

BOOK REVIEW

Joël Noret, ed. *Social Im/Mobilities in Africa: Ethnographic Approaches*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2019. 236 pp. Illustrations. \$135.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1789204858.

In the context of debates over the parallel developments of the growing middle classes as well as increasing inequalities and precariousness in sub-Saharan Africa, Joël Noret's edited book *Social Im/Mobilities in Africa: Ethnographic Approaches* convincingly argues for and demonstrates the usefulness of Pierre Bourdieu's social positionalities as a framework for a fuller understanding of the complexities and multidimensionality of social mobility at work on the continent.

In this book, social mobility is understood as "altered life chances." *Social Im/Mobilities in Africa* presents stories of social groups and individuals who use a wide set of social, cultural, and economic capitals when moving in different social spaces, resulting in either their upward or downward social mobility, but rarely in stagnation. Whereas many edited books appear fragmented, this book comes across as consistent and well edited. First of all, Noret frames the eight chapters with an introduction providing background, literature review, and theoretical reflections and a conclusion summing up and drawing insights from the chapters themselves. Second, there is conceptual consistency across the eight empirical chapters. The chapters present an ethnographic perspective "that is immediately and consistently attentive to positioning social groups and actors in both their objective conditions of existence and the subjective divisions of the social space they confront and mobilize, which taken together inform their life chances as well as their multiple social strategies" (4). A couple of the chapters explicitly engage in these theories, adding richness and depth to the project.

The first three chapters revolve around education, the next four around labor, and the last chapter looks at living rooms as specific social spaces used for class performance. The cases spread across class, geographies, and gender, from poor rural boys in Qur'anic schools in Northern Nigeria doubling

This article has been updated since its original publication. See <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.92>.

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association.

as domestic workers to informal entrepreneurs in Kampala and white businessmen in the Congolese Copper Belt. In the context of power and wealth accumulation in the hands of the elites, a study of Africa's "one percent" elites, either Pentecostal mega-church pastors or business-politicians, could add even further insights.

Some chapters provide context and reflect on the shifting structural conditions, but the focus is on understanding the directions and dynamics of social mobility in social practice. Noret reflects on Bourdieu's "reproductionist bias" and claims the book does show transformations, such as of spaces themselves. Nevertheless, I find that it is primarily the chapter on gender, class, and urban mobility in Mozambique, by Inge Tvedten, Arlindo Uate, and Lizete Mangueleze, which shows how agency (of women) influences structures (patriarchal relations). Although social capital in the form of family, neighbors, and friends is emphasized as important for social mobility, there is unfortunately no reference to collective organizations such as trade unions, informal sector or business associations, or churches and mosques as networks or spaces for mobility.

In chapter eight, Ben Page explicitly positions himself in the living rooms of three "new" middle class individuals in Cameroon and provides his personal reflections, thus encouraging the readers' direct engagement. Given the topic of social positionality, further reflections on the authors' own positionality would be interesting. Where five of twelve authors are women, only two are based in Africa. The editor sloppily omits the two Mozambican co-authors, as only the first (Norwegian) author is mentioned in the framing chapter.

The book is targeted at Africanist scholars. Individual chapters provide national historical and statistical context on mobility, and we might assume the reading audience is relatively familiar with the trends on the parallel growth of African middle classes and socioeconomic inequalities. Although Noret notes the missing or poor quality data, as well as limitations to quantitative data, some more statistics could still be useful. Nevertheless, the book provides concrete examples of important trends, and nuances our understanding of using traditional variables such as educational and occupational attainment to indicate socioeconomic mobility. The opportunities for a job do not necessarily follow education, and a decent living and status do not necessarily follow an occupation over time. Many teachers have lower real income today than they did in the 1980s. Such insights and nuances are certainly useful and important to keep in mind when reading the IMF's report from August 2021, "Intergenerational Social Mobility in Africa Since 1920," which uses educational and occupational attainment as measures for social mobility.

This book fills empirical gaps and provides theoretical nuances, not only to simplistic notions of the current African narratives, but also to our conceptual understanding of social mobility. Maxim Bolt points out that "Symbolic orders are more fragile than Euro-American sociology assumes" (174), hinting that sociologist focusing on geographic spaces outside Africa could also gain from the book.

Camilla Houeland 

University of Oslo

Oslo, Norway

Camilla.houeland@sosgeo.uio.no

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.13

If you liked this, you may also enjoy:

Geenen, Kristien. 2021. "Gnawing Away at the City: Narratives of Domestic Precarity in a Congolese Mining Town." *African Studies Review* 64 (2): 412–33. doi:10.1017/asr.2020.65.

Sarpong, Kwame. 2004. "Ghana's Highlife Music: A Digital Repertoire of Recordings and Pop Art at the Gramophone Records Museum." *History in Africa* 31: 455–61. doi:10.1017/S0361541300003612.