Chapter 9

Conclusion: The African Middle Class in a Contradictory Class Location

The main question to be answered in this chapter is what is the significance of this study in understanding the growth of the African middle class in South Africa? As has been shown in the above discussion, the analytical focus of this research is on the position and role of the African corporate middle class in the workplace and their communities.

The origin of the concept of the middle class can be traced from societies in transition from feudalist to capitalist modes of production (Wahrman, 1995). In its original formulation, the concept denotes a class stratum inserted between the aristocracy and the commons or the working class. The advancement of capitalism increasingly rendered this conceptualisation of the middle class irrelevant as it was accompanied by the dwindling in significance of the aristocracy as the upper class. More specifically, this conception of the middle class became irrelevant in settler colonial countries as the aristocracy became close to non-existence in economic, social and political terms.

However, there is ample evidence to suggest that the concept of the middle class is associated with this conceptualisation in South African intellectual circles. This is indeed the case when one looks at how the rise of the English and Afrikaner middle class has been conceptualised. However, this conceptualisation was changed by an interest in the emergence of the black middle class during the apartheid era. Influenced by neo-Marxism, a new conceptualisation of the middle class was accompanied by the ideological connotations which associate class with particular conscious interests in society. Hence, this conception of class classified people in the middle strata of the economic system as the petty bourgeoisie. While
this study does not throw away the neo-Marxist conception of class structure altogether, it shows that the Weberian conception of the social stratification as based on class, social status and power provides us with better conceptual tools to understand the position of the middle class in society. Hence, it is argued, following Olin Wright (1997), that while they occupy a contradictory class location, it is better to see managers as the corporate middle class.

Historically, the position of the African corporate middle class had been dented not only by the fact that their social and political status was close to non-existent, but also by the fact that there was a high level of unemployment in their communities during the apartheid era. It is envisaged that the implementation of BBBEE-related policies is meant to facilitate the growth of the black middle class, and that this in turn will facilitate the deracialisation of South African society. However, other studies of workplace transition assert that this is not the case in many workplaces. These studies, however, seem to be less considerate of the historical, economic and democratic context and actual experiences of the groups of the black middle class growing as a result of these policies.

Following from the above observations, this study purported to understand how the African corporate middle class perceive their position and roles in a democratic South Africa. Although post-apartheid workplace studies show that black advancement is accompanied by little changes in the workplace, it was shown that there is a lack of scholarship that systematically studies this group of the middle class as a unit of analysis. Hence, a qualitative research method, including in-depth interviews and life histories, was used to explore the position and role of the African corporate middle class in South African society.

The description of the interviewees shows that most of the sample comprises the children of African middle-class parents during the apartheid regime. This directs us to questions about characteristics of people who benefit from BBBEE-related policies. It is furthermore shown that the majority of interviewees denied classifying themselves as middle class. This denial derives from the fact that they
see their lives as being different from other races. Indeed, most of them link their denial of middle-class status to the fact that they are black. Interestingly, however, almost all of the interviewees would like to see themselves involved in business in the next few years.

These seemingly contradictory views about their position are related to two phenomena worth noting about the current South African context. Firstly, there is a deliberate encouragement of the emergence of the middle class and entrepreneurship in South Africa through measures meant to redress the imbalances of the past. Hence, there is no doubt that most black managers are the beneficiaries of BBBEE-related policies.

Secondly, while it seems that only few individuals directly benefit from the BEE-related policies, since there is an indication that some black people earn higher salaries than some white people, Africans constitute the majority of the unemployed in the country. Indeed, these unemployed masses are the brothers, sisters and members of the extended families of the corporate African middle class.

This provides a different kind of a contradictory class location, which goes beyond the capitalist relations of production. It is argued here that while they occupy a contradictory class location, race adds another dimension to their position. This is because of the fact that while there is no doubt about their contradictory class location in the relationships of production, their position is exacerbated by their racial character. It is furthermore argued that this is indicative of the fact that the African corporate middle class is in the process of negotiating space in a democratic South Africa. In the workplace, they are granted this space by virtue of their position. Simultaneously, they perceive a closure to this space by the existence of an upward floating colour bar and the perception that they do not participate meaningfully in their workplaces. This negotiation of position partly derives from the fact that black people in this position find themselves
following on the heels of a social structure in which their existence in economic, social and political terms would be close to non-existent.

This is a socio-economic conjuncture that is characterised by contestations about the way forward for most South African companies. On the one hand, the liberalised economy poses a threat to the existence of these companies, since there is global pressure to be competitive. On the other hand, there is a need to implement BBBEE policies that requires highly skilled people, who, as a result of the policies of the colonial and apartheid regimes, are scarce. However, amidst this contextual juggernaut, one also finds attitudinal problems associated with elements of resistance from white-owned companies and the fact that the strategy of BBBEE is not clearly understood by many black people.

The African corporate middle class’s contradictory class location and their negotiation of their positions and roles can be seen more conspicuously when one looks at their positions in both the workplace and their communities. Indeed, while it is fair to classify black managers as the middle class by virtue of their occupational positions in their workplaces, their lower social status and power hampers the consolidation of this position. Using the concept of upward floating colour bar, this study shows that while there is an emphasis on the lack of skills and experience, and the fact that they occupy lower level positions on the surface, a closer scrutiny of their positions is related to the continuity of the past.

Although some maintain that they emphasise professionalism in their dealings with their subordinates, there is an indication that they are conscious of a need to treat black people differently. This is further shown by the fact that most of the interviewees are conscious of the frustrations they meet in the workplace. In response to this context, one can identify various coping mechanisms displayed by those who associate their workplace environment with these frustrations.

In terms of power, their positions afford them an opportunity to influence the decisions concerning their project and their subordinates. Although there is an
indication of corroboration of the findings of other workplace studies, this study differs remarkably with how the position of black managers is seen in these studies. This is because the African corporate middle class identifies differences in terms of occupational mobility rather than an influence below them.

This difference notwithstanding, the findings indicate that they have minimal influence in terms of decision making in their organisations. In terms of participation, the interviews show that the voice of the African corporate middle class is completely heard only on so-called “black affairs”. This reflects on the phenomenon that helped to facilitate the emergence of the African middle class in society during the apartheid era. There is evidence that a different kind of a contradictory class location traces its origins in the apartheid social structure, as there seem to be assumptions that black people perform differently from white people.

The fact that this study establishes other elements in addition to those established by scholars of workplace transformation shows that there might be other phenomena we are not aware of that warrant a case-study approach.

Nonetheless, a racial contradictory class location displayed by the African corporate middle class becomes clearer when one looks at the position and roles of the interviewees in their communities. Indeed, it is shown that their position grants them space in the new South Africa, as it is possible for them to move to residential areas they could not have moved to under the apartheid regime. However, this new space comes with challenges not only about how they are perceived in their neighbourhoods, but also to their identity.

Although some of those who resides in “suburbs” seem to be less concerned about the environmental differences, others indicate that they experience alienation and find that their social relations with their white neighbours is reminiscent of the apartheid regime. Some of these individuals argue that they initiate iculture yase kazi in their areas. There are conflicting views about their relationships with their
former communities. While some argue that they intend to completely cut their ties with their former communities, others indicate that they are highly conscious of the plight of the poor in their former communities. Indeed, there is an indication that these people repeatedly question their status, as they know that their relatives at the place of origin are suffering. However, the majority of these people are overwhelmed by the expectations they see in these communities. Although the findings indicate that there is little these individuals can do in African communities, since most are not staying in their communities, there is also an indication that most are disillusioned about “so-called” community activities.

In terms of those who still reside in townships, this study indicates that these individuals play multi-faceted roles in their communities. Nonetheless, it is important to note that there are those who maintain that they do not see any differences in terms of their relations with people in their communities. Almost all the interviewees, however, indicate that the living conditions of Africans, especially high levels of unemployment, directly affect them. This is partly the reason for their contributions to the members of their extended families. Indeed, this shows us that their position is a different contradictory class location.

The question that remains to be answered, however, is what are the implications of these findings for the position and roles of the emergence of the growth of the black middle class in general? Can similar experiences be identified within other strata of the black middle class? Or, what will be future developments concerning racial relations in South African workplaces and communities?