

# Class in Soweto

## Deglobalization in the Age of Austerity

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*Peter Alexander, Claire Ceruti, Keke Motseke, Mosa Phadi and Kim Wale*  
*University of KwaZulu-Natal Press: Scottsville, 2013. 306 pp*

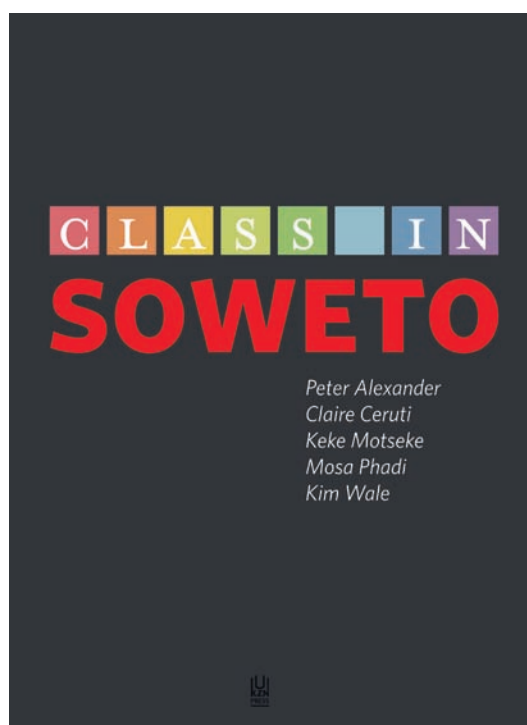
*Class in Soweto* splendidly combines qualitative and quantitative research to provide a detailed sociological account of concepts and identities of “class” in Soweto. The book is extremely interesting, captivating and enticing to read.

The first chapter outlines the purpose of the book, which is to address the shortage of academic research pertaining to class. It identifies the defining features of class in Soweto, conceived through the notion of affordability. It notes that the majority of Sowetans regard themselves as middle class. Chapter Two draws historical attention to the era of apartheid (1948–1994), explaining how Soweto was named and developed, and how black people lived there. It describes the armed struggle, the negotiated settlement, and the build-up to democracy.

The improvements in socio-economic conditions in Soweto after apartheid, when racial barriers in better-paid jobs were removed, are explained in Chapter Three. The chapter argues that Sowetans, although disadvantaged in comparison with whites, are better off than most blacks. The next chapter goes further into this question by capturing the economic class structure of Soweto. The authors broaden the concept of proletariat to understand what people do and the class they belong to.

Chapter Five conceptualises and critiques the employment/unemployment binary, finding that it is not inclusive of all forms of work. It further argues that this binary is not convincing, because, under apartheid, Africans were only allowed to be in urban areas when they were employed.

Sowetans’ class models and identities are the topic of the sixth chapter, which explores what Sowetans mean by class, and how they class themselves. Some people express more than one class identity in terms of affordability, consumption and income. The chapter expounds on the different classes that exist in Soweto. Chapter Seven probes “affordability” further by focusing on perceptions of class mobility. In respondents’ understanding of class, affordability connects economic and cultural capital. It argues that South Africa has changed after apartheid and that individuals should take responsibility.



Acknowledging that “class” is a difficult word, Chapter Eight notes that there is no general term in indigenous languages that can be equated with economic class: the closest words in isiZulu and Sesotho are associated with poverty. The assignment of class is thus subjective. Chapter Nine, noting that religion plays an important part of in most Sowetans’ lives, looks at the variations of how class relates to church.

The overall impressions of the study are given in the final chapter. Sowetans regard themselves as middle class, both because they are better off than most of the blacks in South Africa, and also because of the stigma attached to being poor.

Although the book suffers from a few grammatical errors, and would have been stronger if it included recommendations in the conclusion, I would urge everyone to read this intellectually stimulating piece of sociological research.



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