

Introduction

Theorizing Social Im/mobilities in Africa

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Initially, sociology presents itself as a *social topology*. Thus, the social world can be represented as a space (with several dimensions) constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question.

—Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups'

This volume engages with the complex issue of social mobilities and immobilities in Africa at a time when the public debate about the continent is passionate but dichotomized – either portraying 'Africa Rising' or attending to huge levels of inequality epitomized by the poverty of shantytowns. As this book demonstrates, both of these realities are true simultaneously, depending on which segments of African societies are scrutinized. What is more, they intersect. In fact, broad stroke depictions of the continent are only made possible by the neglect of social positionality, and how it mediates and intertwines with political and economic dynamics. A central argument of this book thus resides in a plea for a more consequential and critical attention to the ways in which social positions matter when accounting for current changes, as some groups and individuals are always better positioned than others to appropriate opportunities, in Weber's famous terms.

Against this backdrop, the notion of social im/mobilities refers to the multifaceted dynamics of social structure in Africa today, and to the complex and sometimes paradoxical social trajectories they frame. These

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dynamics feature both social possibilities and social reproduction, social opportunities and social obstructions, in societies that are themselves subjected to rapid change – that is, in which the forces at play in the making of social positions are also in motion. Therefore, the idea of social im/mobilities emphasizes the limits, uncertainties and complexities of current social mobilities, since social trajectories can be marked by change without significant alterations of ‘life chances’, to refer once again to Weber. Considering a variety of situations, the chapters in this volume investigate the complex intersection of important social qualities – including levels of wealth and education, gender, autochthony or ethnicity – in the production and the distribution of social positions, and the correlative making of social divisions. Advocating a multifaceted view of African societies, they investigate the nature of the social powers that constitute the texture of societies, and that individuals confront or mobilize in the course of their existences.¹

Thinking with Social Positionality

In what follows, social positionality is analysed from a multidimensional perspective, in which multiple factors intersect to produce more or less enduring social proximities among social subjects sharing similar conditions, but also, as a correlate, social divisions and social distances. In other words, the societies we scrutinize are here understood as ‘social spaces’, that is multidimensional and relational spaces of social positions structured by different, interlacing systems of inequality (Bourdieu 1979, 1984, 1994). The work of Pierre Bourdieu indeed offers a fertile framework to consider the intersection of social powers or qualities, potentially working as ‘capitals’, in the production of social positions and chances of social im/mobility. What is more, the idea of social space also allows us to avoid what might be considered a pitfall of unidimensional conceptions of the social ladder, along which social actors can only climb or fall. Contrastingly, a multidimensional analysis of social positions points to the entwinement of different social attributes or qualities in the production of social spaces, in which diagonal or horizontal moves, ‘transverse movements’ (Bourdieu 1979: 145–46), are also possible.

Consider, for instance, situations when people move from a condition of rural poverty to urban settings, but where they remain in the lower segments of urban society. This is a social move that cannot easily be understood through the prism of a unidimensional social ladder, or be referred to unequivocally in terms of ‘gains’ or ‘losses’. Or consider when a slight increase in the formal education level between generations goes

hand in hand with a general elevation in educational standards. This move will not necessarily translate into a notable change in economic position, albeit delivering the social profits of literacy, and therefore consisting in a form of social move in a relational space of social positions itself undergoing structural transformations. In this book, Fawzia Mazanderani analyses the 'undelivered promise of education' in a rural township of north-eastern South Africa, where higher levels of education haphazardly translate into the fantasies of success of the 'born free generation'. Some moves in fact are more significant than others. For instance, short moves in the lower regions of social space, those of the deprived and the excluded, cannot unambiguously be viewed as social mobility, insofar as they do not necessarily represent actual increases in living standards and 'life chances'.

From that perspective, the moves of social subjects between sectors of activity, tracked through massive databases by some development economists with an interest in social mobility (for instance Bossuroy and Cogneau 2013, Lambert et al. 2014), can actually represent ambiguous forms of social mobility – something returned to in the conclusion. On the one hand, the reduction of the share of the population involved in agriculture certainly represents a massive social change, and a significant social move for many rural youth, with cultural implications reaching far beyond the occupational structure, as lifestyles change dramatically. It also reminds us how closely strategies of social mobility and quests for a dignified life have been entwined with physical mobility on the continent, at least since the colonial period. On the other hand, if we consider social mobility as altered life chances, when the move away from agriculture brings poorly educated people into the poor strata of (peri)urban society, this does not unambiguously alter their chances of accumulating wealth or accessing sufficient income. Added to which there are the uncertainties and precariousness of social positionality in African states with generally poorly developed social rights. As Laura Camfield and William Monteith point out in their chapter, Ugandan small entrepreneurs of the informal sector often achieve only 'fleeting social mobility' in the challenging environment of Kampala.

As such, we focus in this volume on the variegated social powers producing social positionality and their intertwinements. This leads us to depict dynamics of social im/mobility in more complex ways by also taking into consideration processes of value conversion – such as when ethnicity is mobilized to access jobs, or when economic capital is converted into political notability, for instance through strategic practices of public generosity. What is more, we explore possible increases or decreases of the value of certain social forces shaping social positionality.

This is the case, for instance, in the current experience of many young Africans, who realize today in ever greater numbers that the distinctive power of education and their school qualifications have partly faded away and been devalued in parallel to the general increase in the level of formal education. In this volume, Gabriella Körling shows how in Niger, as in other African settings, ‘the link between education and social advancement’ has become ‘increasingly tenuous’ in the popular classes of peri-urban Niamey. In fact, such a change in the terms of trade between education and access to stable employment – in other words, the relational value of education – points very clearly to the importance of conceptualizing social im/mobilities in a way that accounts for both the multidimensionality of social positionality and the dynamics of the social forces distributing social positions and life chances.

Yet, since the late twentieth-century ebb of Marxism as a sociological force and the more or less concomitant push of both a ‘cultural turn’ and more ‘phenomenological’ approaches, a significant current across contemporary social sciences has been to put less theoretical effort into thinking about the complexities of social structure and social positionality, and to put more emphasis on thinking about agency and subjectivities. Some readers might find this judgement too hasty or too simple, and it is certainly formulated in very general terms here. Yet it is not a purely personal diagnosis, and several authors have already discussed in similar terms current evolutions in social theory more broadly (see Atkinson 2015, Chauvel 2001, Devine et al. 2005, Savage et al. 2015a, Wright 2005).

In African studies, this turn to agency and subjectivities has diversely led, among other possible examples, to the idea that the poor’s ‘immiseration’ and ‘fragile bare lives’ could be ‘somehow redeemed’ through their inventive agency (Simone 2004: 428), or to the argument that a ‘cultural analysis’ of class focusing on boundary making offers a ‘truer’ picture of class, at least for the African middle class (Spronk 2014: 110). Alternatively, class can also be altogether dismissed as a relevant category of analysis in a city like Kinshasa, on the grounds that the Central African megalopolis’ social stratification can be reduced to an opposition between a small elite and ‘the poor’, class therefore losing, from this perspective, ‘most of its explanatory strength’ (De Boeck 2015: S148).

In this book, without renouncing the incisive idea of situated agency, the following chapters adopt 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. As such, it remains essential to think with social positionality on a continent

where multidimensional inequalities are glaring. Yet, this is in different respects hardly new, and already has a respectable genealogy. A detailed discussion of the different generations of scholarly works and paradigms that have organized the variegated accounts of African social stratification and its dynamics is obviously beyond the scope of this introduction. Still, before turning to what this book has to offer on the subject, a quick and inevitably selective retrospect might remind us of some essential milestones.

Social Im/mobilities in Africa in Restrospect

As Sally Falk Moore has convincingly argued, 'time-conscious' writing about a changing, 'living Africa' has been present in African anthropology almost since the beginnings of field research. It was first deployed in the interstices of the then theoretically dominant structural-functional (and more timeless) accounts of African 'tribal' societies, essentially famous for their concern with the political structure of precolonial states and the theory of segmentary lineage systems, as well as for their peripheral attention to social change (Moore 1994: 37–40). Yet, since 1940, the colonial situation was fully repatriated in Gluckman's seminal article on Zululanders – Blacks and Whites. Starting with a description of the inauguration of a bridge developing the infrastructure in a portion of rural Zululand, the text famously explores the dynamic workings of both the racial divide and the subdivisions of the black and white social worlds (Gluckman 1940).

However, it is the development of social research in urban settings, in the post-World War II context, that constituted the main trigger to the deployment on the continent of new discussions of social positionality and social change. There, perhaps more visibly than in rural settings, 'evidence of ongoing change existed everywhere' (Moore 1994: 52), and the challenge was both theoretical and methodological. Urban situations required anthropologists to think differently about social structure, and ethnographic fieldwork alone quickly appeared as not entirely satisfying when trying to work at the larger urban scale. Answers were sought on both fronts and took the form of methodological diversification and theoretical innovation. Mitchell's 'Kalela Dance' is emblematic of that moment. Grounded in ethnography, but also mobilizing quantitative data on occupational prestige and social distance between 'tribes', the argument is well-known, suggesting that the essential social divisions in the urban Copperbelt resided in reconfigured ethnicities and in occupational prestige, and is emblematic of that moment (Mitchell 1956).

Similarly emblematic, in francophone academia, is Georges Balandier's work on the dynamics of the 'black Brazzavilles' (Balandier 1955), which presents similar interdisciplinary concerns in both theory and methodology to grasp the dynamics of the late colonial urban scene.

The Rhodes Livingstone Institute researchers' well-tempered methodological eclecticism, alternating between in-depth studies of actual cases and more quantitative data, is well-known. However, the move was a more general one. From South Africa to Central Africa and from Uganda to Senegal (for instance Mercier 1956, 1960; Balandier 1955; Goldthorpe 1955), surveys were designed and implemented, leading to the production of various quantitative data, from measures of occupational prestige to household budgets. These complemented more classical ethnographic, and more broadly qualitative research (see Moore 1994: 62–73, Schumaker 2001: 171–89). Theory turned to sociology for inspiration. As for social positionality and its dynamics, social status and class quickly became central topics.

In the wake of the post-World War II intensification of political struggles in late colonial Africa, the new urban worlds gained both political and academic momentum. As Carola Lentz (2015) has recently reminded us, the notions of elite and of social class – both with diverse meanings and contours – became the central theoretical concepts to be mobilized in accounts of social positionality and im/mobility for several decades. The possible emergence of social classes – then essentially understood as status groups deriving from occupation – was discussed from around 1950, in works regularly (although diversely) haunted by a modernization paradigm (for instance Mercier 1954, Little 1953, Mitchell and Epstein 1959). Focused on urban society, these studies in fact regularly entwine concepts of class and of elites, as the latter term is mobilized on the African terrain almost concomitantly with 'class' (for instance Nadel 1956, and more generally UNESCO 1956).

The notion of 'elite' gained currency after P.C. Lloyd's edited volume on Africa's 'new elites' (1966). Lloyd argues against the relevance of class to capture the dynamics of African social stratification for essentially the same reasons that studies from the preceding decades had concluded that class was (still) of limited significance, emphasizing the importance of other social divisions and commitments (ethnic, regional or kinship-based) operating alongside and beyond class, and the correlative weakness of class identities or 'consciousness'. In fact, beyond the elite versus social class conceptual distinction, the works of the 1950s–1960s fundamentally acknowledge the challenging nature of interpreting African social stratification. The issue of class and elite boundaries emerges as central, as is the problem of what is to be made of the salient regional or ethnic identities

and extended kinship networks. In the 1960s, the idea of 'plural societies' comes to be used as a way of theorizing African societies structured by variegated differentiation logics (Mitchell 1966, Balandier 1971). In a sense, the difficulty of accounting for African social stratification processes along a unidimensional social ladder has already become critical.

As the above paragraphs already suggest, research on social positionality also became more interdisciplinary. From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, not only did social anthropologists enrich their methodological apparatuses and theoretical arsenal, but other disciplines became increasingly present in discourses deployed about African social change. Sociologists, historians, political scientists, political economists and geographers made increasingly visible contributions to social theory in the African field. Since the time of independences, a relatively small but persistent strand of research also started to investigate social mobility through the prism of education, exploring the relations between social (and ethnic) origins, educational attainment and occupational outcomes (Foster 1963, 1965; Goldthorpe 1955, 1965; Clignet 1964; Clignet and Foster 1966).

Most significantly for the intellectual atmosphere of the next decades, and for reasons diversely related to the new possibilities of economic accumulation in post-independence Africa, as well as to the post-World War II resurgence of western Marxism (Young 1986), the 1960s saw the development of Marxist intellectual engagements with Africa, which consolidated (and diversified) in the 1970s and 1980s, before declining in the 1990s – with the notable exception of South Africa, where a stronger Marxist tradition persisted. This led to a rich body of literature, which left a durable imprint on approaches to social positionality and im/mobilities. Key debates took place around modes of production, class formation and class structure – as well as around the entwinement of the latter with uneven regional development and ethnicity. As with all paradigms, there were pitfalls and dead ends, and certain strands of work proved quite normative and teleological. There were also, however, significant new accents and directions (Freund 1984). At the times of independence, social positions were now commonly thought of at the scale of national spaces, but dependency theorists (Rodney 1972, Amin 1973) and world-system analysts (Wallerstein 1974) expanded on old invitations of Marxist political economy to think about social (and, especially, economic) positionality beyond the framework of the nation-state. Their views, however, were quickly criticized for their overly deterministic tone, as well as for downplaying the role of social struggles and of the complexities of local production processes and labour relations in the making of African economies and social formations (Cooper 1981).

Critically, Marxist works paid more systematic attention to inequality. For many, the state quickly emerged as the site *par excellence* of capital accumulation and a major channel for upward social mobility. The 'elite' had initially entered the field of African studies with a positive connotation – would the elites not be at the forefront of the modernization process? The notion did remain in use in descriptions of the formation and lifestyles of dominant groups. Yet, the term also progressively acquired a negative connotation, as it came to be associated with neo-patrimonial politics, corruption and clientelism – a judgement that some have suggested should be reconsidered, with more emphasis on the complexities of elites' moralities (Werbner 2004, Fumanti 2016).

In fact, Marxist-inspired scholars have deployed more critical accounts of dominant groups since the 1960s (famously Fanon 1961) and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, often debating the contours of social classes (for instance Cohen 1972, Berry 1985), class struggles, or the exploitative role of a ruling or a state class, state or bureaucratic bourgeoisie, or other similar expressions (for instance Sklar 1979). At the other end of the social spectrum, discussions were taking place over the formation of a working class, and around the potential class nature of the African peasant masses.² In the same period, however, more sceptical voices were heard on the appropriateness of class idioms to theorize African social structures (notably Goody 1971, 1976). In fact, the class nature of African societies, and the more or less (in)appropriateness of class terminologies to analyse African society and multidimensional social divisions, had been a disputed issue from the late colonial period onwards (see above). Obviously, this introduction has no pretention to settle this debate, which is further complicated by the fact that multiple understandings of class and forms of class analysis coexist within the social sciences.

What is worth remembering, however, is that Marxist-inspired approaches in African studies – a variegated constellation rather than a monolithic block – not only put the political economy on the agenda and deployed the analysis of economic positions and strategies far beyond the mere distinction of income strata; they also promoted a relational gaze on social positionality, as social classes in the Marxist tradition are not mere juxtaposed entities, but form a dynamic set of positions related one to the other, and in tension with one another.³ To this day, these perspectives have not only inspired relational accounts of poverty⁴ – as 'the poor' have now largely replaced the working classes in the making and the urban and rural (sub)proletariats – but were also part of classic early perspectives on the 'informal sector' (Hart 1973), and remain key to some recent critical understandings of the 'informal economy' (for instance Rizzo 2017).

The variegated Marxist-derived approaches, however, did not wipe out other lines of research, nor were they exclusive of additional influences or concerns. Beyond and besides the political economy, other discourses on social positionality and im/mobilities have represented significant contributions to African studies over several decades. Explorations of the generational condition of African youths in the wake of the Structural Adjustment Programmes represent a telling phenomenon here. Being barred from full access to social adulthood, a significant part of current African youths have been said to be stuck in a stage of 'waithood' (Honwana 2012), translating into experiences of boredom and shame (for instance Mains 2007, Masquelier 2013), and of 'killing time' (Ralph 2008) – though also feeding the generational protests currently multiplying across the continent. Indeed, the combination of the debt crisis and increasing education levels have added a layer of complexity to the exploration of the educational avenues to social mobility that a few scholars had started to analyse a few decades earlier. Shrinking life chances 'across class' (Hansen 2005), in what has even been called a 'lost generation' by some (Cruise O'Brien 1996), have attracted a lot of comments on the uncertain entanglements of education and social im/mobilities on the continent.

Yet, still other currents of research have developed important discourses on social positionality and im/mobilities grounded in what Roger Brubaker refers to as 'categories of difference',⁵ that is socially salient 'ascribed statuses' and ascriptive identities such as gender or ethnicity, not to mention race – in the southern African situation especially – or slave descent – particularly in Sahelian Africa. These categorical differences have been researched in different theoretical guises, in and of themselves or in conjunction with other social dynamics. In fact, the emergence of gender as an analytical lens has represented a major advance in African studies and in the analysis of social positionality in Africa, most fruitfully mobilized when its intersections with other social divisions are considered. The various ways that a gender bar works have now been evidenced through different methodological apparatuses and disciplinary perspectives, and in various domains of social life, from the legal barriers still preventing women from inheriting land and material property, to the dynamics of unequal education and access to white-collar, 'formal' occupations, and more diffuse forms of discrimination.

Lastly, as a major 'ground for difference' (Brubaker 2015) in contemporary Africa, the role that ethnicity has played in framing African post-colonial national spaces cannot be ignored when one considers social positionality. There are significant national differences, however, in the way in which ethnicity is politicized, and relates to 'regional disparities

in economic well-being and social mobility opportunities' (Young 1986: 471). Here again, entire libraries have been published on the historicity of ethnic divisions and belongings, their contextual dimension, their relative salience in a variety of settings, their entwinement with regional identities, as well as their articulation to economic and political processes. Most prominently, the important body of literature revolving around the 'neo-patrimonial state'⁶ has elaborated the complex intersections of the economic and political dimensions of social positionality with ethnicity through the idea of patronage networks organized along ethno-regional lines. Once more, the intersection of different social divisions in the production of African societies – and the correlative importance to think beside and beyond the model of a unidimensional social ladder (only) – emerges as crucial.

Bayart's 'State in Africa' (1989) can probably be considered as a milestone in this respect. Indeed, despite its primary focus on the nature of African states, the book also deploys a keen interest in issues of social positionality. As others have before him, Bayart posits access and distance to the state as a major stratifying force throughout the continent – the state being a major site from which political actors can deploy 'strategies of extraversion', as he further elaborates later (Bayart 2000). From this perspective, the fundamental process which accounts for the formation of African ruling classes is that of the 'reciprocal assimilation of segments of the elite' under the auspices and through the channels of the post-colonial state – the political field being the site *par excellence* where the postcolonial 'system of inequality' is forged (Bayart 1989). Essentially, 'reciprocal assimilation', a formula he borrows from Gramsci, refers to the encounter and the entwinement of heterogeneous types of elites, supported by various forms of capital and legitimacy (material resources, school titles, traditional nobility, political credentials, etc.) in the state arena, and to the multiple processes of conversion of value and straddling taking place in these circumstances. The focus is undisputedly on the (re)production of the postcolonial ruling class. The rest of the social field is essentially considered as made of factions aligned to the elites and their redistributive power, and dominated by regional identities and 'terroirs'. In sum, in Bayart's 1980s 'State in Africa', the combination of reciprocal assimilation and factional struggles provides the key to the dynamics of the social space.

Significant changes have taken place throughout the continent since the 1980s. The state itself has undergone a series of transformations under the effects of (neo)liberalization and, in many countries, decentralization processes in the post-cold war era, not to mention the diverging trajectories that African states have experienced in uneven democratization

experiences or (semi-)authoritarian persistence. Beyond the state, the last decades have also witnessed, among other things, further growth of cities and secondary towns, an expansion of education in terms of both access and general level, and unevenly distributed new foreign investments. This account is brief and many other important works of the last three decades could be cited that attempt to think of the intersecting systems of difference and social powers that produce social positionality on this changing African scene. But a few key issues emerge in the brief retrospect above, such as the plural differentiation principles of African societies – alongside and beyond class –, the importance to think both with the political economy and without losing sight of other social divisions and categorical differences, and the productivity of a relational perspective on social positionality.

Perhaps especially relevant for this volume, the growing interest in African middle class(es) has witnessed renewed attempts at thinking about the production and distribution of social positions in African societies. Besides economic approaches that work mainly with income or expense strata,⁷ the social sciences have insisted on the need to grasp the cultural side of class, especially in the form of middle class ‘boundary work’.

Yet, beyond the recognition of the difficulties in agreeing on the contours of the African middle classes and of the importance of the cultural side of class, two directions appear of particular interest for a reflexion on social im/mobilities. First, there is the call by (still) Marxist-inspired scholars to extend the current interest in middle classes towards a renewed class analysis, and an appreciation of the relational positionalities of African middle classes (Melber 2017, Southall 2018): how are the middle classes located in a space of social positions? How (dis)continuous is such a space? What forces of differentiation are there at work, and how do they intersect?

Second, the focus on the cultural side of (middle) classes, on class as identity or subjectivity, should not result in analyses dropping more or less altogether the objectivist side of class – that of the access to, and the possession of, economic powers, a concern shared (though in different guises) by both Marxist and Weberian traditions (Wright 2005: 25–27). Considering that class is first and foremost about ‘modes of sophistication’ and ‘signifying practice’ (Spronk 2014), or that ‘classes – middle or otherwise – emerge from the complexity of individual choices and actions’ (Scharer et al. 2018: 24), only tells one side of the story.

As Claire Mercer has recently put it, middle classing in suburban Dar es Salaam revolves largely around ‘building the right kind of house in the right part of the suburb’ (Mercer 2018: 10), but this in turn is closely

associated to the economic capacity to access land, and to secure it. So, 'boundary work' is here 'first and foremost a set of material practices concerned with accessing and securing one's claim to a plot of land' (2018: 10). And accessing land in a context of growing land scarcity and pricing has to do with more than culture, signifying practice and individual choices, but crucially with 'mechanisms of accumulation' (Savage et al. 2015b: 1017). Social im/mobilities need to be considered besides and beyond identities and subjectivities.

Social Im/mobilities and Social Space

Against this backdrop, a thread running through the chapters of the book suggests that Bourdieu's notion of social space (notably Bourdieu 1979, 1984, 1994) offers a promising framework to think about these issues together. Most chapters therefore build on the idea of social space in creative and critical ways. In that, the contributions to this volume stress the importance of thinking about the dynamics of social positions – that is, about social im/mobilities – in a multidimensional and relational way, as well as with sustained attention to both their objective side as a set of conditions of existence, and their subjective side as a sense of one's place in the (social) world. In this respect, precariousness and uncertainty, for instance, are not only defined by objective, 'material' conditions, but also need to be considered as 'a structure of feeling' (Cooper and Pratten 2015).

So, what are Bourdieu's key views on social spaces? And what do we make of them? First, Bourdieu approaches social space – that is, the space of social positions – as a continuous space of positions. This space is structured by the unequal distribution – both in terms of volume and of structure – of different forms of capitals and other social powers, attributes or properties.⁸ In order to work as 'capitals' (Bourdieu 1986) and become social powers, these social qualities or properties need to ensure those endowed with them a form of social advantage that can provide the basis for a mechanism of accumulation, and be convertible into other advantages. To mention just a few obvious examples, this is the case when money facilitates access to education, or education to income opportunities, or when social relationships, working as 'social capital', facilitate access to economic resources. This endowment with different volumes and structures of capitals is crucial to understanding how different social subjects are (un)able to negotiate their everyday life and, more decisively, the 'vital conjunctures' they face, that is these 'critical durations when more than usual is in play, when certain potential futures are galvanized and others made improbable' (Johnson-Hanks 2006: 3).

In this way, the idea of social space accounts for social reality beyond emic categorizations. Indeed, despite the fact that Bourdieu's theory of class is regularly referred to as a 'cultural turn' in class analysis, the idea of social space is actually designed to think of the objective and subjective structures of the social world together. Hence, Bourdieu always assigned a major role to economic capital in the distribution of social positions and in the making of (objective) conditions of existence. Economic capital is essential in drawing the contours of 'classes on paper' (Bourdieu 1984). This is what makes Bourdieu's style of class analysis converge with historical styles of class analysis inspired by Marx and Weber which, although organized around different issues, nonetheless have a common interest in the power of economic resources to draw major social divisions.

What is more, another key idea conveyed by the notion of social space arises from its ambition to account for social positionality as a multidimensional and relational phenomenon. Social space is relational insofar as, in good structuralist fashion, it invites us to look at social positions as the product of a system of differences. In other words, social positions exist through the differences they represent with other positions and the social distances they establish, both in the objective order of the conditions of existence and in the subjective order of the habitus – the schemes of thought, feeling and action that social agents practically mobilize in the course of everyday life. It is multidimensional in that it invites us to explore social dynamics beyond (and beside) the idea of a unidimensional social ladder.

There are obviously upper and lower regions or segments in social space – where people are endowed with a bigger or smaller global volume of capitals – but there is also the potential, to a certain extent, for different orders of worth and plural social hierarchies. Bourdieu's account of the French social space in the 1960s–1970s is famous for its analysis of the space of social positions mainly grounded in the unequal distributions (and the interplay) of economic and cultural capitals, which he deemed to be the most decisive social properties in his case study. Yet, late twentieth-century French society represents only one possible case. As Ben Page puts it in his chapter, while exploring the forces at play in the making of social positionality in Buea, the idea of social space has an 'assertively idiographic' quality that makes it a productive tool to 'locate social differences' and explore relations of power in a variety of settings. Therefore, building on Bourdieu to think of African situations inevitably results in recognizing other social forces that prove to be key in other instances. The vast majority of students of Africa would recognize that money and economic capital more generally distribute social positions in powerful ways across the continent, and all the more since economic

and social rights remain poorly developed in most African countries. Examples abound in the literature, of how money frames both polarizing objective conditions of existence on the one hand, and subjectivation processes and internalized senses of one's place on the other, contributing in decisive ways to the making of 'unequal lives' (Fassin 2018). In many African settings, wealth is not only a major social power in the production of objective inequalities, but also recognized as legitimate, and therefore working as symbolic capital, endowing its owners with social recognition.

African situations, however, prove immediately more complex when we confront them with Bourdieu's understanding of 'cultural capital'. For instance, the historical sedimentation of schools and formal education as legitimate institutions capable of producing cultural domination is not the same as in the West. As Max Bolt suggests in this volume, on the South African-Zimbabwean border, the overall transient character of the border society makes 'symbolic orders' precarious and uncertain, with little room for the recognition of the cultural capital of educated, former white-collar migrants in search of better futures away from the Zimbabwean economic crisis. In that sense, there is no 'unification of the market in cultural capital', and the legitimate forms of cultural capital can change depending on the situation (Hilgers and Mangez 2015). Education has long been recognized as a powerful stratifying force on the continent. In this, school capital is certainly relevant for thinking about life chances in many social situations. Yet other forms of cultural capital can be recognized as well. Take the case of forms of religious capital deriving from a religious education or status – being a priest, a pastor or a Muslim cleric endows one with social recognition in many situations – or from the mastery of 'tradition' or 'custom'. These can also represent powerful social forces and credentials.

In fact, there is no reason to assume that African social spaces are invariably structured everywhere and in any decisive way by the same sort of blend of economic and cultural capitals as late twentieth-century France. A secondary point of attention in Bourdieu's discussions of French society, social capital for instance might well deserve more sustained attention in explorations of the production of social positionality in Africa. In fact, social capital has been discussed extensively in economic sociology and development studies in recent decades. Notable discussions have taken place around the merits and limits of the distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' ties, and the value of social networks, as these can be alternatively envisioned as social capital or liabilities (Meagher 2006). In fact, serious empirical investigation of African social networks reveals that their nature and contributions to African institutional worlds

and production of social positions can differ significantly depending on situations (Meagher 2006, 2010). Yet, despite its ambiguities, social capital – resources deriving from membership in groups themselves more or less endowed with different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986) – is regularly regarded as a major structuring force in African social spaces. As Benjamin Rubbers points out in this volume, social capital proves ‘crucial to account for the dynamics of inequality’ in the Congolese Copperbelt in the last decades. More broadly still, the ways in which people are able to navigate their relations with the state, the distribution of business and job opportunities, the importance of various types of associations and religious communities, are but a few of the scenes in which the (in)capacity to mobilize social relationships and networks proves to be key to the conduct of social life.

Yet, another range of social forces also need some consideration here, when thinking of life chances and social im/mobilities in African social spaces. Categorical differences and inequalities deriving from ascribed identities – such as ethnicity or gender – typically receive less attention in Bourdieu’s characterizations of social space. Passing mentions of ethnicity and citizenship can be found in *Distinction* as secondary phenomena, yet they can work as ‘capitals’ too (see for instance Hage 1998, Hilgers 2011). *Masculine Domination* contains no detailed discussion of gender in relation to social positionality, beyond a few pages on the uneven social effects of feminist struggles across social classes and general statements suggesting that male dominance is at work ‘in the whole set of social spaces and sub-spaces’ (Bourdieu 2002: 102). In this volume, Inge Tvedten explores how Maputo’s women endowed with the status of household heads and daily domestic independence, are in a better position than those with a marital commitment to engage in informal economic activities: they do not have to live with quotidian masculine pressures on their time, movements in urban space and economic resources. In fact, exploring African spaces of social positions without seriously considering ethnicity, gender or other categorical ‘grounds for difference’ is inconceivable.

Indeed, besides gender, other ‘grounds for difference’, as Brubaker puts it, such as forms of ‘traditional’ historical nobility – or conversely of slave descent – for instance, or ethnic claims relying on an ideology of autochthony, or refugee status and restricted citizenship, can all be powerful social forces and sources of categorical inequalities shaping uneven chances of social im/mobility. This is not to imply that all possible forms of categorical differences work in the same ways and can be merged altogether. There are indeed ‘different kinds of difference’ within categories of difference (Brubaker 2015: 18). Categorical inequalities deriving from citizenship work, for instance, largely through legally governed

processes, while gender exclusion can work through both legal barriers (preventing inheritance for women, for instance) and in more diffuse – though not necessarily less pervasive – ways. Categories of difference are thus ‘inhabited’, internalized and embodied in variegated ways, and their workings diversely regulated (ibid.: 19–47). Yet, a range of African situations shows very clearly that social divisions grounded in categories of difference can have deep structuring effects on the distribution of social positions and chances of social mobility.

However, the fertility of the idea of social space probably proves most attractive to think about how forms of capitals and social forces of the sort evoked in the above paragraphs entwine in intimate and complex ways in the production of social positionality and chances of social im/mobility. As Hannah Hoechner shows in this volume, the life chances of students of ‘traditional’ Quranic schools in northern Nigeria suffer from a double exclusion: these children and youngsters are not only poor, but also looked down upon by many urban dwellers because of the cultural illegitimacy of their style of religious education, to the point that they now ‘epitomize the alleged “backwardness” of the rural poor’. In fact, against a ‘reproductionist bias’ in Bourdieu’s reception (Gorski 2013), it is worth remembering that Bourdieu’s framework was largely conceived in order to theorize the dynamics of social positions in situations of social change, that is in circumstances of ‘motion within motion’, to borrow Henrik Vigh’s elegant formula (2009).⁹ Considering the entwining of social forces, the notion of social space underlines how different social powers combine in the production and distribution of social positions. It also draws attention to the concomitant possibility of processes of value conversion, such as when ethnic traditions are turned into identity economics and the ‘ethno-preneurialism’ of ‘Ethnicity Inc.’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), when money and social capital appear to be mutually constitutive and intimately entwined, as observed in the petty criminal networks of Abidjan’s street economy (Newell 2012), or when forms of nobility or slave descent continue to constrain labour relations and/or patterns of actual physical mobility (Rossi 2009, Pelckmans 2012) – to take just three short examples among many other possibilities.

Still, working with the idea of a multidimensional space of social positions invites us to scrutinize social im/mobilities beyond the idea of a unidimensional social ladder. Indeed, besides conventional understandings of social climbing and descending, social moves can be characterized by changes in the structure of capitals rather than in their overall volume. Channelling the attention to the interplay between forms of capitals – and their fluctuating relations – a multidimensional analysis of social positions also invites us to think about the ‘reconversion strategies’ through

which social subjects and domestic groups strive to maintain their position amidst changing circumstances (Bourdieu 1979: 145–85). In fact, the challenge of accounting for the complex regimes of social im/mobilities on the continent requires us to consider both the trajectories of social subjects and the dynamics of the forces at play in the making of social positions.

Following this theoretical skeleton, it is time we put some ethnographic flesh on these conceptual bones. Grounding the discussion in empirical materials and putting theory to work is precisely what the coming chapters offer. The first site we use to explore current social im/mobilities is education. Largely considered as a key for African futures, education is on everyone's lips when considering the challenges facing the continent today. Still, its impacts on social space are multifarious and more convoluted than what is sometimes presented as a direct relationship with the Holy Grail of development.

In the opening chapter, Hannah Hoechner explores the contours of the changing social position of 'traditional' Qur'anic students in northern Nigeria. Historically a respectable, religious-centred style of education for boys from an early age and through their youth, traditional Qur'anic schools now largely recruit in the most deprived strata of society, among impoverished urban households or, most notably, from among peasant families. What is more, they now represent a socially devalued schooling style on the education market, in which formal lay education – private or public – has become dominant. Having to hustle for their own food, as well as for their lodging in many cases, during their stays in Qur'anic schools the boys combine their religious learning with various forms of unskilled labour. Those with a rural background also regularly return to their families to help with farm labour during the rainy season. Once considered as religious students disciplining themselves in the pursuit of a pious life, traditional Qur'anic students now face social judgements that see them as backward, illiterate, rural poor boys. This of course bears heavily on their work arrangements with better off families or patrons in search of cheap labour, in which they are at pains to be treated as the pious religious subjects they claim they are.

Shifting to the meanders of secular education, Fawzia Mazanderani takes us to a rural township in the north east of South Africa. Her research focuses on students in their last year of secondary school and aspiring to upwardly mobile futures. She explores how the emphasis put on individual responsibility and hard work in their curriculum affects their experiences and projects. In fact, few of these young people from rural backgrounds will ever go to university. Yet, despite persisting

attachments to the rural and an ambivalent imagination of urbanity, their aspirations are largely framed by ideologies of social mobility and desires to access the urban, deemed as the place *par excellence* of both a desirable modernity and moral corruption. Black rural youth have today more possibilities than their parents had under the apartheid regime. Yet, education hardly delivers the type of social mobility that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are taught to dream of, leading to ‘paradoxical forms of social mobility’ marked by both an objective increase in the level of education and simultaneous feelings of failure.

The next chapter shifts the attention from southern Africa back to West Africa, while continuing to explore similar issues. Grounded in an ethnography of youth engagements with education, work and the state on the outskirts of Niamey (Niger), Gabriella Körling accounts for the ambivalent commitment to school among young people in peri-urban areas, between strong aspirations to an educated status and a better future, consciousness of the uncertain outcomes of educational investment, and absence of tangible, auspicious alternatives. After a few decades of systematic hiring of university graduates in the state apparatus, with its advantageous salaries and economic security, the 1990s have witnessed a progressive decline of the social benefits of education, with cuts in state recruitments in the wake of the Structural Adjustment Programme, and the simultaneous general increase of the level of education, at least in urban areas. In this new Nigerien order, Körling argues that the prestige of education in itself does not provide much ground for social distinction when it remains disconnected from minimal economic resources – opinions about unemployed school graduates can be severe, and lack of economic autonomy constitutes a serious obstacle on the sinuous path to social adulthood. Like Mazanderani’s, Körling’s chapter evokes the delicate moment of transition to adulthood. In the Nigerien families she interviewed, the prospect of becoming a civil servant is limited, and a significant proportion of young people with little educational background at some point try their luck in the informal economy. They then work either as precarious wage labourers – as African informal economies are far from being made of independent businesses only (for instance Rizzo et al. 2015) – or, for those in a position to access some capital, as self-employed workers or small-scale business(wo)men.

Laura Camfield and William Monteith take us from West to East Africa, and to the heart of the practicalities and indeterminacies of small-scale entrepreneurship in Uganda. The last two decades have seen a lot of emphasis put on entrepreneurship in Africa, which has become, together with education, one of the most celebrated ways of salvation in African development. Among Kampalan small-scale entrepreneurs

and self-employed workers with whom Camfield and Monteith have conducted research since the beginning of the 2010s, uncertain economic prospects and difficulties accessing funds to start a business only allow those endowed with enough economic and social capitals to reach forms of 'precarious prosperity' and relative protection from the spectre of poverty. Access to property and commitment to building one's own house – before other possible investments – is key here. Yet, beyond a general consciousness of provisionality, and open-ended economic strategies, unequal access to capital is what appears to stratify owners of small businesses most clearly. Such access in turn presupposes the capacity to rely on family and other social networks, in a context of high interest rates in the official banking circuit.

Camfield and Monteith's chapter touches briefly on gender issues in entrepreneurs' access to capital. Returning to southern Africa, the next chapter now focuses on the gendered dynamics of social space in Maputo (Mozambique). Combining quantitative and qualitative data on gender and class inequalities, Inge Tvedten emphasizes how the agency of urban dwellers is framed by 'structural conjunctures'. Historically, race and gender have been the main social forces organizing the divisions of the colonial city. In the last decades however, class and gender have probably drawn the main dividing lines in the urban space of the contemporary metropolis. Yet, in the popular classes of poor suburban districts, economically independent women – who are not members of male-headed households – tend to get by better, economically speaking, than male-headed households. In fact, single or divorced women, though still regularly stigmatized, crucially access more diverse jobs in the urban informal economy than both men and their married counterparts. This partial subversion of gendered economic roles – men are expected to be breadwinners – coupled with the political emergence of a growing number of women as elected heads of neighbourhoods as well as in other community-level political structures, has led to a significant evolution of the gendered distribution of social positions in urban social space in the last decade. Women are now increasingly recognized as fully capable, and independent economic agents in the urban popular classes.

The next chapter turns to essentially masculine professional worlds. Mobilizing fifteen years of research in Katanga – the mining region of south-eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo – Benjamin Rubbers discusses the local dynamics of inequality and social im/mobilities in the Congolese Copperbelt. His analysis of the evolution of Katangese social space shows how the relative values of social, cultural and economic capital have changed over the last decades, as the promises of upward mobility through education have somewhat faded. His ethnography

focuses on the postcolonial trajectory of two socio-professional groups, namely white businessmen and former employees of the state-owned, national mining company (Gécamines). In the late 1990s, the collapse of the national mining company led to a major redistribution of economic opportunities. In this process, white entrepreneurs have mobilized extraverted social networks to forge new economic avenues, while the largely company-bound social capital of Gécamines' workers and managers has left them without many social resources once the company stopped paying them. Yet, following years of unpaid salaries, unequal compensations in cash for former managers on the one hand, and former workers on the other, have led to diverging opportunities for reconversion strategies after the demise of the company.

After the contrapuntal trajectories of white entrepreneurs and public companies' employees in the Copperbelt, Max Bolt's chapter takes us to the South African side of the border with Zimbabwe, where Zimbabwean migrants with different social origins and labour arrangements – some being permanent workers, others much more temporary – engage in agricultural work on large, white-owned farms. Bolt explores both the complexities of social positionality in the black workforce and how they are partly framed by unequal regimes of physical mobility. Migrant seasonal workers' daily mobilities in the border society are in fact more constrained and restrained than the possibilities to move enjoyed by permanent workers, endowed with the legal status and social networks that allow them to live more extraverted lives. Yet, labour hierarchies and unequal mobility regimes do not necessarily translate into unambiguous social hierarchies. For instance, seasonal workers, often with more uncertain, but also more open-ended strategies of social mobility, can also be more educated and retain some sense of 'middle-class' social distance in daily practice, performing a form of abstention from communal life in the barracked world of the farm where permanent workers enjoy the most enviable lifestyle.

We return to West Africa for the last chapter. While retaining an interest in the making of objective conditions of existence, Ben Page departs from the central foci of the volume on education and labour, to explore how different forms of upward social mobility, namely 'state-led, migration-led and business-led', provide useful lenses to explore the boundary-making practices of the now famous 'new African middle classes'. Grounded in empirical work conducted in Buea in south-western Cameroon, where building a house is one of the key ways to assert economic success, his chapter scrutinizes how architecture and home decoration materialize variegated ways to inhabit middle classness. A general 'neophilia' broadly frames these visual materializations of success. Yet, the social

trajectories of different types of successful, upwardly mobile individuals also translate into differing displays of social status through architectural achievements and home aesthetics. Finally, beyond 'the public *play* of class' and the staging of social identity, the discourses of the owners of these properties about their intimately invested creations also reveal, hovering in the background of their strategies of social mobility, their quasi-existential quests for social recognition and legitimate personhood.

The chapters will now speak for themselves. From different angles, they will explore how a multidimensional approach to social positionality and social im/mobilities can help to grasp the present, multifaceted changes in African social spaces. In this way, they contribute to theorizing how people navigate the structural constraints which inform their positions and form their grounds for action. How the resulting social im/mobilities represent a key part of what takes place on the continent today seems relatively obvious to us. How critical these issues are to make sense of the current African moment will ultimately be for the reader to decide.

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Notes

1. For their diverse contributions to this introduction and/or this volume as a whole, I would like to thank Kate Fayers-Kerr, Sasha Newell, Hannah Hoechner, Corentin Chanet, Benjamin Rubbers, Pierre Petit, Anneke Newman, Ben Page, Inge Tvedten, Claire Mercer and Noémie Marcus, as well as two anonymous reviewers from Berghahn Books. They have all been incredibly generous with their time. Yet, the views expressed here are mine alone, and I remain solely responsible for the arguments conveyed in this text, and for any possible deficiencies.
2. As Crawford Young put it in a review of the literature in the mid-1980s, 'the number of contributions relevant to a consideration of class analysis in Africa now runs into the thousands' (1986: 457). The rough sketch outlined in this introduction is thus inevitably highly selective, its sole ambition being to remind readers of some essential landmarks. In the 1970s and 1980s, entire journal issues were full of these debates, for instance in the *Review of African Political Economy* or *The Journal of Peasant Studies*.

3. Despite an overall decline of Marxist-inspired perspectives in the social sciences, there have been recent vigorous calls to revisit what Marxian views have to offer (for instance Neveling and Steur 2018).
4. Studies of poverty in Africa represent another complex corpus that is hardly touched upon here, despite the important questions it raises and the significant theoretical and epistemological challenges that poverty analysis represents (for instance Jones and Tvedten 2019).
5. Categories of difference are differences organized as 'discrete, bounded, and relatively stable categories' (Brubaker 2015: 11).
6. As class analysis, neopatrimonialism represents a field of research and a space of debate in itself, with significant disagreements on the scope and depth of this regime of political regulation, which cannot be reviewed here.
7. The will to synthesis should not lead to oversimplification, and it is worth noting here that the focus on expense (rather than income) strata can be complemented by minimal characterization of the type of occupation, such as the importance of stable employment (see Bannerjee and Duflo 2008), and the correlative opportunity to invest beyond the satisfaction of necessity. Also, it is worth noting that another current of research has attempted to produce a substantive definition of the middle class, identifying its minimal substance with standards of living (access to electricity and 'flush toilets', that is 'decent housing'), education ('completed secondary schooling'), and occupation ('skilled employment outside the agricultural sector') – even though these scholars recognize that metrics can shift 'over time' (Thurlow, Resnick and Ubogu 2015, Resnick 2015).
8. It should be made clear here that 'space' in a notion like that of 'social space' is used as a metaphor, spatial metaphors being one of the most regular metaphors used by social scientists, from social 'mobility' to social 'distance', social 'dynamics' and social 'movements', to evoke just a few of the most common ones. This of course can (and actually needs to) combine with the analysis of how social distance can be correlated (or not) with geographical/physical distance, and of how social inequalities are spatialized in various ways.
9. Surprisingly, Vigh's reading of Bourdieu rests on the idea that the latter has essentially dealt with the 'stable ground' of 'relatively stable class-structured states' that he himself contrasts with the transience and instability of the Guinea-Bissauan society (Vigh 2009: 426–27). This might be reconsidered in a less 'reproductionist' perspective when one remembers for instance the works on the changing matrimonial market in the Bearn (Bourdieu 2002) or the attention devoted to changing generational circumstances in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1979).

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