

‘A vision for the future’: Professional ethos as boundary work in Mozambique’s public sector

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Jon Schubert 

University of Basel, Switzerland

Abstract

Global imaginaries of middle-classness, although resonating in very different ways in specific national contexts, more often than not conform to broadly capitalist-liberal aspirations, through globalised markers of consumption and individual social advancement. However, as this ethnographic material from Mozambique’s mining and hydrocarbons sector suggests, even under contemporary conditions of neoliberalism, alternative imaginings of middle-classness, based on technical competence, cosmopolitanism, work ethos and professionalism as contributing to a larger narrative of national progress persist as echoes of socialist technical assistance among the technocrats managing the sector. This article explores how professionalism is constructed across regime changes, from a socialist, high modernist socio-political project that has all but vanished today as a global emancipatory reference, to the current, neoliberal economic and political dispensation that requires of public administrators to promote a business-friendly climate. Professionalism, I show, cuts across generations despite considerable differences, indexing this class’s shifting claims on the state.

Keywords

Civil servants, ethics, middle-class, Mozambique, neoliberalism, professionalism, socialism

Revolution can lead to development if you put the right person in the right place. One thing is to have a diploma, but everyone can have that. The other is to have a vision for the future.

Corresponding author:

Jon Schubert, Social Sciences, Universität Basel, Division of Urban Studies, Spalenvorstadt 2, Basel-Stadt 4051, Switzerland.

Email: jon.schubert@unibas.ch

Statements expressing the value of professional ethics and visions for development such as this one by *Engenheiro* Miguel, a Soviet-trained engineer now working as an administrator for SPI (the investment holding of Mozambique's ruling Frelimo party), were a recurring theme during my fieldwork in the capital, Maputo, in spring 2016.¹ There, and on a field trip to the mining areas of Tete and Manica provinces with an expert delegation, I observed and talked with a wide range of actors involved in the development of the extractive industries in Mozambique, including state functionaries at the Ministry of Mineral Resources and Energy, MIREME, the Administrative Court (Tribunal Administrativo, TA) and the Revenue Service (Autoridade Tributária, AT), foreign donors and expert consultants, as well as representatives of mining companies and civil society associations. My objective was to find out what notions of efficiency and improvement were in play during the process of getting the Mozambican state 'ready' to manage the expected additional revenues from the extractive industries (see Schubert, 2020). Similarly to Eng. Miguel, Julinho Macuane, a young auditor at the TA, saw himself as 'one of the pioneers' in transforming the Administrative Court into a 'strong, well-respected institution', crediting the training he had received from, among others, international consultants from KPMG for bringing international standards of practice to his team's working procedures. Both Miguel and Julinho, however, from their respective perspective, felt that the state had 'lost its way'.

What struck me in my conversations with my Mozambican interlocutors from the public administration was this constant preoccupation with professionalism – a notion, as we shall see, strongly shaped by colonialism and socialism – and how their changing, and sometimes frankly adverse, relations with the state made that quest for professional ethics difficult. Whether they were part of an older generation, trained in the East Bloc during Mozambique's socialist period, or from a cohort of younger, broadly Western-educated professionals made little difference to their understanding of their professional duty towards a national project of development, and how they understood their role within transnational frameworks of knowledge transfer. What had changed with time, though, was their relationship to the state, the imagined vessel of this national narrative of progress, which had changed dramatically in nature, from the times of war-time socialism, to donor-dependent reconstruction, to extractive, neoliberalising capitalism.

This article tracks the formation of middle-class political subjectivities in Mozambique through the select perspective of public servants engaged in making the state 'ready' for an expected hydrocarbons windfall. Seeking to reconcile their professional ethics of working 'for the greater good of the nation' with the realities of a context where, in their own view, public interest has been made subservient to the pursuit of individual enrichment, theirs is an ambiguous 'middle' position. What happens when the values of probity, diligence, technical expertise and fairness promoted by state socialism and ideas of international solidarity – a socio-political project that has all but disappeared today as a global emancipatory reference – now stand in diametrical opposition to the values upheld or enacted by that very same state? How do state functionaries deal with the contemporary economic and political realities of needing to promote a business-friendly climate (the 'there is no alternative' to neoliberal capitalism logic/discourse) in Mozambique, and what are the moral ambiguities this engenders? As such, the article sheds light on the

thinking of the members of at least two different generations of the Mozambican middle classes operating across three temporalities, the colonial, the socialist and the post-socialist. It illuminates shifting moral, technical, temporal and social understanding of professionalism, through which my interlocutors construct their relationship to the state, and their perceived role within it.

Through this focus on professionalism, I suggest, we can chart the constant renegotiations of the ambivalent relationship of educated, salaried state employees to ‘their’ state – and through this, as this special issue suggests, develop novel perspectives on the vexing challenge of identifying and describing the middle classes. Middle classes are commonly seen as the ‘middle’ in relation to an ‘above’ and a ‘below’, the nebulous ‘elite’ and the precarious masses, respectively. At the same time, they stand, per both public and self-perception, at the centre of a broader historical and social project of individual and collective societal advancement, acting as the idealised normal, standard-setters for the whole of society at large. This is often formulated in a dialectical relation to a national frame of reference, a set of values and hierarchies, where the middle class is both conceived of as *‘staatstragend’* (the bedrock of a normative state order and national economic development) and – also in political discourse – as the deserving class of citizens, the ‘natural’ recipients of the state’s attention, respect, and services (as opposed to the ‘lofty elites’, the ‘idle poor’ or the ‘benefit scroungers’, see Introduction [Bolt and Schubert, 2022], this issue).

While the public servants I focus on here certainly demarcate themselves from both the ‘elite’ and the, poorer, uncultivated popular masses, they constitute their political subjectivities not so much in terms of a (broader), explicitly articulated ‘class identity’ but rather in reference to both a national narrative of progress and to larger, transnational frameworks of technical expertise and professional ethos. Framing their position and role in society in terms of professionalism, they articulate a self-understanding as a deserving stratum ‘in the middle’, placing them at the heart of comparative discussions of middle classes in anthropology and beyond. Their individual trajectories reflect at the same time radical shifts in Mozambique’s recent history, from Portuguese colonialism to war-time socialism, to donor-dependent developmentalism and unbridled state capitalist development, as well as surprising continuities in the conceptions of diligence, probity and apolitical, technocratic *savoir-faire* that mark their relationship to the state and society at large. Heeding Carola Lentz’s call to explore ethnographically how and why certain ideals of professionalism and respectability ‘become an attractive means of positioning oneself’ as middle class (Lentz, 2020: 459), this article charts, through the example of a specific segment of Mozambique’s public service, how the registers, imaginaries and processes that help define that middle position are formed not only in the relationship between self and (national) state and society, but also in relationship to frameworks of professional ethos as technical experts and public servants that transcend national boundaries – and how these frameworks, in turn, are shaped by both specifically Mozambican and historically contingent transnational imaginaries. What I show here, is that the boundaries that middle-class state functionaries draw through their professional ethos in order to demarcate themselves both from the lower classes and the elite remain strikingly similar, despite the transition from socialism to capitalism. I suggest that emphasising the

historical trajectories of shifting ethics of technical professionalism allows us to track this *professional* boundary work vis-à-vis the state. Focusing on this shifting relationship and the notions of deservingness articulated through it, I suggest, affords us a fresh handle on the *moralities* of middle-class ethos instead of rehashing already known arguments about the importance of socioeconomic divides.

As a byproduct the article also contributes to re-evaluating the legacies of socialism in Africa (see Pitcher and Askew, 2006). The aim is not to engage in historical revisionism but rather to track in people's moral-ethical dispositions the reverberations of a bygone transnational project of modernisation and emancipation. This project nowadays chiefly resonates in individuals' engrained habits, professional practices, and networks of expertise, and its echoes contribute to forming ambivalent subjectivities among an urban, technical professional middle class in Maputo. While both the official political discourse and many urbanites that come from the social reservoir of the ruling party have rejected the socialist past and embraced capitalist values and 'neoliberal' reforms (Sumich, 2008: 1), we can observe, among socialist-trained technical experts (and some of their foreign counterparts), a more positive assessment of that era, which hails 'neutral' professionalism, diligence, and probity as values lost in the current socio-political dispensation.

The strong resonance of socialist echoes in this material was most certainly also a result of the specific constellation of fieldwork. I had myself partly grown up under actually existing socialism in Angola, and was at the time of research employed at the University of Leipzig. More than a shared language of experience, it was this institutional affiliation that very often produced strong, positive affective reactions among my interlocutors, as, especially at the Ministry of Mines, many of them had been trained in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), and learnt German in Leipzig. While my primary point of entry was through these German networks (including the German Development Agency, GIZ) and the Mining Inspectorate, my interlocutors were overall much more heterogeneous, if all connected in one way or another to the development of the mining sector. That is, even for those less directly shaped by the socialist education system, the legacy of socialism and the single-party state and its influence on Mozambican society, economy, education and politics was a central point of reference, and that, by extension (Macamo, 2014; Panzer, 2009; Sumich, 2018), holds true for Mozambique's urban middle class more generally.

Whither the middle classes?

The 'middle class' is often normatively viewed by proponents of the free market as a panacea for the ills of 'developing countries', as a bastion of liberal democracy (Lu, 2005), as liberating individual (consumer) choices (Lahiri, 2014), and as 'model subjects' of the neoliberal state (Heiman et al., 2012: 18). They are, in a Gramscian sense, those subjects among whom the cultivation of consent has been most successful, that is, where the espousal of values supportive of the state (and the status quo) has been naturalised most completely (Gramsci, 1971: 40–2). As Hadas Weiss asserts in *We Have Never Been Middle Class*, middle-classness serves as an ideology of capitalism, promoting the myth of inclusiveness and meritocracy, and that hard work and thrift will be rewarded with

social ascent, while rejecting its ‘class’ aspect: ‘to reject class or (what amounts to the same thing) to assert middle-classness is to spurn the notion that our chances of success in life might be shaped by anything other than our desires, capacities, and above all, efforts’ (Weiss, 2019: 23). In sum, it is an identity which is rooted in a perceived shared position other than class – a common belief in the promises of upward mobility and their own sense of belonging to this deserving social group.

In her classic work on the middle class in New York and Paris, Michèle Lamont suggests that when we look at the boundary work its members perform, we should look not only at socioeconomic and cultural boundaries, but at moral boundaries, too, which are, ‘centered around such qualities as honesty, work ethic, personal integrity, and consideration for others’ (Lamont, 1992: 4). My proposition is to highlight the tensions inherent in the different kinds of boundaries people draw, and how these are, at least in part, contingent upon professional biographies moulded by service to the state, and always emerging in interaction between global discourses and shifting relationships with the state. In doing so, this article, much like the others in this collection, seeks to centre at the heart of debates about the middle class the relationships of these classes to the state, and the various processes that establish and reproduce this relationship. Indeed, although markers such as education and home-ownership remain important to define the middle class, economic indicators are notoriously unreliable, especially in the African context, where the African Development Bank defines ‘the middle class’ as having at their disposal between US\$2 and US\$20 per day (Mubila et al., 2011). At the same time, focusing primarily on aspirations and self-ascription as we anthropologists are wont to do (e.g. Schubert, 2016) robs the middle class of most of its comparative (and interdisciplinary) analytical potential – that of socioeconomic position. A focus on the relationship with the state, however, allows us to keep a comparative element, while being less prescriptive and limiting than a focus on education or income brackets.

Historically, and especially in Africa, ‘the “old” middle classes, formed during the colonial and early post-colonial periods, emerged precisely from among state employees and were often key actors in nationalist projects’ (Lentz, 2015: 36). In contemporary Mozambique, however, we see these links being based on references to both national and supra-national projects of modernisation and development – professionalism and cosmopolitanism. By historicising and contextualising these links, we can chart the changes and continuities in the moral orders that contribute to middle class formation, taking note of these multiple scales involved – from colonialism to independence, and from socialism to neoliberal capitalism, for example. More than simply a matter of ‘particular configurations of education, occupation and income’, being and doing middle class is also about ‘how people reflect on their lives, *their societies and their role within those societies* [...] or where they think their interests lie or their future is headed’ (Mercer and Lemanski, 2020: 431, emphasis added). Directing our attention to those who stake a claim on being the ones that constitute the ‘deserving’ class, an ‘imagined community’ who think – rightly or wrongly – that the state should work for them, and that they in exchange are the ones that ‘make’ the state/political community might be a way out of the double impasse of (often unreliable) economic benchmarks or a (slightly fuzzy) focus on aspiration/consumption.

By focusing precisely on this relationship, the middle class emerges as much as a programme of individual betterment as one of the ‘greater good’. And with that project come certain moral judgements through which we can chart middle-class boundary work, not only to demarcate themselves from the lower classes but also from the elites, which are often viewed as morally corrupt. Focusing on professionalism rather than on aspirations/consumption or on financial investment/security and housing, and specifically on professional ethos, allows us to locate a professional middle class of state functionaries and index their shifting and ambivalent relations with the state (cf. Hull, 2019). This affords us fresh insights on the ways in which members of the social stratum commonly understood (by themselves as well as by the commentariat) as the one most invested in, and benefiting from, a project of national advancement, form and perform their political subjectivities. What I seek to show is that middle class subjectivity is – here – less about self-ascription than about desires for a particular relationship with the state and other groups in society, allowing us to retain a ‘class’ element to the argument while expanding it beyond purely economic or aspirational logics. Looking at state employees, a select section of that middle stratum, then affords us new insights into that relation.

The making of a middle class of professionals

Many of my interlocutors belonged to an older generation that had first experienced colonialism, and then gone on to do their secondary education in a Frelimo² school shortly after independence. Dona Esperança Machava, for example, was a technical director in Mozambique’s Revenue Service. Neatly dressed and wearing statement eyeglasses, she smiled as she recounted, ‘I was in a Frelimo school in Cabo Delgado, and I learnt hierarchies directly in school. So when I started working, I had internalised this respect for hierarchies. Nowadays people no longer have that.’ Many stressed the value of education, and how training and study-abroad programmes during the time of socialism opened up to the world to them, with avenues not only for individual but also for collective betterment as a society (see also Müller, 2021; cf. Schenck, 2016: 213). As is common to discourses about the middle classes, in Mozambique the value of education was seen ‘as the means to build a moral community of virtuous and responsible citizens’ (Fumanti, 2006: 97).

References to the virtues of the earlier education system echoed in statements by the professionals and technicians I spoke to, which underlined the need for ethical conduct among state functionaries. They contrasted the work ethos and solidarity of an idealised time of socialism with the current, ‘vision-less’ situation to make a moral point about the present (cf. Rantala, 2016: 1176; Sumich, 2018: 117). Similar to what Marco di Nunzio describes in relation to architects’ professional ethos in Ethiopia, where the ruling EPRDF sought to square ‘a commitment to Marxism-Leninism on one hand, and political centralism with a concomitant embrace of the market economy on the other’, comments such as those presented above and below revealed a ‘shared discomfort’ among public servants about how the Frelimo government seeks to create economic growth in contemporary Mozambique (Di Nunzio, 2019: 382, 389).

Many of my older interlocutors (those in their late forties and older at the time of research) had been socialised into their work as *socialist* public servants with a particular

purpose (cf. Alexander, 2007: 175, for the case of Kazakhstan). In drawing moral boundaries, the present was unfavourably contrasted with the past, and seen as less virtuous both because of the ills of capitalism as well as the moral degradation of their political leadership – many complained about corruption, a culture of ‘show-ism’, and people buying diplomas to get ahead in the hierarchies. The greed of leaders and multinational companies, in this perspective, was to blame for all kinds of evils. As the SPI engineer quoted above lamented:

I’m telling you this is savage exploitation. Mozambique has no specialists that can do serious management of the [extractives] sector. There is no government control and oversight.... All this benefits an elite of the government.

In this case, there is a bitter irony to that statement, as SPI has arguably been one of the chief vehicles for elite enrichment in Mozambique (Hanlon, 2017; Nuvunga and Orre, 2019), but such laments and disillusionment about the present state of things were quite common among that generation of state-affiliated professionals.

Jason Sumich, who has written very extensively about the Mozambican middle class in Maputo (e.g. 2013, 2018), argues that independence in 1975 under the leadership of Frelimo ushered in a project of modernisation under the leadership of the vanguard party’s elite, which the whole of society had to follow and subscribe to, transforming themselves in this process into the ideal-typical socialist ‘new man’ (*homem novo*). Mozambique capitulated to the International Monetary Fund and its conditionalities (Hanlon, 2000; Saul, 2011) even before Frelimo formally abandoned Marxism-Leninism in 1989. Yet Frelimo’s high modernist determination to forge the country’s development (as well as its unwavering belief in its own manifest destiny to guide the country in this process) persisted into the era of capitalist development, albeit in slightly reconfigured form: now a new national bourgeoisie would have to form, and pave the way for the development of society as a whole.

As such, Sumich shows that the Mozambican middle class does not exist independently from Frelimo’s nation-building project, although its relative prosperity is uncertain and depends on their continued support of the party state that provides for these privileges (Sumich, 2015). While this middle class is often vocally critical of the Frelimo leadership, its members see themselves as ‘children of Frelimo’, which delimits the horizon of possibilities for the formation of their political subjectivities, and arguably leads to political stasis (Sumich and Bertelsen, 2021). Socialism, in this perspective, is both idealised through nostalgia and, at the same time, viewed with disillusionment due to the unattainability of its ideals, even in its heyday.

Focusing on the dimension of professionalism and ethos, however, allows us to complicate and nuance this picture, first regarding the supposed ‘rupture’ with the past performed by socialism, second concerning the tension between retrospective disillusionment and nostalgia. Here we can observe a retrospective re-evaluation of socialism under a more positive light, counter to the tendencies of disillusionment and the official forgetting prescribed from above (Pitcher, 2006).

Moral boundary work by reference to the socialist past is not just a case of *saudosismo*, (loosely translated as nostalgia): waxing rhapsodically about the supposed egalitarianism of socialist times, my older interlocutors glossed over the continuities between colonial and postcolonial hierarchies of professional selves. Indeed, many of these formerly ‘solid socialist cadres’, like Dona Esperança or the engineer quoted above, had come out of missionary schools, and to further their social advancement had to embody the virtues of ‘good subjects’ under the colonial regime – respect for hierarchies, bourgeois values and *boas maneiras*, good manners (Manuel, 2014: 46; see also West, 2002). Accordingly, though many from this Frelimo-affiliated urban middle class stress their revolutionary credentials and their solidarity with the *povo* (the people), this former *nomenklatura* were to a large extent products of the best-educated and most privileged ‘indigenous’ class during colonial times, and often also remained extremely privileged even throughout the harshest time of civil war scarcity, especially in Maputo. Invocations of the *povo* are thus more often based on the old ideological equation of Frelimo with the *povo* rather than actual shared experiences and outlooks – a conflation that conveniently also allowed branding and prosecuting political adversaries as ‘enemies of the people’ (Macamo, 2014). Following the fall of the Socialist Bloc and the abandonment of Marxism-Leninism in Mozambique, those who demonstrated a great degree of ideological and moral elasticity were also the most adroit at making the transition from socialist *nomenklatura* to free-market ‘national bourgeoisie’.

The technical professionals formed by socialist education abroad that I spoke to, by contrast, often came from underprivileged, rural milieus, and were selected upon the basis of academic merit in primary school – though their parents’ ideological irreproachability certainly also was a decisive factor (Dorsch, 2011: 296). Though both groups – the ‘old’ urban middle class (i.e. the ‘assimilated African elite’ of colonial times) and the technical professionals here – coalesce around the same logic of national development led by the Frelimo state, their background and outlook are not entirely the same. In their self-representations my interlocutors made a link between professionalism, hard work, respect, and high ethical standards, as contrasted to a lack of technical expertise and know-how that, in their view, correlated with moral corruption, *laissez-faire*, and an unhealthy deference to (corrupt) hierarchical superiors and to the power of big capital to flout the laws.

Capitalist tensions

While both the official political discourse and many Frelimo-supporting urbanites have rejected the socialist past and embraced capitalist values and ‘neoliberal’ reforms, we can observe among socialist-trained technical experts (and some of their foreign counterparts) a more positive reassessment of that period as a time in which individuals were contributing to the greater good of the nation rather than just serving their own interests of individual advancement (cf. Dorsch, 2011: 297).

Yet the changing situation led to a necessary re-evaluation of the place of these values in contemporary Mozambique. A donor darling and testing ground for neoliberal reforms since the end of its civil war, the country seemed, from the 2010s on, on the cusp of an

extractives boom that would transform the country into an emerging ‘energy giant’ and ‘African Lion’ economy. The government harboured high hopes of turning Mozambique into one of the world’s largest coal exporters. Moreover, discoveries of natural gas reserves in the Rovuma Basin, estimated to be the world’s third largest contiguous deposits, further created a climate of bonanza, with major international corporations rushing in to secure concessions and exploration rights. Based on sometimes wildly optimistic forecasts, the government and foreign investors predicted stellar revenues for decades to come. Yet by 2016 this rosy picture had been tarnished: a steep downturn in world market prices for unprocessed natural resources, especially coal and hydrocarbons, put many of these ambitious projects on indefinite hold, and fostered – yet again – a climate of economic crisis in the country, which was compounded by worrisome political and security developments.³ Still, there was a widespread consensus among most stakeholders that the country had to be made ready for the next upturn, and improve its ‘weak’ capacities to manage the nascent extractive sectors in an efficient and transparent manner (though there was, evidently, some disagreement about *how* to bring about these improvements, and to whose benefit). Accordingly, a host of experts and consultants were and are still engaged in and around the state administration to improve the efficiency of Mozambique’s public administration and government structures to manage the extractive industry sector.⁴

While private industry’s main concern was finding a qualified workforce, both the government and Mozambique’s bi- and multilateral development partners were worried about the capacities of the state and state functionaries to deal with the expected inflow of revenues from extractives, and wanted to help Mozambique avoid the dreaded resource curse. That includes mitigating the ‘skills gap’ within the public function, a gap only insufficiently plugged by the gradually shrinking generation of socialist-trained cadres.

Indeed, the education system was retooled after the transition. While ‘the political orientation of Mozambique after independence required a vision and provision of HE [higher education] that served the revolutionary cause’ (Chissale, 2012: 10), higher education reforms after the transition were driven by a ‘capitalist conception of knowledge (re)production according to the demands of the free market economy’ (2012: 9). This has largely had deleterious effects, in the view of my interlocutors: while during socialist times hard work was rewarded and people studied diligently, they said, nowadays students were lazy and were selected according to family ties and privilege (conveniently forgetting that during socialism certain kinds of students were also privileged above others, regardless of academic merit).

My interlocutors from this older generation of functionaries presented this as much as a personal quest for moral integrity as an institutional problem. ‘It is not just a question of frameworks and institutional memory, people need to have prepared minds [*mentes preparadas*],’ said Dona Esperança: the functionaries of today haven’t learnt the respect for hierarchy in Frelimo school, and in the induction sessions at the service [workplace] they don’t speak about hierarchies and ethics. But ‘*legislação por si não dá comportamento*’ (legislation in itself does not lead to [correct] behaviour), she lamented, meaning that even the best codes of conduct were useless if functionaries had not internalised the professional ethos required for a project of national development. An ideal-type

imaginary of ‘socialist values’ was thus contrasted to the – equally reified – imaginary of rapacious capitalism that many lamented.⁵

Socialist reverberations

The professional moral boundaries that my informants characterised as ‘socialist’ or ‘neoliberal’ related to some specific – albeit often idealised and reified – model of what socialist and capitalist moral models were, respectively. Here I want to examine the roots of these imaginaries in socialist times, to try to understand how my interlocutors characterised these boundaries.

When the newly independent Mozambican state, under the leadership of the then broadly socialist vanguard party Frelimo, set out to create a ‘New Man’, freed from the shackles of tribalism, obscurantism, and superstition (Sumich, 2015: 829), the country’s socialist brother states were ready to help – the GDR, Czechoslovakia, the USSR, and Cuba, primarily (Dorsch, 2011; Müller, 2010; Obernhummer, 2010; Schenck, 2016). An important part of this help was in the training of cadres, the future vanguard of the socialist Mozambican nation, upon whose shoulders the final liberation and development of the country would rest. Scores of young Mozambicans were sent to these brother countries to complete their secondary and tertiary education – the latter often geared towards technical-vocational professions, though in the case of Cuba also in the areas of medicine and social sciences.

When I was doing fieldwork at the MIREME in 2016, I was surprised to see that nearly all heads of department at the ministry had studied in Saxony, and were mining engineers and geologists trained at the Technical University Freiberg, in the Ore mountain range near the Czech border. This was also true for some of the older mining personnel in the provinces, as well as in a handful of other ministries I visited, where former GDR students held positions of responsibility. Others had studied in Cuba, in Ukraine and in Czechoslovakia – including the current president, Filipe Nyusi, who studied engineering in (then) Czechoslovakia. Carrying out this research with the institutional endorsement of the University of Leipzig eventually opened many doors, with many enthusiastically reminiscing how they had learnt German there in their youth.

It is important to stress that these socialist-trained Mozambican youths of the 1980s were not a homogeneous group. They came from different backgrounds, and their experiences abroad were different, too: secondary-level students sent to study on Cuba’s *Isla de la Juventud* were often selected from underprivileged rural milieus based on academic merit and remained, for the better part, kept apart from the host society (Dorsch, 2011). Mozambican students and technical trainees in the GDR, by contrast, mingled relatively freely with Germans and other foreign students, experiencing individual freedoms and purchasing power – including the possibility to travel within the Eastern Bloc – which moulded them into ‘socialist cosmopolitans’ (Müller, 2021: 14).

Presuming that experiences of education in then socialist countries – GDR, Cuba, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, etc. – would all produce similar subjects would be to presume a blanket experience of socialism everywhere, which it obviously is not. Moreover, assuming that their professional morals were formed in a socialist system alone is to dismiss

people's previous (educational) experience during the colonial regime, as if individuals were a blank slate at independence, in 1975 (Frelimo's fundamental mistake). On the contrary, as in Dona Esperança's biography mentioned earlier, previous educational experience and social status (i.e. access to formal education under colonialism and the class habitus this inculcated) shaped 'absorption' of moral principles like integrity, hard work, and respect for hierarchies etc. in those who were able to study under the guiding principles of scientific socialism.

And yet, despite the diversity of experiences, some themes ran like a common thread through my interlocutors' accounts of their position, then and now. One was an affirmation of difference from 'common' Mozambicans, shaped by the exposure to socialist cosmopolitanism. The engineer working for SPI introduced earlier, for example, had studied in Russia for seven years (for an engineering degree, at a technical university somewhere outside Moscow). He underlined that, 'You can also just study in Mozambique, but you'll have a very limited vision, thinking that the world is just that. I look at things differently'. And part of that performance of difference is precisely the adherence to 'universal' technical standards and the (discursive) upholding of high standards of moral integrity.

The Inspector-General of Mines, the Freiberg-trained Engineer Obete Matine, also underlined that functionaries at the ministry needed 'integrity and institutional discipline. If these are not very strong, people can fall into a situation where they do whatever they want.' The post-independence socialist modernisation project, despite all of Frelimo's excesses and miscalculations, also meant adherence 'to a strict moral code of conduct' (Archambault, 2017: 47), and it appears that among those trained abroad in technical professions, this ideal still had some currency, despite otherwise widespread disillusionment with the socialist past among Maputo's urban residents.

However, as the official line in Mozambique was, for a long time, largely silent about the country's socialist past (Pitcher, 2006: 88), more positive re-evaluations (and official attempts to recuperate the legacy) of socialism have only begun to emerge more recently. The reminiscences mentioned earlier thus generally remain private memories that can only freely be shared with fellow 'socialist cosmopolitans', be they Mozambican or foreign. When I accompanied the German mining expert delegation on its mission, both its members and their Mozambican counterparts repeatedly invoked their shared past and a continued commitment to technical standards taught in socialist-era technical universities like Freiberg (they also used the traditional German miners' greeting '*glückauf!*' to establish rapport).

This common horizon was moulded by similar educational background and the comparable experience of having been shaped in a socialist system and then having to adjust to free-market capitalism overnight. This frame of reference served as an anchor for shared values of professionalism, probity, and dedication to certain standards, making these individuals part of a very much still actually existing transnational middle class of post-socialist technical experts. In addition to a common longing for socialism's 'non-realized potential' (Pitcher and Askew, 2006: 9), this shared frame of reference also underpinned their continued discursive boundary work – be it against exploitative capitalist bosses, against the 'politicised' public administration, or against the 'rogue'

Chinese miners operating in Manica province with ‘absolutely no regard for’ health and safety standards.

The material presented here shows that while the values invoked by these technocrats at the extractives frontier are seemingly apolitical and universal – technical expertise, professional diligence and integrity – the boundary work they help perform does not form in a vacuum: indeed, the Portuguese colonial regime was very much adept at producing ‘hierarchies’ (for all sorts of reasons and in all kinds of strange, racialised and sexualised ways) and it is in no way surprising that these hierarchies remained important in the post-independence period. Many of the Frelimo cadres that came to form the Politburo had either studied in the colonial regime’s high schools or gone to Portugal during the dictatorship to do their undergraduate degrees – and ‘*respeitinho*’ (a ‘little respect’, akin to forelock-tugging) for those ‘above’ was paramount to earn a place in these places of education.

During socialist times, a focus on revolutionary education (and forced re-education) was a key strategy in advancing the project of the ‘New Man’, while neutering the counter-revolutionary potential of the petty bourgeoisie. Yet, suspended both in historical memories as well as contemporary professional standards of socialist-trained technical cadres, the socialist period reappears as not only a time of *falta*, drabness, coercion, and doom-and-gloom; much as in Tanja Müller’s (2010, 2021) and Marcia Schenck’s (2016, 2018) work, it is also remembered as a time of possibilities, of opening to the world, and of opportunities that, in the current situation, are out of reach for all but the wealthiest. While, for example, in Jess Auerbach’s comparison of public and private institutions in the Angolan higher education sector (Auerbach, 2020: 121ff), Cuban training and public service is equated with no free speech and no capacity for critical thinking (and contrasted unfavourably with the relative freedom of thought in a private institution), here socialist technical training emerges as a guarantor of probity, insulating functionaries from the whims and pressures of the free market. These snatches of private recollections by these socialist cosmopolitan technical experts offer a fascinating insight into a vanished world, a utopian project that is nowadays almost completely discredited and under-represented in the historical record (Schenck, 2018: 353).

In a country that is still donor-dependent to the extent that Mozambique is (Sabaratnam, 2017), there is then also an expressed preference from the ‘internationals’ to work with Mozambican counterparts that they – the international cooperation people – characterise as ‘technocrats’. For example, over a coffee, Ricardo, a Brazilian consultant for the GIZ, ran me through the key personnel at the various ministries and departments dealing with the mining industry and its revenues, portraying these individuals either as ‘solid, technicians’ and ‘clean’, versus ‘old’ politicians that were ‘corrupt’.

And yet, times were obviously changing, leading to a preoccupation with the preservation of this work ethos and technical knowledge in the public function on all sides of the equation. As another international development consultant confided, ‘the people who back then studied in the Eastern Bloc learnt good technical expertise in the USSR and the GDR. They are the ones occupying the leading positions now, but they are all retiring soon.’

Middle class professionalism as an ethical project

To further complicate this picture, let us now turn to some younger functionaries also engaged in managing the extractive industries and their expected revenues. They were too young to have studied under the socialist regime and not only recognised (which many of the older ones did, too, albeit more reluctantly) but also discursively affirmed the need to adapt and adjust to the necessities of globalised capitalism – and that this work of adjustment offered them avenues for betterment, both individually and as a society. Yet they, too, framed their position in the middle in terms of professionalism and probity.

Julinho Macuane, the young auditor at the TA's Accounting and Audit Unit (Coordenação das Contas e Auditoria) I introduced above, had been trained in a post-transition Mozambican technical institute, and then on the job, with regular input from international audit firm KPMG, the GIZ, and Afrosai, an African association of public audit institutions, which all helped reform the TA, moulding it into an institution up to 'modern', international standards. After walking me through how the revenues from the extractives sector was accounted for and taxed in great technical detail, he opened up about his own professional biography and some of the challenges to the Audit Unit's work. One example was a law on the decentralisation of the TA passed in 2013, which foresaw audits at provincial levels, by provincial auditors. As Julinho explained:

It wouldn't be very practical to do audits at provincial level by provincial auditors. We have a very strong political system here [looks around] – I am talking about the party in power – and this influence would be felt if the provincial governments were auditing themselves. If the auditors come from here [the capital], there's already no longer this influence.

I asked him whether, in his view, there was less pressure for functionaries at the TA in comparison to other public institutions to be card-carrying Frelimo members. Julinho reminded me that the TA was an independent institution, and that there was a law that public institutions could not 'raise a party flag'. He admitted, though, that 'the law exists, but what happens is another thing'. At least sending auditors from Maputo to carry out provincial audits would insulate them from some of the social pressures:

When you leave from here on a mission, people there [in the provinces] don't know you. There, these are small provinces, so [if the auditor is local] people already know this is the *Fulano* [generic placeholder name], that is the other *Fulano* who lives there, this can complicate the realisation of the mandate.

To Julinho's relief, however, the law was reversed in 2015, after having been effective for less than a year, returning the TA's work 'to the situation that we think is normal'. This, in Julinho's view, helped ensure the upholding of high professional standards of diligence and integrity, insulating the court's work from political and other social pressures (even though its auditors often still depended on external donor money to carry out their mandates).

Younger technocrats like Julinho (and also those in the revamped Revenue Authority) saw the older generation as too tainted by socialist ideology and, by extension, as too close to the ruling party and its interests. From this perspective, the respect for hierarchies that Dona Esperança mentioned as a positive virtue appears in a slightly different light. This is particularly stark in the context of Mozambique, where, because of the blurred lines between party, government and state, very few public functionaries are in a position to speak out against malpractice of their hierarchical superiors (or speak to me openly, for that matter).⁶ Young professionals also linked their middle-classness to notions of due diligence and professionalism; however, this time political autonomy from the Frelimo apparatus and distance from socialist values emerge as key to professionalism. Professionalism is again constructed in relation to this wider discourse and the state, but through autonomy from the state as opposed to loyalty to the state, as with the older generation.

However, such notions of professionalism remain contested and in tension with neoliberal logics. Repeatedly I heard from younger technocrats that ‘Those *velhotes* – these old-timers in the ministry – are not up to the task. They don’t understand competitiveness.’ This was contrasted with their own, ‘superior’ training in a free-market liberal context (often in Brazil, the US, UK, South Africa, or Portugal).

Cláudio Dimande, a Brazilian-trained PhD in ‘multiple process management’ was at the time of my research in charge of the World Bank’s US\$60 million Mining and Gas Technical Assistance Project (MAGTAP) in Mozambique. At the interface between donors, state, and industry, he, too, very much understood his role as a mission to help Mozambique move forward in global capitalism. He lamented the old culture of secrecy that still prevailed among public functionaries ‘because of the socialist past’, and decried the bottlenecks caused by slow decision-making processes that were totally unacceptable if a country like Mozambique were to attract investors from such an ‘extremely aggressive, very competitive’ sector like the extractive industries.

And so, practices that signified professional integrity in one place (such as Julinho’s insistence on due process) could also be interpreted as excessive zeal, and lack of adaptation to the needs and pressures of business by others. Most of my interlocutors across the board spoke very highly of the work of the TA, for example, and Julinho clearly took pride in his diligence and lack of ties of obligation to the ruling party. Yet that kind of diligence was also seen as an obstacle to market efficiency in other places. Dimande, for example, complained that ‘here they don’t understand competitiveness. There’s a law that limits the audits [of the TA] to 45 days, but 45 days is not a small thing. Especially if they send the process back and you have to start all over again. They’re such sticklers!’

The challenging quest for personal and professional integrity was compounded by semi-regular reshuffles and the restructuring of entire ministries, which meant that people with technical knowledge suddenly found themselves subordinated to a *chefe* (boss, hierarchical superior) with little know-how regarding the dossiers, and who were parachuted into place for political or personal convenience. This, added to the rising costs of living, was ‘damaging the middle class’ (as the SPI engineer told me), and likely to erode political support for Frelimo, in the eyes of many, especially younger ones, who prided themselves on having attained their position by virtue of their competences, not

their party affiliation. Virtues of competence, technical knowledge and professionalism run through both generations, even though one generation links this to socialism and a Frelimo-led programme of national betterment, and the next associates it with neoliberalism and distance from the party state.

Conclusions

While the overall political and economic framework in Mozambique has changed drastically over the past 40 years, the boundaries that middle-class state functionaries draw in order to demarcate themselves from a predatory, 'political' elite remain strikingly similar, despite the transition from socialism to capitalism (and, I suspect, also from colonialism to independence). And these boundaries are profoundly shaped by their professional biographies, which, in very different contexts, cultivated comparable values of professionalism, diligence, and integrity. The frame of reference that is invoked may have changed between then and now – always context-specific, path-dependent, historically contingent – but some of this boundary work through an affirmation of professional ethos remains strikingly similar, across these declinations and scales.

That is evidently not to say that all middle classes across the globe are drawn from a reservoir of (self-described) virtuous and technically competent professionals, or that professional ethos is the only register of middle-class boundary work. But the fashioning of professional selves with regard to a national project in relation to which one feels belonging and entitlement might be a defining key characteristic of middle-class self-making that we can probe analytically to help us undertake 'the necessary work of tracing the social life and social relations of the middle classes' (Mercer and Lemanski, 2020: 429). And that self-making stands in an ambivalent, constantly renegotiated, dialectic relation to the state that this middle class is the supposed bedrock of.

Socialism inculcated and demanded a specific kind of technical efficiency and probity. With changing times, however, various state and parastatal institutions bring to bear different kinds of pressures on the personal ethics and moral values of individuals – how to combine efficiency and a 'business-friendly climate' with integrity and diligence in daily work, for example. This leads to moral ambiguities for state functionaries: the demands for market efficiency (and the licence for self-enrichment) under the current socioeconomic dispensation installed by Frelimo stands in clear tension with the moral values of professionalism inherent to a middle class broadly coming out of an (internally differentiated) social reservoir of Frelimo-affiliated biographies. This allows us, on the one hand, to disaggregate the state and, on the other, to complicate overly simplistic chains of causality from state institutions to class formation.

By way of the particular example of one specific section of an urban, professional Mozambican middle class working for the state, I have sought to demonstrate a way of reconceptualising the middle classes through their relationship with the state – always historically grown and contingent upon specific contexts, but formed in an iterative, dialectical process with what the state is supposed to be for them, and what they represent for this national project. Through this, the middle class emerges as an ethical project, constantly remade by making claims on the state.

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ORCID iD

Jon Schubert  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1100-8086>

Notes

1. All interlocutors bar public figures speaking on the record have been given pseudonyms.
2. Frelimo is Mozambique's liberation movement turned ruling party.
3. These include the resurgence of opposition party Renamo as an armed force in Central Mozambique from 2013 to 2017, followed by the growing, still ongoing Islamist armed uprising in Cabo Delgado (see [Morier-Genoud, 2020](#)).
4. I discuss these entanglements around making the country 'ready' at length in [Schubert \(2020\)](#).
5. Although examples like the 'hidden debt scandal' evidently do give strong indications about the true rapaciousness of elite accumulation in Mozambique ([CIP, 2021](#); [Nuvunga and Orre, 2019](#)).
6. See also [Gonçalves \(2013\)](#) on 'Orientações superiores'.

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Author Biography

Jon Schubert is SNF Eccellenza Professor in the Division of Urban Studies at the University of Basel. He is the author of *Working the System: A Political Ethnography of the New Angola* (Cornell University Press, 2017). He currently works on climate crisis and urban adaptation in Coastal Africa.