

## 2. Invisible Childhoods - Invisible Globalities

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Although the concept of childhood as a spatio-temporal order is universal to almost all societies, the reality of childhood is far from being universal. When exploring the spatial order of childhoods, it is important to remember that social orders rest on the social matrix of domination (Collins 1990). In this matrix of social inequalities, nine-year-old Hamza lives in an apartment flat in Fés (Morocco) and is the same age as Marilyn, who is growing up in a gated community in Cape Town (South Africa). Hamza's parents own a kiosk. Marilyn's mother runs an NGO, and her father is the deputy of a private hospital. After school and on Saturdays, Hamza helps his parents in the kiosk. Marilyn, on the other hand, visits different clubs, where she learns horse riding, dances ballet, and practises the contrabass. Marilyn and Hamza are children. Surely, both know they will have more freedom and responsibility when they become adults. We could assume this without asking them. But we can only understand what childhood, adulthood, freedom, and responsibility mean to them if we ask them. What they say will give us direct or indirect insight into their societal positions within their nuclear and extended families, neighbourhoods, and societies. No matter what they say, their '[r]elation is only universal through the absolute and specific quantity of its particularities' (Édouard Glissant 1997 [1990]: 178). And so is the material world that surrounds them, because '[a] Mayan wristband worn by a Californian youth and an American t-shirt worn by a Guatemalan teenager are not symmetrical in the power relations they inscribe' (Ansell 2009: 196).

When exploring spatial orders and their relations, which supposedly produce the world, we must keep an eye on how we contribute to the representation of these worlding processes through our explorations. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully watch which relations we hide while others become overemphasised. In the following subchapters, I will point out hidden relations (invisibilities) which, in the context of my research, I aim to shed light on. These are children's missing perspectives in globalisation research, the missing consideration of class in childhood research interested in global spatial figuration, and the epistemic dichotomies that uphold these invisibilities.

## 2.1 Age, Social Reproduction, and Globalisation

The *first* complex of hidden relations I want to discuss is *age* as a category of social inequality within globalisation research, connected to the generally marginalised position of social reproduction within the same tradition. Although (even) its (critical) leading scholars are interested in the consequences of a global market economy, they lose sight of the restructuring of social reproductive relations (Katz 2001a; Nagar et al. 2002). This might also be a side effect of Marxist-informed approaches dealing with globalisation. Feminist scholars have criticised that Marxist theory upholds the separation and hierarchisation of the reproductive sphere, relegating it to a devalued position in relation to the sphere of production (Crenshaw 1989; Winker/Degele 2009). This hierarchy is, at the same time, gendered: The reproductive work appears as a supposedly female family affair, while productive work appears as a supposedly male affair of the market (cf. Becker-Schmidt 2019: 67). To challenge the social difference caused by this gendered hierarchy, feminist scholars demand exposure of the process dependency of the two spheres and equal acknowledgement and remuneration of the work in both of them (Meillasoux 1972; Bock/Duden 1977; Beneria 1979; Dalla Costa/Dalla Costa 1999; Katz 2001a). This might also be why, in the context of globalisation research, Marxist-informed analysis, which does not consider the feminist critique, reproduces the primary focus on the productive sphere. This asymmetry is highly problematic, because it reproduces the gendered hierarchisation of the spheres within the framework of theory formation, leading the reproduction sphere to appear as an ‘appendage’ of the production sphere within the framework of historical materialism. This could be another reason why globalisation research often fails to set up its analysis intersectionally. Overemphasising the global market economy entails suppressing reflections on social categories of inequality, such as gender and age.

Let me give an example of how the focus on the reproductive sphere might change the outcome of what is made (in-)visible: One of the most well-known effects caused by globalisation is the phenomenon of what David Harvey calls ‘time-space compression’ (1990: 426) and Milton Santos describes as ‘temporal unicity (the convergence of moments)’ (Santos 2021: 124) – and thus the product of diverse technological innovations (from the telegraph to the internet), driven by the global expansion of capital, that compresses (as in condenses) distances of space and time, making it possible to perceive the simultaneity of different events from different global coordinates. Whereas these two globalisation researchers, which focus on the market sphere, see the globalising world as shrinking, Cindi Katz, a feminist geographer who engages with the reproductive sphere, sees the world as expanding. She encountered what she calls ‘time-space expansion’ (Katz 2004: 226) in the lives of children and young people of rural Sudan, restructured and complexified by structural adjustment programmes. Katz vividly concludes this paradox herself when noting: ‘While from the perspective of transnational capitalists and those living directly in their midst the world may indeed be shrinking, on the grounds of places like Howa – ever more marooned by these processes – it seemed to be getting bigger all the time.’ (Katz 2004: 226)

But besides the overemphasis on the productive sphere, another reason seems to maintain the invisibility of childhood in globalisation research, namely the fact that the

reproductive sphere in general and childhood in particular are attributed to local scales. The home, the street, or the neighbourhood – scales that seem connected to the reproductive sphere, often fall out of the frame of global world-making processes as long as they are examined within a spatial analysis based on a Euclidian understanding of space and scale. But once proximity and mobility are understood as relational spatial processes, these scales no longer appear primarily local. From a relational or, as I will later argue, topological perspective (elaborated on in subchapter 3.3), which looks at the processes of scale-making and does not set scale a priori, the social constitution of home often appears beyond the actual house where one lives, unfolding as an emotional spatial arrangement entangled on different scales. A topological understanding, moreover, shows how even the diverse materialities of housing and home-making no longer appear local once we make ourselves aware of the global architecture transfer, also based on classed concepts of housing, which in return regards the middle classes as increasingly global, as my findings (subchapter 7.2) will show.

### 2.1.1 Class in Research on Children's Spatial Relations

This brings me to the *second* complex of hidden relations, caused by the missing or insufficient contextualisation of *class* as another category of social inequality within childhood studies (concerned with space). Social inequality is often depicted by the global divide (South and North). This points to a problem which I will in the following refer to as 'methodological hemispherism', with a reference to what other scholars frame as 'methodological nationalism' (Beck 1997; Friedberg 2001; Gille/Ó Riain 2002; Hage 2005; Beck 2007), but on a different scale. In the context of 'methodological hemispherism', Tanja Betz argues that childhood research in the Global North causes a universal conception of 'childhood as modern'. She notes that, '[t]he analysis of social and ethnic lines of differentiation within the group of children is conceptually not wanted. Childhood is to be treated as a uniform phenomenon; children have more in common than what distinguishes them [...] (Qvortrup 2005)' (translated from Betz 2009: 462). In such a perspective, children are analysed – regardless of their classed differences – in their capacity as children who are confronted with specific developmental tasks. Betz argues that this might also be caused by childhood studies and its analogies to women's studies, where 'the dimension of "gender" plays a far more central role than the dimensions of "milieu/class" or even "ethnicity"' (translated from Betz 2009: 462).

Only recently have childhood studies based in the Global North critically observed the undeniable overrepresentation of middle class-situated childhoods in their own field. If we look at childhood studies concerned with space, such as in children's geographies, class similarly remains implicit if not absent. Exceptions are, amongst others, Helena Pimlott-Wilson's (2011) study of familial habitus, Marlies Kustatscher's (2017) study of children's own class identity, and negotiations of class boundaries by Imane Kostet et al. (2021). A deeper look into childhood studies concerned with space shows that, within this critique, we must distinguish between (a) studies that do not contextualise the socio-economic backgrounds of their study participants and (b) approaches that build upon findings or concepts of other studies without mentioning or considering the socio-economic contexts these findings are based on. Especially in the case of influential spatial

models of childhood, such as the 'zoning model' (*Zonenmodell*) (Muchow/Muchow 1998 [1935]) and the 'insularisation model' (*Verinselungsmodell*) (Zeiber 1983), the model itself stands so much in the foreground of its reception that it is often applied without its specific (classed) contexts. The study by Martha Muchow already introduced above, for example, explored the access to and experience of space of proletarian children in Hamburg in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, it is questionable whether the insularisation model found by Zeiber did not maybe appear much earlier than the late 1960's and 1970s in bourgeois families. The study of Zeiber (1983) addresses children from two neighbourhoods in Berlin. One of the neighbourhoods was that of the new urban working class profiting from complex modernisation processes during the late 1960s, changing their socio-economic position. The other was a rather educated middle class still strongly identified with the 68er generation. Economically, these two groups were not so different from each other (*ibid.*: 181). From a cultural perspective, though, they had very different ways to 'equip' (*ibid.*: 189) their children: While for the 'well off' working class it was important to enable their children's consumption and material security, the educated middle class focused on what Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1977) identifies as cultural capital in the form of organising different formal and informal educational and play encounters (Zeiber/Zeiber 1994). While in educated middle-class families, mothers were more often fully responsible for the reproductive work and currently not employed, they also consciously anticipated and pushed to realise the future of their children, whereas the 'new' working class showed a 'traditional [...] strong commitment to the present and little future orientation' (translated from *ibid.*: 190). On the basis of their sampling of a 'broad new middle class' (translated from Zeiber/Zeiber 1994: 21), Hartmut and Helga Zeiber draw a rather pessimistic picture of childhood as being dispersed and splintered throughout the city. Even though the studies of Muchow (1998 [1935]) and Zeiber (1983) rely on very different socio-economic contexts, they are received as a general account of the spatial figuration of childhoods from the early 1900s up until the present day and regardless of class differences. In her study of children's spatial relations, Elisabeth Pfeil (1965 [1955]) does not explicitly give any information on her sampling strategies – it rather seems as if she draws on observations from all over the city or from several cities – but her somewhat scattered observations still contextualise socio-economic contexts. For childhood in the 1960s she states that within working-class contexts, Martha Muchow's zoning model still prevails. Yet she differentiates: 'The more bourgeois the urban family, the more it tends to protect its child from contact with other children' (*ibid.*: 16). In the same context, Imbke Behnken and Agnes Jonker, who investigated the urban spatialities of play in working-class and lower-middle-class children with informants from the birth cohorts of 1875 to 1920 in Wiesbaden (Germany) and Leiden (Netherlands) (Behnken/Jonker 1990), draw the distinction that in the 'last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [...] the tendency of the domestication of childhood became unified [and that] street childhood as a historically surviving form of life has since then only applied in Western Europe to the children of sub-proletarian population groups, such as homeless families and subgroups of foreign working-class families' (translated from Behnken/Jonker 1990: 166). However, it remains unclear how, on the basis of their research with working-class and lower-middle-class children, they conclude that beyond the two above-named lower-income groups, childhood became, as

they say, ‘unified’, as children from wealthy, upper-middle- and middle-income groups were not part of their sample.

These models count as classics of childhood spatio-temporal analysis and have been received in historical childhood research as evidence for the spatial figuration of childhood. The problem with an asymmetrical comparison between childhoods and, more generally, the concept of childhoods within models is that they risk suggesting that there is a single spatial history of childhood rather than childhoods in the plural. From this perspective, it also seems questionable whether the emergence of the insularisation, domestication, and familiarisation of childhood is historically primarily connected with the urban modernism of the 1960s or whether it started much earlier with the emergence of the bourgeoisie. The classed re-reading of the spatial models indicates that there is not and never was one single spatial model, nor has the simultaneous existence of diverse models increased, as Ignacio Castillo Ulloa et al. (2023: 38) suggest, but that these spatial models always co-existed, depending on the classed positionality of the models’ protagonists.

Whereas figures of childhood in Europe such as the street childhood are regarded as having disappeared, childhoods in African contexts in particular remain imagined as their counterparts (De Moura 2002). In this context, postcolonially informed childhood researchers, such as Tatek Abebe and Yaw Ofofu-Kusi, criticise the

two dominant portrayals of African children. The first is predicated on notions of vulnerability and innocence whereby children are presented as passive victims. [...] The second image of African childhood is based on a romantic view [...], which tends to exoticize, particularize and, sometimes, universalize children’s experiences as ‘indigenous’ and unique. (2016: 303–304)

Nonetheless, even approaches that challenge this victimisation, such as that of working children in the book *Postkoloniale Kindheiten* (Postcolonial childhoods) by Manfred Liebel (2020), the dichotomy of poor (Global Southern) versus wealthy (Global Northern/European) childhoods dominates the analysis. Childhood research that focuses on children’s everyday lives growing up in urban contexts of the so-called Global South mostly depicts them as negatively affected by the current processes of city development and planning. Even though such perspectives are crucial and still rather scarce, they run the risk of becoming representative of the so-called Global South childhoods. While they rightfully criticise the victimising Western gaze, at the same time they draw a highly essentialist image of the Global South in which children seem to generally grow up poor. What remains invisible within and beyond childhood research are the social realities of middle class-situated children positioned within broader globally marginalised contexts. Once the category of class is out of the intersectional scope, certain childhoods seem to be too. In this way, the plurality of childhoods within diversely situated globalities is rendered invisible. And this is crucial, if we remember how fast these local minorities are growing in number globally, such as middle-class childhoods in urban Kenya.

## 2.1.2 Beyond Epistemic Dichotomies

In this subchapter I would like to briefly point to the effect of intersectional categories that are epistemologically based on spatial and scalar dichotomies, which, even if they coincide in most cases with the dichotomies hegemonised in world society, do not always seem to be useful in a transnational comparison between middle-class milieus in Nairobi and Berlin. Categories such as BPoC vs white, Global South vs North and non-Western vs Western are often naturally attributed to a binary opposition with underprivileged vs privileged, suppressed vs supreme, uneducated vs educated, and so on. These dichotomies often even linger in critical approaches sensitive to intersectional categories. This is partly also because these epistemological concepts have developed within specific contexts in which this binary is very powerful.

bell hooks, for example, writes how feminist reforms by privileged white women in the US often failed to achieve their goal of social equality for all women in existing structures. The fact that 'black women/women of colour' have not benefited in the same way from these reforms, she argues, has led to the 'spreading of fear that feminism would only repeatedly lead to the strengthening of white power' (hooks 2000: 42). Hooks describes this 'white power' problematic in terms of a global hierarchy in which 'Western women have gained class power and greater equality because a global white supremacism has enslaved and/or subordinated masses of Third World women to them' (ibid.: 43). Based in the American context, hooks addresses the paradox that 'emancipated', 'white', 'Western' women enjoy the privilege of being able to afford the reproductive labour of less privileged 'Black women and women of colour' from the 'Third World'. A critique of feminist theory and practice rightly questions its emancipatory character for all women. The opposing subject positions offered here – Third World vs First World/West and BPoC vs white – are each connoted in a complementary way as precarious (oppressed) or privileged (oppressing). Although this representation of power relations might work within American socio-historical contexts, they are not easily applicable in the context of Nairobi, because other social positions uphold and produce the same or other power relations within the local middle-class milieus. If we turn hooks's example around, we will see that compared to the other location of my research, Berlin, much more urban middle- and upper-middle-class families in Kenya employ domestic workers, who often reside directly in the family's household. In comparison with Berlin, we must still argue that working women who raise children without state support (Nairobi) cannot be compared to those who receive this support (Berlin), yet is it important to acknowledge that the Nairobi middle classes also employ women less privileged than themselves and the domestic workers of hook's American example. What I would like to acknowledge here is that life is so pluralised that these dichotomies do not easily apply. Still, it is important to keep these hegemonies in mind. My comparative research in Nairobi and Berlin made me realise the importance of what McFarlane calls the 'context of contexts' (2011b: 375) to reflect multiple power constellations from diverse positions and beyond the hegemonial structure. Qualitative empirical material, such as that evoked within narrative-biographical interviews, helps us to understand the very specific context of contexts of the speakers and additionally challenges the asymmetry between speaker

and researcher – an important aspect of my research that I will elaborate on further in Chapter 4.

In summary, the missing scopes that I want to address with my research are, in part, caused by a lack of consideration of the intersectional category of *age* in globalisation research and *class* in childhood studies interested in children's spatial relations. Additionally, I argued that some of these invisibilities lie in the complexity of the specific contexts in which children grow up, which often cannot be grasped at all with critical intersectional approaches, as intersectional categories often rest on spatial and scalar dichotomies, which often but not always apply in other political, geographical, or historical contexts. I aim to counter this development with a spatial analysis that uncovers childhoods such as those of middle-class children in Nairobi and their entanglements with children of similar 'situatedness' (Haraway 1991) in Berlin. But how must this comparison be built and conceptualised so as not to end up in other asymmetries? How is it possible to focus on *class* without reifying socio-economic situatedness itself?

## 2.2 Children in the Global Middle-Class Discourse

In dealing with global entanglements of childhoods from a middle class-sensitive perspective, I am at the same time dealing with another not invisible yet quite foggy and nebulous thing: the current discourse on the so-called global middle classes (GMC). The 2030 Global Trends Report of the US National Intelligence Council (2012) describes the growth of the GMC as one of the megatrends at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Asian economies, such as China and India, in Brazil and Chile in South America, and in Africa, a significant part of the population is experiencing income growth. Growing with it is an international discourse on the GMC, which is based largely on purely economic definitions. According to these definitions, the GMC comprise approximately 10 to 30% or even 50% of the world's population (Banerjee/Duflo 2008; Kharas 2010) and have roughly doubled since 2000 (Pezzini 2012; Milanovic 2016). On the basis of the definition of the World Bank, the African Development Bank (2011) calculates a middle-class Kenyan household income of four to 20 US dollars per day, calculated in purchasing power parities. However, four dollars a day is just above the nationally defined poverty line (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2018). It is therefore questionable how this allows for a middle-class lifestyle, especially in Nairobi. The average income in Kenya is just under 600 US dollars per month (about 20 US dollars per day; CEIC Data 2020), but it is extremely unevenly distributed (Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics 2018).

Beyond the economic definitions, the GMC are associated with several positively described collective orientations: As a group, they are said to be the central driving force for social change, and have as such become the bearers of new lifestyles. Considered to be strongly integrated into global, technological, and media structures, they are regarded as the driving force behind innovation processes (Kharas 2010). Even though there is very scarce empirical evidence for it,

[t]he middle classes, more than any other social group, are seen as the promoters of education, science, and the rule of law, as well as the pillars of capitalist market

economies and an open public sphere. They seem to be the prerequisite for the emergence of civil society and the project of modernity as a whole. Indeed, the subject has fired the imagination of global corporations and institutions such as the World Bank, McKinsey, or Credit Suisse, as they consider these groups the promoters of free markets, liberalism, and democratic institutions. (Dejung et al. 2019: 38)

According to the African Development Bank, African middle classes are ‘a key source for private sector growth in Africa, accounting for much of the effective demand for goods and services supplied by private sector entities’ (African Development Bank 2011: 1). Beyond ‘economic growth’, the African Development Bank furthermore argues that the development generated by the middle class ‘is also essential for the growth of democracy’ (ibid.: 1). Besides the estimations from investment-driven actors such as the African World Bank, African scholars also express hope that the emergence of African middle classes will foster consistent economic growth, despite the global recession (Ncube/Lufumpa 2015).

What marks the global as well as the African middle-class discourse in its sum is that it addresses and describes the group it constitutes as modern and modernity as salvation for all. As a modernisation discourse, it promises well-being and prosperity through development ensured by controllability and plannability. The GMC discourse proposes a linear historical narrative by inviting the so-called underdeveloped nations to put all their efforts into reducing poverty and strengthening their future towards a modern ‘developed’ nation. As such, the discourse (once again) implies European historicism over the world – a problem that has long been raised within postcolonial studies, because it rests on a ‘first in Europe, then elsewhere structure of global historical time’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 6). Postcolonial scholars criticise that the modernisation narrative positions so-called developing countries as if they were ‘behind’ the Western world, ‘impos[ing] a theory of progress’ (Bhambra 2007) that reproduces the discourse of the ‘West and the Rest’ (Hall 1994: 137). This is highly problematic, because such a linear idea of global history also evokes the colonial discourse of the West that brings education, salvation, and wealth, which not only trivialises the terrifying practices of imperialism and colonialism but also silences the multiple crises the West is currently facing. From this point of view, it also seems disturbing that the GMC discourse encourages those which it addresses as ‘developing countries’ to repeat Western history. The primary focus on the future typical of modernisation seems like a manoeuvre to overcome a past that would, if processed deeply, never allow us to believe in such a linear narrative. This narrative once imposed development that was utterly uneven globally. The violent inscription of a modern world logic and the extraction of social and natural resources also caused what is today finally forcing even the West to its knees: war over territory, political secession and separation, environmental decay and dwindling resources, the resurgence of nationalism, and growing inequalities. The future suggested here is, moreover, utterly paradoxical, because within the narrative of historicism, the future is prophesied, and because it is prophesied, it also already tells us that this future vision is utterly dystopic. First, who and what is left to be suppressed, exploited, and extracted, and second, on which inhabitable planet (Chakrabarty 2021)?

However, in the narrow definition referring to social and economic wealth, the GMC discourse attracts and in this way also creates postcolonial subjectivities that strive for a better job, better house, and better life. In cities like Nairobi, where poverty is all too present, this striving is often accompanied and also amplified by the anxieties of losing one's hardly earned status. Yet this again deepens social inequalities and weakens social cohesion locally, where, against modernisation myths (Pineault 2021), resistance could grow into new futures connected to indigenous knowledges and practices as more inclusive and sustainable counter-developments. Instead, hopeful futures are being built on devastating pasts through myths of modernisation.

Beyond contextualising these myths of modernisation, in the following I will additionally point out four challenges that appear within the academic debates on GMC and elaborate on how I approached them in my research. The *first* challenge addresses the disproportion between the often positively connoted ideas and imaginations about the globally connecting cultural patterns of middle class-situated people and the scarce empirical evidence of such patterns. As described above, the GMC discourse, which is defined predominantly in economic terms, attributes collectivising and socially desirable cultural attributes to its subjects. As a group, the GMC are believed to be the central driving force for social change, the bearers of new lifestyles, and important actors in global, media, and technological innovation processes. Although there are a few exceptions (Spronk 2012; Melber 2016; Kroeker et al. 2018; Dejung et al. 2019; Korte/Weidenhaus 2021; Mock/Weidenhaus 2022), the general assumptions about cultural patterns and values that are commonly shared among the GMC are predominantly built on speculations and urgently need further empirical evidence. The previously named studies furthermore show that it is not easy to even decide who will be the right study participant, as conceptualisations of global middle classness that extend beyond economic definitions are still missing and are often based on Eurocentric ideas of class. In addition, most studies only investigate the lifestyles and cultural patterns of so-called members of the global middle class. What remains unclear is whether the cultural aspects do not equally apply to other socio-economically situated groups. Middle class is a term referring to a heterogeneous spectrum. Approaches mainly aiming to sharpen a definition run the risk of essentialising middle classes instead of portraying their diversities.

Hence, when composing the sample, I took care to represent a group of people with contrasting socio-economic and cultural backgrounds reaching from lower- to upper-middle class and beyond, including people of different ages, genders, ethnicities, nations, and neighbourhoods and with different religiosities (for a detailed overview, see subchapter 4.2). Furthermore, I chose a biographical perspective to get to these self-constructions, because such a perspective is very likely to enrich this debate, as it enables us to trace similarities and differences in class or forms of belonging from a 'bottom-up' perspective, revealing how broader geopolitical processes matter in people's lives according to their classed positions. So instead of starting the analysis with a definition of global middle classness, I will keep it a question of my empirical findings, which should enlighten the discourse and debate on GMC by bringing in empirically grounded insights on how the GMC discourse is reflected in the spatial relations of people positioned within these situated globalities. Therefore, my findings promise a new perspective on the cultural analysis of middle classness through its focus on socio-spatial relations and so-

cio-material cultures. Tracing the spatial relations and material cultures of the middle classes is promising with regard to understanding processes of socio-structural change. As 'legitimate speakers in socially recognised positions' (translated from Bischoff/Betz 2015: 264), the middle classes have the power to implement their ideas about and the desired conditions for a successful life in the socio-historical discourse, thereby generating normativity. Thus, we can assume that their ideas gain a far-reaching discursive efficacy, influencing the specific anticipation of societal well-being in the future and, for example, also (de)legitimising certain ideas and norms of good childhood and parenthood. Conversely, these ideas of the good life and, more broadly, good personhood can be read as complementary to the ideas of development and the myths of modernity. Through my scope on childhood, I explore the GMC discourse from a biographical perspective that remains highly unexplored yet promises a deep insight into these ideas of the good life.

The *second* challenge I want to point to is also a spatial one: Paradoxically, the GMC have been studied primarily within national containers. In this way, one runs the risk of reifying them within these nationally framed logics instead of analysing them 'as a global phenomenon by comparing middle classes across the world or by tracing their global entanglements' (Dejung et al. 2019: 3). An exception is the work of Eva Korte and Gunter Weidenhaus (2021) and myself (Claudia Mock) and Gunter Weidenhaus (2021). To address this challenge, I explore the spatial relations and material cultures of GMC through a trans-local comparison between Nairobi and Berlin (elaborated in Chapter 3). I draw on biographical narratives from Nairobi and Berlin – globalities situated in more than one nation-state and in more than one global hemisphere. This 'global' comparison also needs a more than local (and more than Eurocentric) theoretical base of class commonalities, as proposed by Olaf Groh-Samberg et al. (2014). Such a base is not found exclusively in middle-class milieus but represents a transnationally connecting element for subjects of the middle classes, because it establishes a connection between resources and lifestyle. According to Olaf Groh-Samberg et al., middle class subjects are, beyond their classed local specifications, characterised by a pattern of 'investive status work' (translated from Groh-Samberg et al. 2014: 226 f.), which refers to both the ability and the need to invest in status in order to remain middle class. To maintain or increase their status, they must invest in the future (for example in the form of education for their children) and, to achieve that, eventually forego consumption in the present. Subjects of the lower classes, on the other hand, rarely have anything that could be invested, and members of the upper class do not necessarily need to invest to the same extent. Therefore, both groups (lower and upper classes) appear more centred in the present (here and now) compared to the middle classes. Future orientation and investment are therefore assumed to be a globally collectivising attribute of the middle classes.

The use of a solely economic concept of middle classness is particularly inappropriate in a trans-local comparison between such different societies. It is more appropriate to also consider an aspect of leading a middle classed life that Max Weber described as a 'rationalized, methodical direction of the entire pattern of life' (Weber 1956 [1922]: 271), which refers to more of a cultural approach. Therefore, I follow middle-class approaches that define their sample as being at the nexus of economic middle strata and cultural life conduct. This enables me to also use the concept of class sensitively in 'non-European and non-Western' contexts, because it helps me to analyse the self-identity of the group

and the esteem associated with it. It therefore remains an empirical question whether the analysis of the spatial relations of middle-class childhoods show globally connecting cultural patterns. And furthermore: Can these cultural patterns be interpreted as positively as the GMC discourse implies?

A *third* and at the same time fundamental challenge is that the discourse and discussion on the ‘new’ middle-class strata of societies in the so-called Global South furthermore suffer from the difficulty of applying concepts that were drawn from the analysis of Global North societies. This issue can be contextualised further with the help of concepts such as ‘the provincialism of European universalisms’ (Patel 2014: 609) and ‘epistemic inequalities’ Anna Amelina et al. (2021: 305, 310), as a part of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak called epistemic violence (1988). The term class is empirically linked to the conditions of early industrial European societies, as the forms of life conduct have multiplied ever since, and the concept is often portrayed as old-fashioned and Eurocentric. Nonetheless, Ditmar Brock (2012) and Vivek Chibber (2013) argue that the trend of micro-sociological structural analysis might also cause us to fail to see the re-figurations of socio-economic boundaries, which segregate societies as much as they were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ditmar Brock argues that ‘what seems to matter slightly more than the organisation of work is the accessibility of material culture’ (translated from 2012: 67). A concept of class beyond the notion of economic status includes occupation, education, value orientation, lifestyle, and political orientation (cf., e.g., Hradil 1987; Burzan 2011; Mau 2014; Groh-Samberg et al. 2014). Recent publications in this tradition call for these approaches to be opened beyond national containers (Mau/Verwiebe 2009; Pries 2010; Burzan 2011). On the one hand, the formation of the social structure against the background of a globalised economy within the framework of methodological nationalism alone is no longer suitable (Beck/Grande 2010). On the other hand, the fact that the future of societies is dependent on how the middle classes deal with their lifestyle errors and challenges is not only applicable to Western societies (Groh-Samberg et al. 2014). Yet, the problem with the concept of class remains that it offers a specific scope, risking the researcher becoming blind to what lies beyond the concept’s reach. In the worst case, this might result in the description of what lies out of the concept’s scope as deficient, backward, simple-minded, or simply as other. In the wider context of studies on historical materialism, Walter D. Mignolo additionally criticises the focus on capitalism, such as in Wallerstein’s world system theory, because

it maintains the social sciences in an overarching epistemic totality that parallels the overarching totality of capitalism. Alternative economies in tension with capitalism as well as alternatives to capitalism have no place in Wallerstein’s conception of the social sciences, in which the very notion of historical capitalism is founded. Since the colonial difference is blurred in Wallerstein’s notion of historical capitalism, it is impossible to foresee the possibility of thinking from it or of thinking the tensions between capitalism and other economic organizations as well as the alternatives to capitalism from subaltern perspectives. (Mignolo 2008: 243)

Therefore, it seems crucial to carefully observe the power of the theory one applies. But this perspective paradoxically also entails the risk of constructing non-Western contexts

as the 'other' contexts. For childhood this means that one must not, as I noted earlier with Tatek Abebe and Yaw Ofosu-Kusi, 'exoticize, particularize and, sometimes, universalize children's experiences as "indigenous" and unique' (2016: 303–304). This might become visible when we look at it from the opposite perspective: For a long time, middle classness has been considered exclusively Western, and as a consequence, '[s]imilar social groups in other parts of the world have been considered as merely pseudo-bourgeoisie, if they have been considered at all' (Dejung et al. 2019: 3). In an increasingly globalised economy, it is important to consider existing middle-class approaches outside of national boundaries. Christof Dejung et al. argue that 'the establishment of transnational regimes of labor and the worldwide emergence of middle classes happened concomitantly; both can be considered as a consequence of an emerging global economy' (2019: 7). To be sensitive to the epistemic problems, yet not oversee the trans-local entanglements caused by a globalising market economy, I suggest that when we are working with the concept of class as a Eurocentric theory in non-Eurocentric contexts, we must apply it in a generic, open, unorthodox manner. This should be done in conjunction with constant reflection on the researcher's positioning, accompanied by a dense description of experiences in the field and a methodological reflection. A collaborative way of conducting academic work can be useful for that – a point I will elaborate on in subchapter 3.2.

The *fourth* challenge is entrenched in the modernisation myth that lies at the bottom of the GMC discourse, which is based on a rhetoric of the 'West and the Rest' (Hall 1996: 184). This rhetoric also makes it look as if the GMC (or the middle classes beyond the Global North) are an entirely new phenomenon. Moreover, the historical genealogy of the GMC in Africa (and beyond) seems to be under-researched. One of the few exceptions is the 2019 anthology of the rise of middle classes in the age of empire by Christof Dejung et al. In one of these contributions, Emma Hunter traces historical evidence of 'imagined' (2019: 106) global middle classness connected to the negotiation of modernity in the context of print media in colonial East Africa. She concludes that even though privileged East Africans were still highly restricted to local scales 'within the tight constraints of a colonial public sphere that limited the emergence of an independent press, print allowed them imaginatively to insert themselves into a collective which transcended space and the repressive confines of colonial rule' – a resistant form of (un)belonging and negotiating boundaries through class which she refers to as the concept of 'jumping scale' (ibid.: 121, 122). However, generally empirically grounded studies are missing, beyond the scarce contributions to the historical genealogy of global middle classness. While I cannot travel back in time to address the vagueness surrounding the historical development of the middle class, my intergenerational approach allows me to work with collective memory and oral histories, which provide insights into the origins of the GMC dating back to the 1960s.

Above, I have described how the GMC discourse circulates myths of modernisation, which fosters the globalisation of Western lifestyles, overshadowing urgently necessary alternative imaginaries of planetary wealth through care and solidarity. Pointing out five challenges within the academic discourse on the GMC and introducing my response to them, I have already given insights into some of the methodological premises my work is based on. In the following subchapter, I want to address a fifth and final issue of the GMC discourse, the missing perspective of children and childhood, and highlight some 'signs'

signalling that centring children in the GMC discourse is highly promising, especially against the background of the previously marked modernisation myth of the GMC as the bearers of hope for a better future.

Even though, as Bashford states, '[m]iddle-classness is signalled, and perhaps even achieved, by having fewer children compared with the poor' (Bashford 2019: 88), children themselves remain highly marginalised within the GMC discourse, and global middle classness is seldom the subject of childhood studies. There are only a few works on global middle classness that focus on the sphere of social reproduction and take the cultural aspect of class into account (Heiman et al. 2012; Katz 2012; Spronk 2012; Mercer 2014; Spronk 2014; Kroeker 2020; Kroeker et al. 2018; Korte/Weidenhaus 2021; Mock/Weidenhaus 2022). At this point, it is important to draw on the contextualisation of the PhD project at the basis of this book through my affiliation to the Collaborative Research Centre 'Re-Figuration of Spaces' (CRC 1265, phase 1). From spring 2018 until spring 2021, I worked there in subproject A05, 'Biographies of the Middle Classes: Spatial Experience and Meaning in the Life Course Narrative', together with Gunter Weidenhaus (head of the project) and Eva Korte (student assistant). In this project we compared middle classes in Kenya and Germany with the aim of understanding to what extent the trans-local structural changes of late modernity, such as the flexibilisation of labour, might have led to a global institutionalisation of middle-class biographies. With a focus on biographical spatio-temporal patterns –the ways in which people lead their lives by making choices such as whether one or many places are home or whether one or many futures are possible to them – we explored how these patterns experience rupture when people become parents, potentially increasing the tension between the productive and the reproductive sphere. This exploration consequently revealed cultural aspects, such as ideas of good parenthood and childhood. These ideas were often characterised by norms, such as providing children with a stable home, referred to as a 'safe harbour' in the present moment (translated from Mock/Weidenhaus, 2022: 151), while simultaneously equipping them with the necessary skills to 'become a world citizen' in the future (ibid.). Thus, the construction of a good childhood interestingly seemed to be situated at the point of scalar tension between local and global, accompanied by the temporal tension between present and future. This tension also connects 'status work' as well as a global orientation as a globally connective pattern of middle classness proposed earlier as applying to childhood.

'Raising world citizens in a safe harbour' as a normative pattern of good parenting already proposes something that seems to be hardly realised beyond the economic position of the middle classes and that must be a challenge even for those who have that status. Connected to this, there has been criticism in childhood research of Western or European middle-class concepts of childhood and their power to circulate normative ideas of the good life and good childhood worldwide (Burman 1996; Boyden 1997; Nieuwenhuys 1998). But figures of good childhood circulate in Nairobi as well, some of them on sky-high billboards in the city.

Figure 2: Madison Group Kenya billboard located near the National Social Security Fund Headquarters on Ngong Road, Nairobi.



Source: Photo by the author, 2019.

Figure 2 shows one of the many billboards of the life assurance company Madison Group Kenya advertising guaranteed funds to ensure children's education. Erected during 2019 in Central Nairobi as some of the largest in town, the advertisements portray children dressed, in this case, as businesspeople, and in others as chemists, doctors or teachers. The slogan '*Bima ya Karo* [school fee insurance] means my dream is realised' accompanies the children with clear future aspirations of middle- and upper-middle-class working positions. The Madison Group Kenya website on the *Bima ya Karo* initiative states:

Education is the key to the liberation of our people, empowering your children and loved ones with education is the best thing you can do for them. However, it is said that the opportunities available to many are left to go begging as the parents/guardians have no money to cover the costs involved. To salvage this situation, we developed an education policy that seeks to enable your children live their dreams. (Madison Insurance Policies 2018)

The Madison Insurance Group mobilises a deeply paradoxical discursive framework here. While it selectively appropriates vocabulary associated with Black and decolonial struggles – most notably terms such as “liberation” and “empowerment” – it simultaneously constructs itself as a salvational authority, an institution positioned

to rescue or salvage a supposedly deficient social condition. This rhetoric of salvation is historically sedimented in missionary epistemologies and Christian morals, which were frequently imposed through coercive and violent colonial encounters in Africa. Within this genealogy, Madison's language reproduces the modernisation myth: the assumption that progress, security, and agency can only be achieved through Western epistemic frameworks, formal education, and the rationalisation of risk. Crucially, this discourse is also embedded in neoliberal logics of financialisation, where social vulnerability is reframed as an individual problem to be managed through market participation. By positioning insurance and future-oriented investment as the primary mechanisms of empowerment, the company displaces structural and historical inequalities onto personal responsibility, thereby recoding liberation as financial inclusion and empowerment as compliance with actuarial regimes of risk management. These billboards can be seen as a materialised example of the ongoing discursive production of a middle-classed discourse of good childhood. Furthermore, they can be analysed against the background of 'status work' in the form of investment in the education of children. Another look at the Madison Group website shows another scene (Figure 3) that makes it seem relevant to also engage with the material cultures of housing and homemaking connected to the modernisation myths constitutive of the GMC discourse.

*Figure 3: Bima Ya Karo guarantees funds for education.*



Source: Photo by Madison Group, 2018<sup>1</sup>.

The photograph (Figure 3) portrays three people that I read as (from left to right) 'daughter', 'mother', and 'father'. They are seated on a large beige couch. The couch faces the television, not captured by the photo but hinted at by the remote control in the mother's hands. With her other hand, she holds her daughter, who hugs her mother

1 Image available at: <https://www.madison.co.ke/protect-your-future/bima-ya-karo/> [Accessed 5 March 2026, 10:25]

with her whole body and squeezes her smiling face against her cheeks. In this intimate moment, both are held in the father's arm, while his other arm stretches towards the viewer, presenting his watch and wedding ring. He is wearing a light-blue collared shirt that is loosely opened. The nuclear family is portrayed in a tidy, clean, and spacious living room with big windows that fill the room with light. Some books are positioned in the background directly behind the daughter's head. A modern home also appears as a dream to be realised. In this picture, we can trace how different aspects of modernity relate to the middle-class discourse. The image chosen for the *Bima ya Karo* initiative conveys global middle-class norms, such as the nuclear family model with the single child positioned in a homely scene, which seems to deliberately avoid any cultural reference to Kenya. Taken out of context, it is impossible to say whether this scene is taken from a home in Nairobi, Los Angeles, Istanbul, or Berlin.

But besides this material discourse of Western purity and order, middle-class children and their parents are also addressed in so-called African urban phantasies (Watson 2014), such as in the private city development project Tatu City in the north of Nairobi. As part of it, Tatu City Education Village was commissioned at the World Architecture Festival in 2018.

*Figure 4: Architectural rendering from the Tatu City Education Village proposal commissioned at the WorldArchitecture Festival in 2018.*



Source: Boogertman + Partners Architects. World Architecture Festival 2023.<sup>2</sup>

According to the developer's website,

'[e]ducation is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.' – Our beloved Madiba (Nelson Mandela). The site, set in a golden African savannah, is located near a rural settlement outside of Nairobi, Kenya. The new facility will form

2 Image available at: <https://www.dblog.hr/price/kakav-svijet-nas-ocekuje-u-2019/attachment/education-boogertman-partners-architects-tatu-city-education-village-nairobi-kenya-3/> [Accessed 5 March 2026, 10:18]

an integral part in the upliftment of the community and the education of its children.  
(World Architecture Festival 2023)

The Madison Insurance Group advertisement and the architectural project description operate within strikingly similar ideological terrains, despite belonging to different fields. Both mobilise emancipatory language – liberation, empowerment, upliftment, education – while simultaneously reinscribing hierarchical relations between a Western or institutional actor and an African subject imagined as lacking, vulnerable, or in need of intervention. The invocation of Mandela’s quote – “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” – functions as a moral legitimising device, cloaking the project in the authority of an iconic anti-colonial figure. Yet this citation is detached from Mandela’s broader political critique of structural injustice and redeployed to justify a development narrative centred on institutional intervention. Education is framed as a singular, almost self-evident solution, while the architectural project assumes the role of benevolent catalyst for “upliftment,” implicitly positioning the local community as passive recipients rather than active producers of knowledge, space, or futures. The setting of the project in a “golden African savannah” further reinforces this asymmetry. Much like the insurance advertisement’s abstraction of social vulnerability, this romanticised landscape aestheticises Africa as timeless, rural, and underdeveloped – a backdrop against which external expertise can perform its transformative role. This echoes colonial and missionary imaginaries in which African space is rendered as both pure and deficient, simultaneously picturesque and in need of correction through education, infrastructure, and moral guidance.

The architectural rendering in Figure 4, just reinforces the same discursive problems. The architectural rendering selected to represent the project involves highly problematic material and social boundaries, raising the question of who this education is for. The ‘education as weapon’ metaphor becomes somewhat absurd in this context, because those who have access to the facility, and therefore the necessary education, are exclusively white people, whereas the people positioned outside of the educational building’s gated site are the Maasai – a group that has already been left outside once before, when the British started building the settlement which would later become Nairobi. Ever since, the Maasai have been the victims of these symbolic but also material weapons of the Europeans, and they are still a highly marginalised group in Kenya today. The Maasai outside the educational facility function as ethnographic signifiers rather than participants, reinscribing a long colonial history in Kenya in which Maasai land, mobility, and autonomy were systematically curtailed in the name of progress. By situating them in the savannah as static foreground figures while education and futurity are spatially enclosed within the building, the image reproduces a developmental hierarchy that separates indigenous life from institutional knowledge. In doing so, the project visually echoes missionary and colonial logics that framed the Maasai as temporally “behind,” requiring settlement, discipline, and uplift rather than recognising their historical resistance and epistemic sovereignty.

Read together, the two examples show how contemporary neoliberal and humanitarian discourses continue to recycle colonial logics under the guise of care, progress, and empowerment. While their rhetoric gestures toward decolonial ideals, their underlying

frameworks reaffirm asymmetrical power relations, transforming emancipation into a managed process delivered by institutions rather than a political project articulated by the communities themselves. These three examples illustrate the material and symbolic manifestation of the GMC discourse, which circulates myths of modernisation accompanied by Western visions of good childhood, good parenting, and the good life. These myths in turn circulate norms, such children having to invest in their futures as early as possible, preferably grow up in a single-family model where the father is the breadwinners, and enjoy education in classed and privatised environments that perpetuate existing social inequalities in their societies. Although children are missing in the debates of the GMC discourse, they are hyper visible targets of middle-class markets and are often instrumentalised as the agents of modernisation myths, and they will hence be at the centre of attention here.