



Theorising middle class consumption from the global South: A study of everyday ethics in South Africa's Western Cape



Cheryl McEwan^{a,*}, Alex Hughes^b, David Bek^b

^a Department of Geography, Science Laboratories, South Road, Durham University, Durham DH1 3LE, UK

^b School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 October 2014

Received in revised form 13 February 2015

Available online 10 March 2015

Keywords:

Thrift

Ethical consumption

Care ethics

New African consumer

South Africa

Middle class

ABSTRACT

Emerging research on the increasing significance of consumption in the global South is concerned with its links to the globalizing middle classes. Against the backdrop of optimism invested in the new global middle classes to fuel consumption-led growth, this paper contributes to new debate about the articulations and significance of ethical consumption in the global South. Missing from much current mainstream policy, media and academic debate is acknowledgement of the diversity of the global middle classes and an understanding of how ethical interpretations and behaviour differ in various consumer markets around the world. In response, this paper draws on qualitative research in South Africa's Western Cape to explore the cultural significance of everyday ethical realities in shaping consumption in the global South. In addition to addressing the relative absence of research into ethical consumption in global South contexts, the paper makes two key contributions based on our findings. First, it challenges the tendency, particularly in economic discourses, to generalise about the 'new' global middle class consumers by highlighting the significance of locality and context in shaping consumption practices in the Western Cape; specifically it finds that, for diverse middle class consumers, thrift is an important ethical choice and practice determining consumption patterns. Second, it highlights the significance of everyday ethical practices in shaping consumption in the Western Cape, focusing specifically on how thrift is imbricated in concerns with not just economic constraint, but also care, habit and aspiration. The paper concludes with reflections on the wider implications of these findings and suggests that they illustrate a need to theorise ethical consumption from contexts in the global South, on their own terms.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

This paper explores the significance of everyday ethics in shaping consumption in the global South, with a specific focus on middle class consumers in South Africa's Western Cape. Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning interest in the rise of the global middle classes. While economists cannot agree on precisely who constitutes the global middle classes or how they should be measured,¹ they tend to agree that there is currently an

escalation, particularly in developing countries, in the numbers of people who are experiencing an expansion of income and increased spending power. Of particular interest to many commentators is the nature and potential of middle class consumption. Through a study of middle class ethics and consumption practices in South Africa, this paper responds to a need for further empirical investigation to broaden understanding of ethical consumption in the global South, with an explicit focus on everyday ethical practices. It addresses three problems in the ways in which the global middle classes and consumption are understood: first, the tendency, particularly in economic discourses, to generalise about 'new' global middle class consumers; second, the relative absence of research into ethical consumption in global South contexts; third, the tendency in what little research exists on ethical consumption in the global South to focus on conspicuous or socially visible acts, and on ethical consumption as narrowly-defined social and environmental responsibility, rather than everyday ethical practices.

The paper's starting point is that all forms and practices of consumption are in some way influenced by moral considerations,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: cheryl.mcewan@durham.ac.uk (C. McEwan), Alex.Hughes@ncl.ac.uk (A. Hughes), david.bek@ncl.ac.uk (D. Bek).

¹ Opinion is divided on using absolute global or relative definitions for each country, and using measures of income or expenditure. For example, Easterly (2001) defines middle class as those lying between the 20th and 80th percentile on the consumption distribution; Birdsall et al. (2000) define middle class as those between 75% and 125% of median per capita income; Banerjee and Duflo (2008) use household daily per capita expenditure valued at purchasing power parity between \$2 and \$10; Kharas (2010) defines a global middle class as all those living in households with daily per capita incomes of between \$10 and \$100.

including care for the self and proximate others, as well as financial responsibility (Mansvelt, 2005; Sayer, 2003). It builds on some of the more nuanced and contextualized understandings of middle class consumers to consider how consumption is shaped by ethical practice and how South Africa's diverse middle class consumers deal with the ethical dilemmas embedded in many of their everyday purchasing decisions. It recognises that negotiating these dilemmas is influenced by the considerable diversity in relative affluence and purchasing power that exists between people routinely categorized as middle class, but demonstrates that in the context of South Africa similarities in ethical practice exist across this diversity. The paper thus seeks to problematise the discursive binary of 'traditional' and 'new' middle classes (Fernandes, 2006; Kharas and Gertz, 2010) and the assumptions made about how they do or do not conform to the ethical expectations of both mainstream and critical analysts (Lange and Meier, 2009).

The paper draws on research conducted between July 2013 and June 2014 into ethical retailing and consumption in South Africa's Western Cape. The methodology involved 10 focus groups, supported by 21 interviews with local institutional actors,² to examine middle class attitudes and consumption practices in the region. The focus groups were conducted in numerous locations to explore the ways in which consumers understand, rationalise and respond to ethical consumption in the context of their everyday lives (Barnett et al., 2011). Participants were asked about their everyday consumption practices and what informs their choices, rather than about ethics directly, which elicited discussion primarily about food and household provisions.

Participants were recruited via two local fieldworkers and three key informant interviewees. The Western Cape is demographically diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, language (mainly Afrikaans, English or isiXhosa), socio-economic status and levels of urbanisation. Seven of the focus groups capture insights from across the diversity of South Africa's middle-classes and provide most of the data for this paper. This includes three groups in Cape Town (one in the city centre and two in the suburb of Newlands) all at places of work and with participants who live in various locations around the city; it also includes one group each in Hermanus (south-east of Cape Town), Bredasdorp (in the Agulhas Plain), Croydon (near Somerset West) and Cloeteville (near Stellensbosch), primarily with participants resident in these areas (see Fig. 1). The groups in Hermanus and Bredasdorp comprised people who might be termed 'traditional' (predominantly white) middle class; the groups in Cape Town were mixed 'traditional' and 'new' (with the latter including those who identify as both black and Coloured). We also include findings from one of three focus groups with men and women (in this case, labourers and flower pickers in Elim in the Agulhas Plain) who would be considered middle class on some measures (e.g. AfDB, 2011), but not in the context of South Africa (the discursive construction of the global middle classes and measures used to define middle class in South Africa are discussed further below).³ The focus groups were conducted in participants' first language or, where groups were mixed, in either English or Afrikaans; all were recorded and transcribed and, where required, translated into English.

The paper begins by illustrating the problematic ways in which the 'new' global middle classes are often discursively constructed by the business world and popular media, specifically in relation

to consumption. It then challenges the tendency towards generalisation in these discourses by exploring the nature and complexity of those groups in South Africa now defined as middle class. Drawing on our research findings, the paper explores everyday ethical choices and decision-making that influence consumption patterns in the Western Cape. Our findings suggest that, despite diversity amongst our middle class participants, there are similarities in ethical decision-making informing consumption patterns and attempts to draw crude distinctions between 'traditional' and 'new' middle classes are not particularly helpful in understanding this. Specifically, it appears that *thrift* – “the careful and wise use of money and other resources” (Podkalicka and Potts, 2014: 227)⁴ – is an ethical disposition and practice that our participants tend to share. Thrift appears to be a primary factor in consumption decisions, rooted not simply in anxieties about economic precarity and debt, but a choice exercised in relation to care ethics, responsibility for the household economy and aspiration. Therefore, understanding ethical consumption in the Western Cape requires an understanding of everyday, locally meaningful ethical practices. The paper concludes with reflections on the wider implications of these findings which, while still exploratory and relatively modest in scale, suggest there is a need to theorise ethical consumption from contexts in the global South, on their own terms.

Global middle classes, the 'new African consumer' and emerging questions of ethics

Initial interest in a 'global middle class' was focused upon the emergence of new consumer classes in the BRIC countries (Brazil/Russia/India/China) and their potential to boost global economic growth through consumption (Kharas and Gertz, 2010; Mawdsley, 2004).⁵ More recently, since the down-turn in the global economy from 2008 and slowing of growth in the BRICs, numerous strategic briefs and equity research notes (see, for example, McKinsey (Leke et al., 2010); Goldman Sachs (2012), Deloitte (2013)) have given rise to a second popular discourse concerning the 'new African consumer'. This relies on defining a 'new' middle class through purchasing power parity (Deloitte, 2013). Thus, the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2011) defines the African middle class as those spending between US\$2 and US\$20 a day. Rather than merely hovering above the poverty line, anyone spending more than US\$2 a day is now elevated discursively into the ranks of the burgeoning global middle classes in which so much economic hope is invested (cf. Ravallion, 2009). Almost overnight, the African continent ceased to be “Hopeless Africa”, to be avoided at all costs by international investors (The Economist, 2000; cf. Versi, 2000). Instead, its newly defined, 313 million-strong middle class puts it on a par with India and China, giving rise to new media reports proclaiming “Africa is the new Asia” (Newsweek, 2010) and the “The Hopeful Continent” (The Economist, 2011; see also Smith and Lamble, 2011). In addition, the benighted African Other – characterised by “brutality, despotism and corruption” (The Economist, 2000) – turns out to be just like ‘us’: “Africans are also aspirational. African consumers want the same as consumers elsewhere – a mobile phone, a bank account, and the latest Beyonce CD bought in a store at a shopping mall” (Deloitte, 2013: 4). As Enaudeau (2013) wryly observes:

In a time when growth rates of industrialized countries stutter and when the Chinese and Indian engines of the global economy are somewhat slowing down, financial analysts and investment

² These included consultancy firms, mainstream retailers of ethically-labelled products, pioneers and marketers of sustainably produced goods, high-end restaurants using ethically sourced ingredients, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) responsible for ethical initiatives, ethical trade multi-stakeholder organizations and industry associations.

³ The meanings of middle class are also a topic of popular debate in South Africa; see, for example, <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-09-25-what-its-like-to-be-young-black-and-in-the-middle>.

⁴ The etymology of thrift derives from Old Norse meaning the condition of 'thriving' (Podkalicka and Potts, 2014: 229).

⁵ A parallel debate concerns the relationship between a growing middle class, good governance and stable political institutions (e.g. Birdsall, 2010).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5073759>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5073759>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)