming a political role. Because they too were indigenous, they were thought to have more credibility, than the settler missionaries, to convince their native brethren about the righteousness of the gospel.

Albeit the British colonialism purported to be founded on the "equality for all civilized men", as Cecil John Rhodes once claimed, the African middle-class, however, could not escape racial prejudice. Admittedly, 1850s constitutions of the Cape and Natal colonies had granted franchise to literate Africans who also owned some property. By the 1890s, however, colonial authorities had introduced measures aimed at restricting the number of eligible African voters. This was a response to the growth of African voters, which, in turn, created fear among settlers that Africans would vote for their own, and thus endangering their interests. By 1936, sixteen years after forming the Union of South Africa, African franchise was abolished (Trapido, 1980).

African disfranchisement was reflective of the racist foundations of the Union. Racial supremacy formed its foundation. Already dispossessed of means of self-sustenance through wars of conquest, a slew of legislation followed legalizing African servitude to the colonial and apartheid economy. Africans were pushed into wage labour; taught inferior education; denied higher education; barred from occupying certain jobs; and paid a pittance.

Needless to say, racial oppression stunted the growth of the black middle-class. Blacks lacked adequate education nor did they have opportunities for social advancement. Because apartheid denied them permanent residence in the urban areas, shunting them to the reserves instead, they could not own houses. This meant they had no assets. And, without assets, even the aspirants business people, found it extremely hard to secure financial loans. By and large, Africans were reduced into a mass of blue-collar, manual labourers.

A minute layer of the middle-class, however, remained within the black community. It was made up largely of teachers, nurses, court-interpreters and clerks. A significant number of African middle-class was concentrated in the black homelands, built on the spurious idea of separate development (or separate, but equal). Although supposedly independent, homelands were economically unviable and depended wholly on the apartheid government for their budgets. It is here though that the African middle-class bourgeoned. Not only did they find employment in the state bureaucracy, but some also became traders. Homeland government provided financial support to aspirant business-people (Mandela, 1994).

That the emergent African middle-class was a product of contrasting processes meant that it was not politically cohesive. Because they owed their existence to the apartheid state, the homeland-based middle-class was conservative. It was protective of the homeland system, and shunned anti-apartheid activities. Conversely, the urban-based middle-class, which suffered the wrath of apartheid brutality, together with the rest of the urban African populace, became part of the broader anti-apartheid movement. After founding the current ruling party, the African National Congress, in 1912, the African middle-class dominated its leadership right up to 1950s when the party evolved into a mass movement. The paper returns to this point later, when it picks up the point about the role of the middle-class in contemporary South African politics.

As noted earlier, the foregoing is critical to understanding present-day measures towards racial redress, which have consequently expanded the black middle-class. It is an acknowledgement of the need for social justice[1]. Racial redress entailed promulgation of legislation to uplift the previously advantaged groups bringing them on *par* with their previously advantaged white counterpart. Practically, this has meant preferential hiring for blacks and women in places of employment through purchasing goods and services from the companies that have demonstrable black ownership, control and management (Ndletyana, 2008).

In other words, racial redress is meant to achieve representivity and inclusion. In light of South Africa's culture of racism, entrenched over centuries of colonial and apartheid rule, drafters of the Constitution doubted that society would simply de-racialise on its own without official nudging. Racial redress has indeed met with fierce resistance from some quarters. Critics charge that affirmative action downplays merit, is reverse racism and keeps South African society racialised (Leon, 2008). In the light of such resistance, it is doubtful that, without legislation, workplaces would have become racially (and gender) diverse. And, the way redress consequently unfolded, as discussed below, bore out this concern.

Overall, legislation enabled tremendous strides in black social mobility. But, progress has been uneven in the various sectors and employment echelons. As demonstrated below in the Figures 1- 2, the ten-year period between 2002 and 2012 has seen a notable rise in the number of blacks appointed into jobs that require professional and technical qualifications. Compared to 2002, Blacks now

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[1] In light of the systematic dispossession and pauperization of the African masses, some have decried affirmative action and black economic empowerment as inadequate to effect social justice. They clamored for confiscation of privately owned white-land and transfer to the previous owners, Africans. Drafters of the constitution shunned this option, however, preferring a moderate route instead. This included cajoling land-owners, especially where a previous owner could demonstrate dispossession, to sell at a market-value.

make up the majority of employees in cohort that require professional qualifications. The level of improvement is even better amongst technical jobs.

Figure 1: Professionally Qaulified Level: 2002-2012

Figure 2: Skilled Technical Level 2002 - 2012
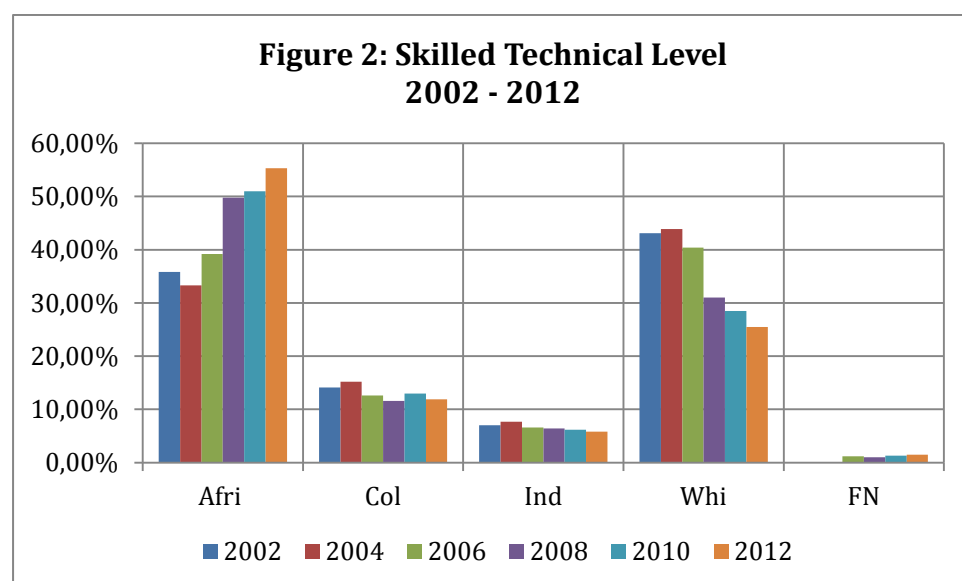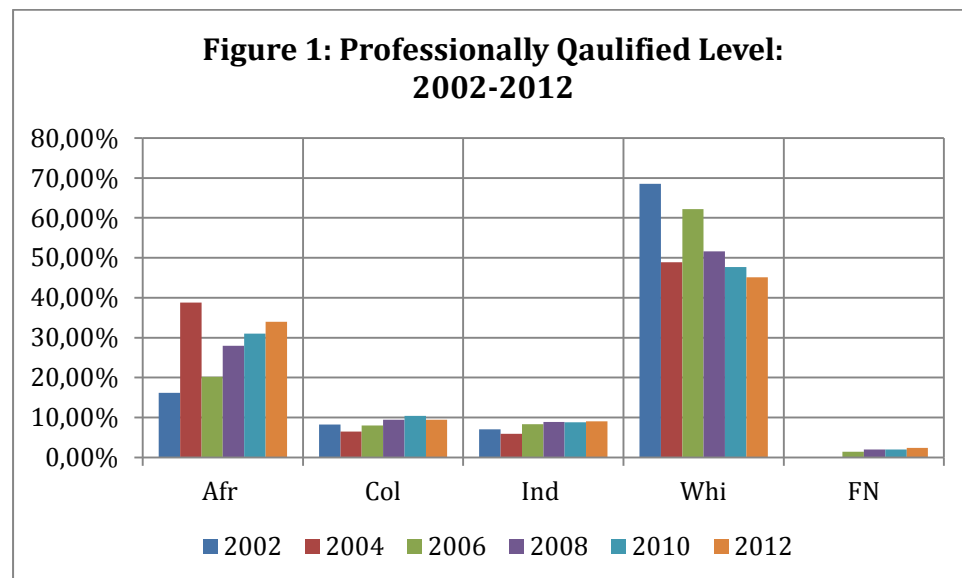
The picture is different with respect to senior and top management level. Here little improvement has happened. According to figures 3 and 4 below, Whites remain an overwhelming majority in executive positions. Changes have simply been marginal.
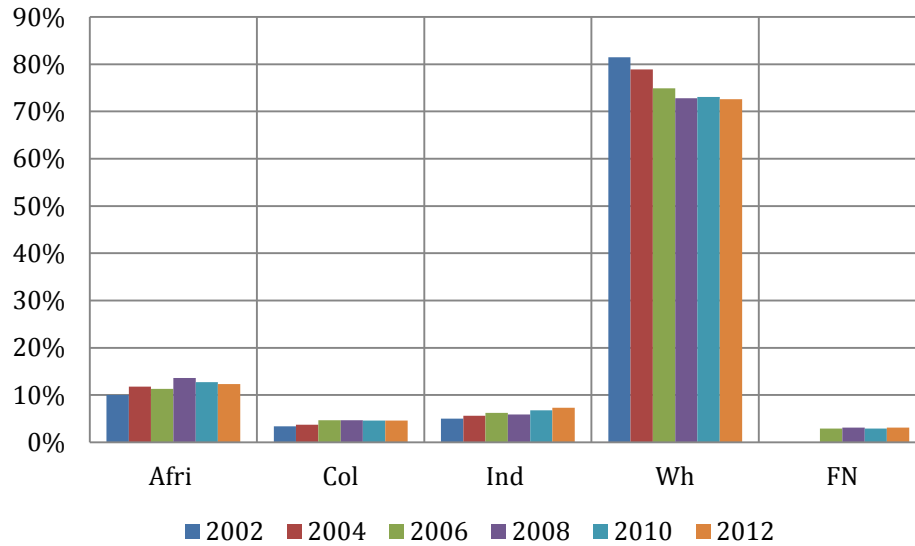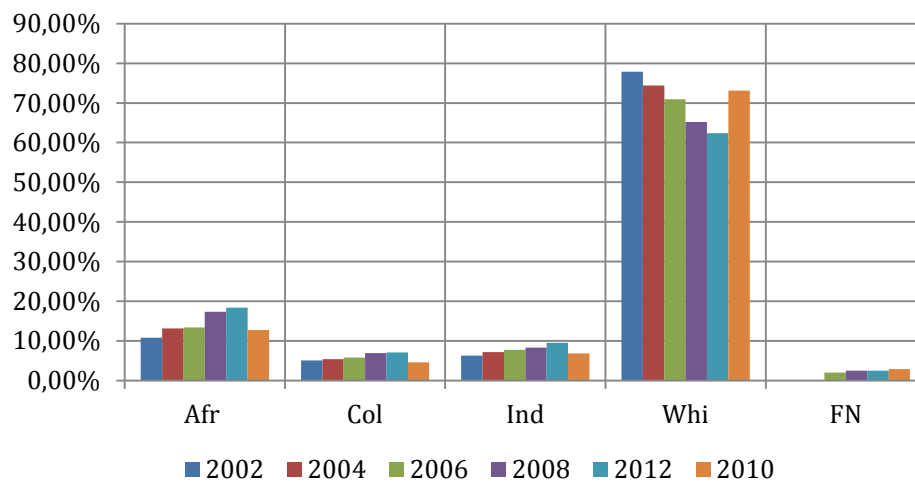
Figure 3: Top Management by Race 2002-2012

Figure 4: Snr Management by Race: 2002-2012

The uneven progress indicates varying performances by the private sector, on the one hand, and the public sector, on the other. The latter has done far better than the former. Black managers and professionals in parastatals and the public service make up 67% and 62% respectively. Conversely, in the private sector, African managers and professionals make up 29% and 43% respectively. This is partly a function of the leadership in each sector. Executive authority in the public sector rests largely with politicians drawn from the ruling ANC. The party-

in-government has been unrelenting in implementing its (own) policies. Conversely, Whites, as has been the case in the past, largely lead the private sector. There is evidently less enthusiasm for racial redress in this sector.

The foregoing not only underscores that black mobility is a post-1994 phenomenon, but also indicates that such changes would not have happened in the absence of legislation. It is similarly important to point out that the mushrooming of the black-middle class does not presuppose elimination of racially-based inequalities. Whites still earn and own the largest portion of South Africa's national income and wealth. Median income for a White household, for instance, stood at R20 000 in 2012, compared to R3 000 for an African household (Presidency, 2014).

A substantial portion of South Africans fall in the low-income category and is unemployed. Unemployment hovers around 24% of the able-bodied population. Blacks dominate both the poor and unemployed segments of the South Africa society. Consequently, South Africa is one of the most unequal societies.

4.   PROSPECTS OF UPWARD MOBILITY

For a country that has experienced equality for only 20 years, the advancement of black people is not an insignificant phenomenon. It testifies to the seriousness with which officialdom seeks to eliminate manifestations of racism. That said, prospects of upward mobility, especially if one takes education as the most common enabler, are rather limited. There's greater chance of the middle-class reproducing itself than a working-class child climbing up the social ladder into the middle-class ranks.

Before delving into South Africa's educational system, it is worth elaborating on what one means by social reproduction. The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) in what he called cultural capital and habitus, initially espoused this theory. Social reproduction contends that social mobility has a lot more to do

with one's social circumstances, especially family. Mere access to education is not sufficient to facilitate upward mobility. Working class kids, it is argued, face greater impediments in escaping their social background, than middle-class kids are able to fall onto a lower class (See also Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Mehan; 1992; Lareau, 1987; Power, 2000; Kaufman, 2005).

Family environment and social networks provide resources that complement school attendance. Birth into a middle-class family gives its offspring a head-start over kids born into a working class family. This alone is a structural advantage, which gives them cultural resources necessary for success at school. Educational standards of their middle-class parents predispose their children towards learning. Educated parents are prone to buying books and open to learning in general. This makes the home a learning environment as well. School learning is complemented and reinforced by home learning. It is then easier for middle-class kids to pass and do well at schools.

Moreover, middle-class families socialize their children into a middle-class existence. They model themselves along the lives of their parents. From early on in life, middle-class kids come to believe that middle-class is only way of life, which they can easily attain and even advance further up in life. This makes them confident, free of any psychological hang-ups about whether or not they can succeed in life.

Conversely, working-class students face a lot more impediments towards social mobility. The home environment, culture and financial status don't necessarily complement the child's schooling. Because they're not as educated, parents may lack a literary culture and even confidence, if not knowledge, to help out with their kids' home-work. And, without disposable income, working-class parents are limited in what they can buy their children to stimulate and enhance their learning.

Performance of South African schools and tertiary institutions bears out social-reproduction theory. Less than half of the kids that start school go on to complete. Of those that complete school, roughly a quarter attains results that qualify them for university entrance. And, universities experience massive drop-out rates. A measly 15% of undergraduates complete their degrees.

Learners that drop out of school or university are predominantly black and from a working class background. This means they're likely to not only remain within working-class ranks, but also to be unemployed. Black youth fills the ranks of South Africa's unemployed. Seventy-five percent of the unemployed is made up of individuals at the age of 34 years and below. Their unemployment is partly a result of lack of skills. Two-third of them have either not finished matric or never worked in their lives.

The South African economy does not quite absorb unskilled labour. Of the sectors that have been creating employment in the last few years, only the security sector – as guards and patrols – employs unskilled labour. Other thriving sectors – i.e. information technology, financial and retail services – require some form of certification and specialized skills.

Despite the significant growth of the middle-class in the last few years, there are great odds against upward mobility. South Africa's middle-class is likely to remain minute for a considerable period of time. Unless the structure of the South African economy is altered drastically, working-class and unemployed segments of our society will remain predominantly black for a similarly long period of time.

5.   SOCIAL MOBILITY AND STAGNATION: IMPLICATIONS

South Africa's growth of the middle-class promises contrasting fortunes for the country. Economically, middle-class has immense benefits. It expands consumers' buying power, which translates into a concomitant increase not only

in the purchase of consumable products, but also assets such as housing and cars. The increase in the sale of cars and the purchase of new houses in the last few years, for instance, has been ascribed to the growth of the middle-class. The automobile industry, for one, has been amongst the best performing sectors of the South African economy. The impact of the new black middle-class, for instance, is such that marketers have even dubbed them "black diamonds", singling them out for particular attention and advertisement.

Taken as a whole, however, the middle-class lacks cohesion. Admittedly, middle-class blacks have also followed the typical pattern of suburban life. Exclusive white residence has now made way for relatively racially diverse suburbs. Racial fissures within the middle-class, however, remain. Arrival of the Blacks, in some suburbs, was met with White flight. Reports about blacks being denied apartments in predominantly white residential complexes are common in South African media. The exclusion is motivated purely by racial prejudice.

In other words, race is a stronger determinant of association (or affinity) than class. The African middle-class is closer to its working-class brethren than its White counter-part. Whilst South African law does not allow for exit polling, some surveys suggest that the black middle-class share a similar voting choice as the black poor and working-class – i.e. they vote ANC. This is not unexpected especially because the ANC has been a strong advocate, through racial redress policies, of the upward mobility of blacks, whilst the poor have similarly benefited from the governing party's creation of a social safety net (Schlemmer, 2005).

But, the Black middle-class and poor is not only bound by racial redress. The ties are also both familial and cultural. Because most of the Black middle-class is first-generation, it maintains close contact with working-class relatives. It is common of middle-class families, for instance, to visit their working-class brethren in the "townships" and rural villages especially over long holidays. As if

to suggest that their suburban homes are impermanent, they call such sojourns "going home". These are normally ancestral homes, where extended families, even clans, gather. In other words, Black middle- and working-class share some cultural values and practices (Modisha, 2007).

By and large, therefore, the middle-class is fairly progressive. The affinity of the black middle-class especially with the poor and working-class predisposes them towards social justice. They are generally supportive of welfare measures to ameliorate social hardships experienced by low-income earners and the poor. And, middle-class progressiveness extends to their political orientation in general. As noted earlier, they have been at the forefront of the anti-apartheid struggle and are highly engaged in the electoral process. They are fervent supporters of democracy.

CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at the evolution the middle-class in South Africa. Whilst not exclusively, the paper focused largely on the past 20 years of the country's democracy. It has shown that black middle-class especially is largely a post-apartheid construction. This was a result of the country's racist past, which the current dispensation has sought to undo. And, the fact that the black middle-class is largely a product of racial redress has created a wedge between itself and its white counter-part. Racial redress enjoys lukewarm support amongst whites. The schism also stem from racial prejudice. This has made South Africa's middle-class incoherent.

The paper has also shown that the black middle-class is not entirely distinct from the working-class. Though distinguished by income, education and even residence, the African middle-class especially still maintain familial links with the working-class with which it still shares some cultural values and practices. This is mainly because a predominant component of the African middle-class is first-generation. The black middle-class, in other words, is still in formation.

Politically it is quite progressive, having led the anti-liberation struggle and is now actively involved in the country's political life, especially because it seeks to ensure that the state remains transformative.

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