



Jess Auerbach. *From Water to Wine: Becoming Middle Class in Angola.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. xxiv + 230 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4875-2433-3.

Reviewed by Claudia Gastrow (University of Johannesburg)

Published on H-Luso-Africa (May, 2021)

Commissioned by Philip J. Havik (Instituto de Higiene e Medicina Tropical (IHMT))

This recent book on the middle class in Angola is bound to cause controversy among those who conduct research on the country, namely because it does the almost inconceivable: it attempts to sidestep politics. Frustrated with what she views as negative representations of Angola and the continent, Auerbach severs the everyday from Angola's difficult and contested political realm, instead explicitly exploring her interlocuters' worlds through the lens of "what is working," as the author puts it (p. 5). She thus tries to focus on moments of success, joy, and achievement rather than obstacles and frustrations. The author takes a risk by excluding politics and the result is mixed. On the one hand, it is refreshing to get insight into actors, stories, and institutions generally ignored by most scholars, who are more interested in the state, politics, corruption, and exclusion than in seeking out new narratives and framings of Angola. The result is an absorbing account of everyday life as she investigates how people prosper and find meaning under difficult conditions. The focus on the middle class is also original for studies of Angola and provides a unique entryway into everyday life in the country. Although there has been a growing literature on the middle class in Africa,[1] the topic has remained relatively unexplored in Angola.[2] However, by ignoring politics,

the account partially fails to account for the rise of the very group it is studying—the middle class, whose presence in Angola has historically been not only tightly tied to the state as a source of employment and patronage, but also strongly shaped by the political and economic vicissitudes of the time. Signs of people's lives being heavily impacted by Angola's broader political and economic context (including the author's) are only briefly explored, sometimes to the detriment of the analysis.

The primary aim of the book is arguably to teach undergraduates about ethnography and its quandaries rather than to present an in-depth analysis of contemporary Angolan society. The book is part of series from the University of Toronto Press that focuses on teaching ethnography and from this perspective it is extremely successful. Aiming at providing a means for students to understand how research is conducted, ranging from organizing fieldnotes and interviews to different kinds of research techniques and ethical considerations, the author divides the book into five primary chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion), each of which is centered around a different human sense. Chapter 1 is about smell and investigates urban smells, per-

fume, and human body odor as ethnographic objects. The next chapter, on touch, seeds itself in a study of scouting in Angola, following how young people carve out community in the context of rampant petro-capitalism. Chapter 3 looks at taste and uses the life stories of restaurant owners and fashion designers to explore the manifold meanings of this term. Chapter 4, shaped around sound, provides an account of university education in the aftermath of the Cold War and the rise of the country's economic fortunes in the 2000s. Chapter 5 uses social media, and the representation of Angola to Angolans and the international community, to think through questions of sight and vision in anthropology, both as analytical terms and in regard to the visibility and positionality of the ethnographer. Each chapter jogs the reader to think about how one conducts research in relation to that particular sense and provides different ways to create ethnographies and represent people and places by making use of images, cartoons, recipes, and poetry, among other things, to indicate alternative ways of writing.

In terms of work about Angola, the strongest chapters are those on the scouting movement and on university education. These provide insight into institutions and organizations generally bypassed by other scholars. The chapter on universities is particularly helpful in thinking through the politicization of university campuses alongside the genuine drive from administrators, academics, and students to build a successful tertiary-level education sector in the country. The chapter on scouting challenges the reader to consider what major organizations have been bypassed in the canonical literature's approach to Angola, which has not only been dominated by studies largely based in Luanda (although this is rapidly changing) but tends to focus on a limited number of institutions and actors as relevant to the country's politics and social make-up. Hopefully there will be more studies undertaken in these kinds of directions that can push the limits of existing research to focus more on a more diverse array of actors and locations.

Despite the novel insights of these chapters, however, it is not clear that the author really provides a strong sense of "middle classness" in the book, nor of "what is working," even as she chooses to describe the more positive aspects of life in Angola. This is partially because there is a gap between an incredibly rich and captivating ethnography and her analysis. The author, for instance, early on states that her interlocutors described someone as middle class if they had "a house, a car, and an education" (p. 15). The book, however, does not really extrapolate further on these three facets of class-making. While she discusses working in a school teaching music and has, as mentioned, a strong chapter on universities in the country, she does not directly explain how these contribute to the project of class-making and practices of boundary maintenance. The reader can surmise that more education means class mobility, and it is highlighted that the school emerged in relation to the demand for good education from an emerging urban middle class, but

the analytic significance of these ethnographic statements is not pushed as far as it could potentially go. Again, this is most likely because the primary audience of the book—undergraduates—is expected to be diving into ethnography rather than lofty theory, but a clear analytic thread about the middle class rather than simply a short summary of the literature on the topic at the beginning of the book might have enabled a stronger argument about what makes someone middle class to emerge.

Perhaps the most controversial element of the book, however, will be the extent to which readers feel that the author's focus on a more positive representation of the country has been at the cost of an adequate historicization and political understanding of Angola. The key texts that have elegantly described the political system that emerged in Angola post independence are tellingly, with the exception of Ricardo Soares de Oliveira's book, not cited at all. Most notably, there are no references to Christine Messiant or Jean-Michel Mabeko-Tali's canonical studies. Arguably, if one ignores Angola's political economy and its history, one is missing a lot of the context that would enable a convincing analysis of information that was gathered during fieldwork. There are also many instances where, in trying to keep politics outside the frame, the author seems to problematically gloss over certain issues and events. Two examples of this from early on in the book are in the chapter on Angola's history, undertaken in the form of a graphic novel in which a scout leader is telling the younger scouts about the country's history. In one section, when discussing the end of the civil war, the narrator states, "Zedú became known as the 'architect of peace' because he made a plan to turn Luanda into Africa's Dubai!" (p. 28). This statement is simply incorrect, as work by scholars such as Gilson Lázaro has shown the origins of the term in the late years of the war as a tool of anti-Savimbi propaganda, and it glibly ignores the term's use in the postwar era as a means of politically positioning Dos Santos as the source

of peace and prosperity. It also disregards the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of urban residents during the period of postconflict reconstruction. Similarly, in discussing the (lack) of political freedoms in Angola, the scout leader states: "It wasn't always possible to speak freely, like in the case of the 15+2 but that is a story for another day" (p. 29). This statement papers over one of the most contentious events of the late Dos Santos era: a show trial in which fifteen young men and two women were accused, based on fabricated evidence, of trying to overthrow the regime merely for daring *to read* about peaceful revolution. One of the accused, Luaty Beirão, came close to death during a thirty-six-day hunger strike, and supporters who came to witness or protest the trial were sometimes arrested, beaten, or manhandled outside the court. To say this story is "for another day" might very well be what a scout leader in Angola would say given the political climate in the country, but surely undergraduate readers need to be better informed? The scout leader's very statement illustrates that all is not well in the country. Angola's political challenges come up all the time as people tell the author of needing to be members of the ruling party, of having to be involved "trafficking influence" (p. 20) to get what they want and provide examples of freedom of speech being curtailed within the scouting movement. Surely this is not reflective of 'things working'.

Ultimately this book does not really show us "what works," or provide a detailed analysis of the country's emerging (and precarious) middle class. What it does do—and does brilliantly—is show, using captivating ethnography, how people forge lives and futures under adverse circumstances. In the last decade, there has been a tendency in much anthropological literature about the African continent to portray it as a space where futures are curtailed, where people are caught in interminable cycles of hustling, and most believe the only real possibilities of living satisfying lives lie in leaving. This book pushes against this. We hear

from ordinary people who have forged fulfilling lives and find contentment in what they do. People who build relationships, fall in love, invest in their children, and continue to build their lives and believe in possibilities. The book thus successfully does what I believe is actually its central goal—to push against a tendency to represent the continent as a lost cause as well as the effacement of ordinary people's lives in the name of abstract academic theoretical innovation. It successfully makes the reader confront the difficulties of representation, ethical and competent fieldwork, and knowledge production and it does this through a well-documented and beautifully written ethnography. Will this book become a canonical work about class formation in Angola? I am not sure. Its depoliticization of ethnography is questionable. However, I would certainly assign it for undergraduate courses about methods, writing about the continent, and, more specifically, Angola. Its strengths lie in its accessibility, innovative approaches, and honesty, but also in its gaps and elisions. If read next to more established canonical work on Angola, these very gaps are what would be bound to generate exactly the kinds of critical thought and questions one would hope should emerge from an undergraduate seminar, while also teaching students how to be better researchers.

Notes

[1]. Deborah James, *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014); Henning Melber, ed., *The Rise of Africa's Middle Class: Myths, Realities and Critical Engagements* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2017); Roger Southall, *The New Black Middle Class in Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2015); and Jason Sumich, *The Middle Class in Mozambique: The State and the Politics of Transformation in Southern Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[2]. Exceptions include Chloé Buire, "The Dream and the Ordinary: An Ethnographic Investigation of Suburbanisation in Luanda," *African Studies* 73, no. 2 (2014): 290–312; Jon Schubert, "Emerging Middle-Class Subjectivities in Post-War Angola," in *The Rise of Africa's Middle Class*, 147–58; and Claudia Gastrow, "Housing Middle-Classness: Formality and the Making of Distinction in Luanda," *Africa* 90, no. 3 (2020): 509–28.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-luso-africa>

Citation: Claudia Gastrow. Review of Auerbach, Jess. *From Water to Wine: Becoming Middle Class in Angola*. H-Luso-Africa, H-Net Reviews. May, 2021.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56413>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.