Preface

Mr Thabang Ndlovu is 44 years old and was born in one of the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal. He is the second-born in a family of three children. His mother, a housewife, is the first of three wives of Mr. Ndlovu, who worked as a security guard. Thabang’s parents separated when he was eleven years old.

He started school at the age of 12. Thabang was driven by curiosity and a passion for reading, and managed to finish his matric at the age of 24. Upon completion of high school, Thabang was expected to take care of his family’s livestock. However, like any other young man, Thabang wanted to try his luck in *Egoli* (the City of Gold - Johannesburg). As a result, he ran away from home and was employed from the gate\(^1\) as a general worker in 1987. In the workplace, Thabang joined a trade union movement. This is partly the reason for his retrenchment in 1991.

After being unemployed for three years, Thabang was employed as a welding trainee in a large car manufacturing company in 1994. Because of his interest and activities in the labour movement, Thabang was elected as a shop steward in his new workplace. He then pursued his studies and acquired a certificate and diploma in Human Resources Management. These earned him a junior management position in the human resources department of his company. However, he says his participation in his workplace is minimal because his company does not believe in black people. Furthermore, his trade union background makes it difficult for him to perform his job satisfactorily because he is treated with suspicion by both management and shop-floor workers. However, Thabang is aspiring to have his own business in five years.

Despite these achievements, Thabang still classifies himself as a member of the working class. This is because he was promoted from the shop floor and he is always trying to do everything to make sure that shop-floor workers get opportunities like him. Furthermore, he

---

\(^1\) People who are looking for employment usually stand outside the gate with a hope of being called by the employer to do anything available to be done
is taking care of the three children of his brother, who passed away in 1987. In all, Thabang has 12 dependents, including his wife, mother and members of his extended family.

Ms Sharon Shopeng is 28 years old and belongs to a family of five people, including her two siblings and parents. Her family is based in one of the townships in North West Province. Her father worked as a priest (B.A. Theology) and her mother worked as a teacher (B.A. Education).

After completing her matric at the age of 18, Sharon went to the University of Cape Town in 1996. Although she had to raise funds to pay her tuition fees (because her parents wanted her to study something other than Science), Sharon graduated with B.Sc. (Hons) in Quantity Surveying in 2000. She spent 18 months working as a consultant in a large company. After that she worked as a site quantity surveyor in another company. The latter occupation afforded her an opportunity to spend six months in the United Kingdom (UK). At the time of the interview in 2005, she was working as a junior manager in a multinational company in South Africa. As a black woman, Sharon states that she has to work doubly hard to get promotion. Similar to Thabang, Sharon wants to be involved in business in five years’ time.

Sharon classifies herself as middle class partly because she was raised in a family that was not poor, and partly because she earns enough to buy whatever she wants to buy. Although she does not take care of any member of her extended family and does not have a child, Sharon maintains that she is financing the lifestyle of her two siblings. Asked whether the African middle class was doing enough to uplift the majority of black people from poverty, Sharon said that it seemed they were slowly forgetting about the plight of the poor.

These are the stories of two Africans in the management level of their two companies in a democratic South Africa. The stories show that these individuals have two different family backgrounds. While Thabang comes from what may be classified as a working-class family, Sharon comes from a family that may be classified as middle-class.

Although access to training played a major role on their access to BBBEE (Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment) policies, their family backgrounds had an impact on the paths followed by each individual to be where they are today. Thabang got his training from the labour movement, while Sharon got hers from the university. Nonetheless, the mere fact
that they are black places them in a contradictory class location, although this differs in degree. While Sharon states that she has to work harder to get a promotion, Thabang says that his situation is more difficult because of his trade union background.

Despite the emergence of a new workplace regime (Von Holdt, 2003), one may argue that these stories of black managers illustrate the persistent nature of racial undertones in some South African companies. The seeds of this can be found in the ideology of ‘white supremacy’ that served as a cornerstone of South African society under the colonial and apartheid regimes (Webster, 1985; Von Holdt, 2003).

The stories further illustrate that both individuals aspire to run their own businesses within five years. This dimension of the stories directly contradicts the Marxist conception of class consciousness. Indeed, it illustrates that we cannot always classify people in the management level with the capitalists (see Weber, in Gerth and Mills, 1948). Furthermore, it shows that not all workers have a working-class consciousness. Reading from Thabang’s story, it is indeed difficult to conclude that his is a false consciousness.

While there is no question about the impact of the growth of this class on the economy of South Africa, one can ask a few questions about its impact on South African society. Firstly, one can ask whether BBBEE-related policies serve to deracialise South African workplaces. Secondly, these stories raise questions about accessibility of BBBEE-related policies in South Africa. For instance, how many people in Thabang’s situation would be able to get opportunities to improve their life? Thirdly, what is the role of the black middle class in transforming the workplace and alleviating poverty in South African communities?

These are some of the questions that inspired me to conduct research about the rise of the African corporate middle class in South Africa. Indeed, can we really conclude that black people earning a salary they could not earn under the apartheid regime are the middle class in every sense of the word? Or do we need a change of conceptual lens to understand the social dimensions accompanying the African middle class? In an attempt to answer these questions, this research aims to explore the position and role of the African corporate middle class in a democratic South Africa.