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Scott, Sam ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5951-4749> (2023) Rethinking privilege and social mobility in middle-class migration: migrants 'In-Between' Review. South Asian Diaspora, 15 (1). pp. 113-114. doi:10.1080/19438192.2022.2121487

Official URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2022.2121487>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2022.2121487>
EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/11609>

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Rethinking Privilege and Social Mobility in Middle-Class Migration.

Edited by Shanthi Robertson and Rosie Roberts

Routledge: Abingdon

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The size of the global middle class is set to increase dramatically from 1.8 billion (in 2009) to 5.3 billion (by 2030). The majority of this growth will come from Asia. No wonder then that Shanthi Robertson and Rosie Roberts felt it time to draw together scholars to explore middle-class migration with a particularly focus towards Asia. The result is a timely, richly evidenced, and inspiring, edited collection that plugs a key gap in the migration literature.

Certainly, middle-class migration has not been ignored by scholars, but it has been neglected relative to other forms of mobility: with a tendency to be attracted to the social poles when deciding what forms of migration to research. Whilst one should not over-state the novelty of this edited collection, it is a book that both restores balance to the migration literature and also responds to a highly significant global social trend (a burgeoning middle-class). Moreover, it directly addresses the relative absence of class (until quite recently) at the heart of migration research.

The way in which class position for migrants is transnationally experienced, negotiated and emplaced is something the book engages with throughout and this is a central theme and key strength. As part of this, upward social mobility, following spatial mobility, appears to be far from guaranteed. Migration secures status for some whilst frustrating others who may experience stagnant or even downward mobility. There is also an important distinction made between what middle-class migrants experience after a move and what they hope for in the longer-term.

The ambiguity in the relationship between social and spatial mobility, and in some cases even middle-class precarity (see Chapter 4), is clearly and forcefully emphasised throughout. Status and privilege “travel in different ways” (p4) and evolve in different ways. Such contemporary ambiguity with respect to international mobility and class position may reflect the squeeze in living standards affecting the middle-classes. It is also linked to the often quite hostile, or at best perplexing, migration policy *milieus* structuring and constraining migration and settlement. Whilst a few chapters touched upon the importance of these *milieus*, overall, I felt there could have been more of a policy angle to the book.

A unifying concept developed through the edited collection is ‘privilege’. Robertson and Roberts (p18) explain: “The privileges engendered by class, gender, race, nationality,

occupation or other social markers are not simply carried by migrants as they move...they are actively produced, reproduced and transformed by migration processes and regimes". This is, to my mind, a very neat way of critically exploring the complexity of middle-class social and spatial mobility. The concept of privilege was taken up skilfully by some (e.g. Chapter 3, Chapter 5, Chapter 8 and Chapter 9) and will no doubt be taken up by many more scholars in years to come. I would have liked, though, to have seen this concept developed much further by more of the contributors.

Linked to the dynamic conceptualisation of privilege, there is a clear consensus in the book (as the title makes clear) that middle-class migrants are propelled into an 'in-between' position following their move. This relates not only to class status (between marginalised and elite migrants) but also with to both how this status is fluid and evolving (as a process rather than end point) and how it is transnationally emplaced (across both 'here' and 'there'). The opening chapter to the book places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of the in-between but this is then only explored explicitly by a few of the contributors (notably in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 and Chapter 8). Once again, it would have been good to have seen more direct engagement with the idea of the 'in-between', possibly linking this to the related and now widely used concept of liminality.

Considering the contributions in the book as a whole it is clear that there is great breadth both in terms of countries covered and in terms of the types of middle-class migrants profiled. Certainly, the notion of 'a middle-class' is problematic, and the book goes a long way in recognising this: emphasising a need for nuance and plurality when discussing the spectrum of middling migrants. In this sense, it takes us well beyond the early literature (from the mid-2000s) on middle-class migration. Related to this, whilst the book is squarely focused on class, other facets of identity are brought to the fore such as race, gender and age. This diversity and nuance is a real strength and underlines the importance of edited collections like this in building up sophisticated and multi-dimensional empirical and conceptual insight. Ultimately, one is left in no doubt of the need for a class-based lens when considering middling migrants' experiences and trajectories, but one is also left in no doubt that a class-based lens on its own is insufficient.

Throughout, the book draws upon very rich empirical material, with all contributors opting for in-depth qualitative methods and often drawing on impressive sample sizes. Going forward, there is certainly room for complementary quantitative research into middle-class migration, more policy engagement, and further development of the notions of 'privilege' and 'in-between' status (ideally with reference to related established concepts in the extant literature). The potential for future middling migration research, and the platform established by this edited collection, is something that could have been reflected upon in a concluding section and the book does end a little abruptly. Overall, and despite minor gripes, *Rethinking Privilege and Social Mobility in Middle-Class Migration* will undoubtedly anchor and inspire future studies of middle-class mobility which, given the predicted growth of the middle-classes, is likely to become an ever more important strand of international migration research. The collection (all 11 chapters are of high quality) is one that I would certainly recommend to readers of South Asian Diaspora and to students and researchers from across the social sciences more generally.