



The rise of an 'indocile middle class' in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This article sheds light on subterranean and subjective dimensions that shape specific sectors of African middle-classes: processes of personal subjectivation, understood as the construction of oneself as an actor of one's own life, against the hold of political, cultural or economic domination. Cameroon offers an insightful case study. Most of the country's middle-class owns its status and economic situation to the regime's patronage system. However, our series of biographical interviews shows the emergence of new subjectivities in citizens who decided to change the course of their lives following the 1990s democratic protests. Members of this 'indocile middle-class' have prioritised the development of economic, media or cultural projects that have allowed them to implement different values and set up spaces that escape the cultural and social control of the political regime and may contribute to a more democratic and better developed Cameroon.

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Introduction

Until recently, most definitions and analyses of the middle class in sub-Saharan Africa have focused on economic criteria. The African Development Bank (AfDB 2011) defines the middle class in sub-Saharan Africa as individuals with a per capita daily consumption between US\$2 and US\$20 in purchasing power parity. Dominique Darbon (2012, 36) points out that the middle class escapes 'precariousness while not having enough capital to allow it to live totally or significantly from its rents'. Connected factors considered as indicators in the studies of the emergence of a middle class in Africa include urbanisation, economic growth and changing consumption patterns.

However, the new African middle class is not only the product of an economic boom, new infrastructure or new possibilities for communication and payment tools provided by cell phones. Recent research, case studies, and theoretical arguments have unveiled the interplay between economic and political factors, emphasising the connected struggles against poverty and authoritarianism (Daniel and Neubert 2014; Melber 2016). Other recent works (e.g. Stoll 2017) have highlighted sociocultural factors, such as living standards, the connections with rural, ethnic or religious communities or upward social mobility. Kroeker, O'Kane, and Scharrer (2018) have shed new light on the vast diversity among

the sub-Saharan African middle classes and the need to integrate perspectives from the Global South to understand the reconfigurations of classes in the global age.

Our in-depth analysis of biographical interviews with individuals who successfully carried out economic, media or cultural projects in Cameroon suggests that beyond its economic and material conditions, the emergence of a specific part of the middle class also results from specific personal and subjective processes. The article invites us to consider processes of individuals' self-construction (personal subjectivation) and their transformative impacts in the relationship to society and the state as a crucial feature of forming a specific part of the middle class, the 'indocile middle-class'.

The first sections of this article introduce the concept of 'indocile middle class' in the context of Cameroon and some elements of the theory of personal subjectivation that have taken on increasing impetus in French-speaking sociology. The third section provides a brief account of the unrest of the 1990s and the repressive response by the regime that have shaped Cameroon's recent history and our interviewees' lives and subjectivities. The next parts of the article examine the personal trajectories of 10 interviewees who belong to this 'indocile middle class'. They are rooted in two fundamental aspirations of these individuals: the will to build oneself as autonomous subject and as the actor of one's life (subjectivation) and that of contributing to a social, political and cultural transformation (agency) in Cameroon.

Methodology

Between November 2011 and 2016, we conducted 40 in-depth biographical interviews with Cameroonians who had developed economic, cultural, media or civil society projects in Yaoundé (4 millions inhabitants) and Douala (3.7 million inhabitants). Out of this set of interviews, we selected 10 individuals who have gained social recognition for their projects and accomplishments and experienced similar personal processes. We have closely followed these individuals since 2011 and regularly met. The second wave of interviews was carried out in 2016 with the same 10 interviewees. We paid particular attention to how they constructed their life stories, their biographical bifurcations (Bessin, Bidart, and Grossetti 2010), and the perception of their role in society. The third wave of interviews, conducted between October 2018 and February 2019, notably focused on the new orientations of their commitments and the evolution connected to the political context (after the 2018 elections and the incarceration of senior state clerks and opposition leaders).

We draw on the biographical experiences of these 10 participants who embody a diversity of social and economic profiles within the urban middle class. While the selected sample does not represent the middle class as a whole, the trajectories, projects and personal experience of these 10 individuals exemplify the discreet emergence of an 'indocile middle class' that distinguishes itself from the one that benefits from the patronage system. Our focus on qualitative interviews with a selected and limited sample allows us to shed light on a category that remains invisible in macro-political or economic studies. While they form a minority of the middle class, they may nevertheless lay the roots of changes in Cameroonian society.

Repeating interviews over a period that spans almost a decade (from 2011 to 2019) with a limited group of people who strongly embody the social category we seek to

understand has revealed a demanding but efficient method to collect qualitative data. Interviewing the same person three times allows to reach a more subjective and reflexive account of their trajectory and personal development, as Bajoit (2013) has shown in his study of subjectivation processes. Usually, the first encounter is limited to a more factual account of their trajectories, mentioning only superficially the subjective dimensions of their experience or their divergences with the social system of the regime. In the second and third rounds of interviews, we included questions to collect interviewees' perspectives on the first set of analyses based on the previous waves of interviews.

Our work in analysing the biographical interviews consisted in elucidating the links between the 'sociological' and the 'biographical'. Following the biographical interview analysis method, we sought to understand how the life experience of our interlocutors provides information on the social and/or political history that is underway, or even in the background and, in return, 'how these socio-historical processes can be understood from the analysis of individual paths' (Dubar and Nicourd 2017, 4). Based on these interviews, we developed an in-depth analysis of the *processes of personal subjectivation* understood as the construction of oneself as an autonomous being, as the author of one's life.

An 'indocile middle class' in Cameroon

Nothing seems to have changed in Cameroon political regime for decades. Political science literature on Cameroon focuses on political change that the regime has prevented or on attempted changes in the distribution of economic wealth that have been thwarted. The country remains under the grip of an authoritarian regime that controls all the areas of public life through crony patronage networks. It prevents citizens' political engagement (Amougou 2011) and the development of economic projects, as the main economic sectors remain tightly controlled by the patronage system.

Recent development in Cameroon reminds us that the link between the emergence of a middle class and sustained GDP growth should not be taken for granted. The economic growth over the past decade has not reduced the social divide (Ngo Tong 2016). In fact, economic growth and the massive influx of Chinese capital (Kernen 2014) have reinforced the patronage system controlled by the ruling elite (Amougou and Bobo Bobo 2018) as they increased economic and social opportunities for members of a middle class connected to patronage networks and who benefited the regime (Mohan and Lampert 2012, Kernen and Khan Mohammad 2014).

In Cameroon, as in most sub-Saharan Africa, the 'middle class' refers to a segment of the population with some albeit limited economic wealth. While they do not belong to the narrow political-economic elite that dominates the country, they are part of the top 10% to 20% of the population in terms of wealth and income. This middle class comprises a petty bourgeoisie working in public administration and international NGOs, and as engineers, retailers, wholesalers and entrepreneurs whose sources of income largely derive from the patronage networks that spread throughout the country (Darbon and Toulabor 2014; Melber 2016). In a context that made it impossible to integrate the national elites or to change them (Eboko 1999), this Cameroonian middle class has renounced contesting the regime given the exorbitant cost. It has been portrayed as

'apathetic' (Jacquemot 2012), 'demobilised' (Pommerolle 2008) and benefiting directly or indirectly from the regime's business opportunities or civil servant jobs.

This article argues that a minor but influential part of this middle class may be actors of a change already partly underway in spaces created by the projects they have set up. They form what we call an 'indocile middle class', in contrast with the relatively apathetic and well-inserted 'docile middle class' that owes much of its status and economic situation to the regime patronage network; it is another middle class that has emerged in Cameroon since the 1990s.

They share a high social and cultural capital (inherited, built or acquired), a critical stance towards the ruling elite and a will to develop cultural, media or economic initiatives autonomous from the regime. While the structure of the authoritarian regime prevents them from taking part in political parties and elections, they have developed different, more subterranean, ways to contribute to the transformation of their society. This article shows that they are moved by an aspiration to become actors of their lives and society, and hence to resist the regime attempts to control their lives and integrate them into the patronage system.

We argue that the 'indocile middle class' category is based on the individual values resulting from deep reflexivity and socialisation processes that familiarised them with an alternative social and cultural model. It encompasses members with different social backgrounds. Some experience downward social trajectories; others have gained access to more comfortable living standards that are regularly jeopardised. Following Neubert and Stoll's insightful research (2015), we do not ignore the existence of socio-economic differences, nor do we claim that this inequality is not essential. This paper insists that sociocultural factors, life projects, and subjective processes should also be considered.

We borrow the term 'indocile' from Mbembe (1988). He refers to a capacity of indiscipline, bypassing and trickery in African societies during the colonial and postcolonial periods. It entails a critical stance when citizens constantly invent their daily life to bypass political, religious or ideological norms. The biographical experiences of our interviewees are different as they reveal subterranean forms of resistance to the regime grounded in economic and social projects that create alternative and autonomous realities.

Research on democratisation processes in the Arab world has pointed out middle-class segments' significance and political agency. Bayat (2010) has analysed the crucial role of the 'poor middle class' of Cairo's suburbs in the emergence and unfolding of the 2011 revolution in Egypt. Khosrokhavar (2011) has shown the prominent role of young people belonging to a 'would-be middle class' in the Arab spring:

This segment consists of individuals who are well-educated and cosmopolitan and would hence expect a middle-class life. However, marginalised either by unemployment or precarity, that aspiration's negation resulted in the group's widespread participation in the Arab revolts. ... They are middle class in their culture and education but are mostly excluded from it. ... As individuals, they feel that they have no place in society, that it gives no meaning to their life, nor the promise of a better future. They feel caught in a vice, with no possibility of self-expression in the political arena controlled by the oligarchies, nor of self-fulfilment through any economic project in a society where economic entrepreneurship requires capital and 'political' relations that are out of reach. (Khosrokhavar 2011, 219 & 224)

The shared experience of a difficult insertion into the job market and a denial of civil and political rights has had a deep impact on the subjectivities of a whole generation (Glasius and Pleyers 2013). While we point to some similarities with some middle-class segments in Arab countries and share a similar focus on subjective processes, the individuals we focused on in this article differ from this 'would be middle class' youth in three significant ways. They belong to a previous generation that has made its way to the economic middle class (and are thus not 'would be', even if some have renounced this economic well-being) and have developed business, social and cultural projects that were out of reach for the 'would-be middle-class youth' of the Arab world.

Subjectivation: becoming actors of their lives and their world

The works by Scott (1985) on peasants in Asia and Bayat (2010) in the Arab world have shown that when repression and control by an authoritarian regime do not allow the organisation of protest movements and demonstrations, resistance¹ arises from everyday life, through disparate actions that might seem trivial but defy the regime. While recognising the role of everyday actions, we take a step further in this article by emphasising a subterranean process: the processes of *personal subjectivation* understood as *a personal and subjective transformation related to the construction of oneself as an actor of one's life*.

The practices and projects we describe are initiatives by economic, social or cultural entrepreneurs who have developed their projects voluntarily outside the state patronage system. Their initiatives are both the fruits of politicisation and subjectivation processes and the seeds of potential democratisation processes.

We build on recent theories developed by French-speaking sociologists who have used the concept of 'subjectivation' as a heuristic tool to grasp the meaning and the scope of personal and subjective dimensions that are at the core of these actions and projects. Since the mid-1990s, authors in international (Beck 1997; Giddens 1992) and French-speaking sociology have shed new light on individualisation and subjectivation processes. Among French-speaking sociologists, researchers around Alain Touraine have developed a growing interest in the 'processes of subjectivation', understood as the self-construction of an individual as the author of his or her own life, as an autonomous being who resists the prevailing economic, political, cultural, social or media domination (Touraine 2002; Wieviorka 2012). This personal subjectivation process lies in a constant work of individuals on themselves (Dubet 1994; Martuccelli 2006), through which they strive to give meaning to their actions by emancipating themselves from dominations and ascribed identities (Bajoit 2010). Subjectivation thus combines a dimension of resistance to external impositions and a dimension of construction of oneself as an actor of one's life (Pleyers 2016).

Subjectivation processes take different shapes in different societies. Nevertheless, besides a groundbreaking study in Chile (Araujo and Martuccelli 2012), the studies based on this approach have been conducted in Western European countries. This article aims at contributing to this flourishing literature by shedding light on subjectivation processes in a different context, the Cameroon authoritarian regime, and analysing its contribution to the rise of a different middle class in that country.

The 1990's unrests as a generational marker

The primary socialisation of the people interviewed in this research occurred under the authoritarian regimes of the presidents Ahidjo (1958–1982) and Biya (since 1982). However, their generational marker (Mannheim 1972) lies in the early 1990s pro-democracy demonstrations that profoundly impacted the subjectivities for each of them. Rather than an age cohort, 'generation' refers to a partly shared experience of blocked achievements and hopes during their emerging adulthood or at a bifurcation in their life.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Cameroon's middle class was heavily affected by an economic crisis, and the subsequent imposition of the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) by the IMF and the World Bank (Aerts et al. 2000). This contributed to generating social unrest and mass protests that expressed strong democratic aspirations. After a series of sectorial mobilisations by lawyers and teachers, the protests spread after the arrest on 19 February 1990 of Yondo Black, a figure of the opposition then accused of 'planning to create a political party'. The students' demonstrations held on 6 May were severely repressed. The unrest did not recede. On 27 December of the same year, Célestin Monga, a young bank employee, published an article in the privately-owned newspaper *Le Messenger* in which he criticised the state's monopoly over the alleged 'democratic transition process'. The arrest of Monga and of the *Messenger* director sparked riots across the country (Eboussi Boulaga 1997). 1990 was also the founding year of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), which was the main opposition party between 1992 and 2018.

In the following years, Paul Biya gradually regained control of the situation after his official victory in the presidential elections of October 1992 and progressively returned to 'authoritarian routines' (Pommerolle 2007). He strengthened his hold on the institutions and control over the opposition parties, which allowed his re-election in 1997. At the same time, the imposition of the SAPs and the devaluation of the franc CFA in 1994 had a double effect. They increased the importance of jobs in public administrations and state-controlled companies and strengthened economic precariousness outside of these sectors. It pushed an increasing part of the middle class to the informal economy while the ruling class took advantage of privatisation to seize public resources (Éla 1998).

All the interviewees mentioned the harmful effects of this crisis and the deep resonance of the early 1990s pro-democracy movement, revealing a shared temporality that shaped their lived experience. Except for Bernard and Henriette, who are 10 years older, the other interviewees' entry into adulthood took place in this decade in which the vast majority of the interviewees set the bases of their economic, social, cultural or media projects. During this decade, Severin launched his magazine, Bob his higher institute of management, Malet his cultural enterprise and Madeleine her human rights organisation.

In the following decade, Biya strengthened his authoritarian regime. He established the 'operational command' in 2000 after unrests in Douala, the main stronghold of political opposition. He legalised the state of exception and established a police unit that committed extra-judicial executions. In February 2008, the regime severely repressed 'hunger riots'. That year, Biya amended the constitution to allow him another run at the presidential elections in 2011.

The authoritarian nature of the regime goes beyond the political sphere. Its nature of governing enforces its domination of and control over the economic and social spheres of

the country, and extends to everyday life social relationships. In this sense, the Cameroon regime subjugates (Foucault 1995) and controls its citizens, reducing spaces of autonomy in the sphere of institutional politics, in economic, social and cultural sectors and in the production of subjectivities. Malet felt this oppression by the authoritarian governability during a visit in 1995, after spending some years in France:

When I came back to Cameroon, I was shocked. I did not understand why everyone was in this mindset and could not see any perspective while I saw so many opportunities. I did not understand why these potentials were not used for the country's development, growth, and improvement. It was so revolting to see so much wealth and little impact on development and people's well-being that I decided to extend my stay in Cameroon and develop my project to promote local artists. (interview, 2016, Yaoundé)

Cameroon corresponds to what Eboko and Awondo (2018, 7) refer to as 'the stationary state', namely a 'political organisation that produces a system of patronage allegiances whose central aim is to preserve the existing power structure'. The ruling elite 'use the country's resources and those of international partners to its advantage and mobilises the administrative elites to further the goal of perpetuating its power'. However, by taking advantage of certain benefits of the prevailing regime, people of the 'docile middle class' also play a crucial role in the enforcement and reproduction of the operating mode of a regime that combines authoritarianism and patronage (Bayart 2006; Boyogueno 2012).

Personal journeys in an indocile middle-class

We selected the interviewees for the second stage of our research based on the distance they had travelled away from this 'docile middle class' and the regime patronage system. As the political arena remained under tight control, they developed initiatives in the economic, social, cultural or media sectors, driven by similar aspirations to avoid the regime's control over their lives, to be the subjects of their own existence and actors in a more democratic Cameroon.

Their shared belonging to the middle class hides different social backgrounds and trajectories. Bernard and Jean-Bosco are sons of peasants. They earned scholarships to pursue higher education, which represented a significant social ascension. Immediately after graduating from the National High School of Agronomy, Bernard started a two-month internship at an NGO run by a young Belgian engineer. He considers it a turning point in his life: 'It turned the wheel of fate ... For the first time, I met a team and a structure that greatly valued peasants' farming practices' (Njonga 2016, 57–58). This eye-opening experience made him aware of the discrepancy between what he had learned at the high school of agronomy and farmers' real life, leading him to adopt critical stances on the state system. At the end of his internship, the Cameroonian civil service system assigned Bernard to the Institute for Agronomic Research for Development. Tensions and misunderstandings with his supervisors arose as the experience he acquired at the NGO made it unbearable for him to leave things unchanged in the public administration. 'The way the administration worked was revolting. My bosses were clearly not role models. I realised I did not want to live in this environment (interview, 2012, Yaoundé). Bernard resigned from the agronomic institute in 1987 to found a small NGO that supports peasants and local development. A year later, he started the newspaper *La voix du paysan* (*The peasant voice*).

Hanan followed a very similar path. After graduating from the National School of Journalism, he was hired by the daily newspaper *Cameroon Tribune* in 1988. He quickly became uncomfortable with the editorial line that censored freedom of expression. 'I realised that they and I do not see the future of Cameroon in the same way'. To deal with this existential tension, he decided to return to university and graduated in communication in 1994 at the University of Yaoundé. He then became the editor of the independent newspaper *Mutations*. In 2008, he founded the newspaper *Le Jour*, and in 2010 a publishing house.

Malet had a different journey. He moved to France during his childhood, where he pursued most of his education. After graduating, he worked in Paris as a journalist for the radio 'Africa No. 1'. During a stay in Cameroon, he was baffled by the 'widespread social apathy' and the lack of credit given to local artists. He decided to settle back in Cameroon to develop projects to promote local arts and crafts.

Célestin went to Paris to study economics and became embedded in a cultural model where individuals are encouraged to develop their personality and contest what they consider an unfair situation. As explained by Bajoit (2013), the current 'Western subjectivist cultural model' encourages individuals to become the author of their own lives, to assert their opinions, beliefs, norms and affects towards the own conception of self-fulfilment and a 'good life'.

When he returned to Cameroon in the mid-1990s, Célestin worked for a foreign company in the agro-industrial forestry sector. In 2002, aged 35, he decided to start his own company to produce pasta. Three years later, he became the CEO of another flour manufacturing company and the authorised distributor of the leading pasta brand in Cameroon. In 2010, in a surprising move, he bought an almost broken pharmaceutical laboratory from a French-Belgian company. Interviewed a few months later, he explains it this way:

It was a very challenging project. I had just bought a broken company, but it was an industrial opportunity. I also took it because I am determined to reassert our sovereignty. I cannot understand that the diseases are in the South and the medicines come from the North and emerging countries. I had to move beyond food products and enter the field of pharmaceuticals because these are products of first necessity, essential for health ... , because I consider we have a mission, that we can give another image of Africa. This is how I think. When I was studying in France, I thought I should not have any complex towards my French colleagues but that it was necessary to get out of the logic of dependence and take care of ourselves. (interview, 2011, Douala)

Célestin attributes his regular economic difficulties to the country's poor governance. However, he considers his entrepreneurial activities as 'a mission'. Like the other members of this 'indocile middle class' we interviewed, he is moved by a deep aspiration to take his own responsibilities, a core feature of subjectivation processes. They see it as a way to resist the prevailing social order and set up concrete alternatives.

Even though she was born a decade earlier, Henriette was profoundly impacted by the 1990s unrests and repression. The mobilisations for democracy became her generational marker. The daughter of a director of an important bureau of customs, she obtained a university degree in history in Paris in 1974 and a Master degree in English in London. She joined the National Union of Cameroonian Students ('*Union Nationale des Etudiants Kamerunais*' UNEK) close to the fallen Nationalist Party. Shortly after returning to Cameroon in

1983, she resigned from a white-collar position at the National Hydrocarbons Company to join the clandestine struggle and became the leading editor of the underground newspaper *Kamerun Nouveau* ('New Cameroon'). Arrested in 1990, she was tortured and held in jail for seven months. After her liberation, she did not abandon her struggle and joined the coordination of the opposition, where she played a significant role. She founded the Cameroonian branch of *Transparency International* and became its vice-president and then president.

Bob has a similar trajectory but in the education sector. He obtained a PhD in France in the mid-1980s and worked as an assistant professor at the University of Douala. 'Frustrated' by the patronising practices and 'power abuses' in his institution, Bob distanced himself from the higher education sector he considered as 'disconnected from the country's needs'. Like other interviewees, he entered a long reflexive process on the reasons their working environment opposed people autonomy and hindered development. He reached the conclusion that 'Cameroon's pedagogical approach and the very content of teaching are the very opposite of what needs to be done' (interview, 2012, Douala). Hence, he decided to focus his energy on and dedicate most of his life to the 'Higher Institute of Management' he created in Douala in 1998. This institute aims to break with Cameroonian management schools' focus on sales and marketing and train its students to start and develop 'industrial and productive projects'.

While they operate in very different sectors, these people share a biographical bifurcation rooted in a reflexive subjectivation process that deepened their discomfort with the patronage of the authoritarian regime. All opted to develop projects outside (and against) the institutional frameworks of socialisation and professional ascension that dominate Paul Biya's Cameroon (Pigeaud 2011) at the price of renouncing comfortable and secure professional careers but with the possibility to live more according to their values and the conviction to contribute to the development of their country.

Middle class in upward and downward social mobility

Belonging to the middle class is seldom a permanent and stable status in sub-Saharan Africa (Darbon 2012). It is even less so the case for the 10 individuals we selected as representatives of this 'indocile middle class'. Understanding their life course, projects, and subjectivities requires acknowledging some similarities in their social positions and cultural identities as much as unveiling their different and sometimes opposite biographical and social trajectories.

Some interviewees have modest social backgrounds and have experienced upward social mobility thanks to school and higher education. Others grew up in a much wealthier milieu but opted to reject belonging to the elite patronising system, which led them to 'fall' into the middle class. Nevertheless, all their trajectories result from similar personal choices to favour the construction of themselves as autonomous subjects and actors over joining the 'docile middle-class'. They have prioritised the development of meaningful cultural, economic, social or education projects that have allowed them to implement different values and set up spaces that escape the cultural and social control of the political regime.

Higher education is a common feature among the people we interviewed and probably of this 'indocile middle class'. Nine out of 10 persons considered in this article had

graduated from university (3 in Cameroon, 6 in France). Education has been crucial in allowing them to access the middle class and the resources needed to develop their projects.

Bernard, Bob and Jean-Bosco are sons of peasants. They managed to climb up the social ladder thanks to success at school and in higher education. Jean-Bosco was entrusted to his older sister at the age of four. He learned early on to win his place at school and in society, and these challenges forged his personality and social awareness:

My older sister was learning to sew 5 km away from our home. She could not take me with her, as she was caring her daughter on her back. She resolved to leave me with her little brothers-in-law, who took me to their primary school and left me under the mango tree in the schoolyard while they were in class. At one point, I began to stay, from time to time, next to them in the classroom, and I started to learn writing. (...) All these experiences made me a sensitive person. When I reached university, I realised I must never let anyone push me around after the injustices I faced. (interview, 2015, Yaoundé)

Severin comes from a modest family. A bright pupil at primary school, he benefited from the support of his family and a local patron to complete high school and then earned a grant to study in France. He socialised in this new environment and joined various student organisations. He started a doctoral thesis in political science at the time of the 1990 pro-democracy uprisings in Cameroon. The trial of Yondo Black, a lawyer and key figure of the opposition, was a turning point for Severin. He decided to drop his doctoral studies and dedicate himself to the struggle for a more democratic Cameroon. Aged 28, he returned to Cameroon and founded a newspaper to foster a 'pluralistic political society' and provide alternatives to government-controlled media.

Henriette and Malet experienced very different social trajectories. They grew up in the upper class, with parents holding high positions in the regime. Both completed most of their education in France and then returned to Cameroon during their early adulthood (Honwana 2012), with a strong will to contribute to a change in their home country, even at the price of social downgrading. Malet belonged to the upper class when he returned to Cameroon. He 'fell' to the middle class after his risky decision to leave his job in France and invest in the promotion of the visual arts in Cameroon, an area in which he had no previous experience. Henriette is the daughter of a customs director, a 'bourgeois from the administration' in her words. She 'found inequalities unbearable', 'especially in a country that has so many resources'. During her studies in France, she joined the Cameroon Student Union (UNEK), sympathised with the left and became an activist. Back in Yaoundé, she joined the clandestine struggle for democracy. Later, she got involved in human rights organisations which implied renouncing the material comfort and living standards of her childhood and youth.

For their part, Célestin and Haman come from the upper and intermediate middle classes. They both refused to enter the patronising system and its rent. However, by becoming successful industrial and media entrepreneurs, they improved their living standards, but they live with the constant threat of an arbitrary administrative decision that may bankrupt them. Célestin has become a CEO and an industrial actor, a status that may suggest he belongs to the upper class. However, his economic situation and living standards are constantly at risk due to his choice not to embrace the ruling elite patronising system. For instance, his generic drug manufacturing company was closed in May

2013 for about a year. Insecure material conditions bring him closer to the lifestyles of the 'new African middle classes' that live with considerable income variations and, to a high degree, more reliant on local social networks than on his connection to the national elite (Stoll 2017).

Being an actor of one's life: subjectivation processes

Choosing one's destiny

Working in a public administration is broadly considered an achievement and the guarantee of comfortable living standards in the middle or upper class. Our respondents meet all the requisites (academic success, cultural capital, social status) to join patronising networks and occupy a privileged place in Cameroonian society. Nevertheless, they turned this option down, driven by a desire to build their lives outside (and against) the control of the regime. They rejected mainstream society's success criteria to become autonomous actors and free themselves from subjugation.

For these members of this 'indocile middle class', resisting the control of one's life by the patronising system of the authoritarian regime is first and foremost rooted in a personal quest for autonomy and an aspiration to be the author of one's own life. In most cases, their subjective processes are triggered by specific events that result in deep reflexive processes and are translated later into concrete projects and initiatives in the economic, media, cultural or social sector.

Célestin, Bernard, Haman, Henriette and Malet renounced an easy and stable career to start risky projects, such as promoting visual arts, working for a human rights NGO or taking over a bankrupted company. They consider that taking control of their own lives and enacting their values and worldviews were worth the material sacrifices.

The living conditions of the actors of this 'indocile middle class' do not always reflect their status. Severin, Bob, and Haman explain that they allocated decent wages and working conditions to their employees at the price of sacrificing their own comfort. Until 2013, Severin and Bob lived in relatively modest apartments they rented.

Bob started his management school in Douala by renting rooms in various institutions. His school was under the tutelage of another higher education institute. He needed 10 years to secure a loan that allowed him to fund his first campus. The process was not exempt from sacrifice in terms of living standards and working hours:

I taught and worked part-time in several private institutions in Yaoundé and Douala. The salary I earned as a professor, conducting impact studies and giving seminars was entirely invested in the Institute. I did not allocate myself a salary for my teaching at the Institute to maintain it afloat. It has meant many sacrifices. I gave up my life. I own no material goods, no house. Up to now, I rent the place I live in. (interview, 2012, Douala)

Subjectivation and socialisation

The interviewees have built their life narratives stressing their autonomy. They present themselves as individuals who managed to escape the regime's control over their lives, projects and socialisation. However, it would be misleading to consider their subjectivation as purely individual processes. Subjectivation processes are both deeply personal and social as they result from a socialisation process in a cultural model (Bajoit 2013) that

fosters individuals to 'fulfil themselves' as autonomous persons and take control of their destiny. Moreover, fulfilling these processes requires social 'supports' (Martuccelli 2006) that are unequally distributed, such as access to education, a social state or some freedom of expression. The interviewees were impregnated with this 'subjectivist cultural model' during their adolescence or early adulthood and benefited from social supports and favourable conditions that paved the way for their subjectivation processes.

Malet, Henriette, Célestin and Tayou, who come from well-off families, integrated the values of individual emancipation through the elite education they received thanks to their parents' status and wealth. They did not have to work during their youth and pursued their studies while developing their reflexivity and critical analyses. Interviewees from underprivileged or modest backgrounds (Bernard, Madeleine, Severin and Bob) developed their reflexivity during their youth as they became aware of the need to 'fight to escape precarious living standards'. They all emphasise similar values transmitted by their family or during adolescence: a sense of personal responsibility, the quest for personal achievement, the freedom to choose one's destiny, a sense of justice, some taste for risk, and the importance of success at school. For some interviewees coming from modest backgrounds, these experiences are rooted in the family structure. Bernard, whose family lived from small-scale livestock farming and fieldwork, describes his childhood as a period of 'great wealth without money'. 'I very much value the education I received from my parents. It is what rubs off on me today (...). My father helped me a lot in developing initiatives. In his model of education, he didn't lock me up. That forged me'. (Interview, 2011, Yaoundé)

Social psychologist Lucia Rabello's (2009) research with low-income family children in Brazil has shown the critical role of open and more horizontal relationships within families during childhood in the future development of social and political participation and the upbringing of democratic citizens.

Being an actor in one's society: subjectivation and citizenship

The interviewees' engagement in various projects stems from their outrage towards the regime and its patronage system and their desire to translate their aspirations into tangible projects. As the repressive regime blocked the paths of political activism, they translated their aspirations into economic, media, social or cultural projects. As shown by Cameroonian political scientist Jean-Marc Ela, the entrepreneurial ethos may constitute an answer to both the exactions of the postcolonial state and the behaviour of international aid and funders' complex. He criticises the latter for 'funding the obstructions to development by ignoring the patronising networks which are at the roots of the economic crisis and the deterioration of the country' (Éla 2006, 18).

Some of our interviewees are directly committed to struggles for democracy. Henriette chairs a human rights NGO. Madeleine's association denounces indecent detention conditions and torture in state prisons and executions perpetrated during the 'operational command' period. Haman, Severin, and Jean-Bosco founded free media, with editorial lines critical of the ruling elite. Others became opinion leaders and have generated some tensions with the regime. The regime banned several of Jean-Bosco public talks in 2015.

Other interviewees have a less direct political focus but consider their economic, social, and cultural projects as contributions to the country's transformation. Bernard focuses on

local economy projects for farmers, but he lives his work as a social and political commitment. As an agronomist engineer, he sets up alternative economic and social projects for peasants. He started an NGO programme that supported 60 poultry farmers. In 1997, businessmen close to the regime started massive low-cost importation of frozen chickens, undermining the NGO project's sustainability.

This massive importation was a disaster for local producers. 92% of them left aviculture. Moreover, the mass importation networks were a niche for corruption practices and embezzlements. While they authorised the import of 100 tons, 300 to 400 tons were actually imported. (Njonga 2016, 96)

After two years of fruitless claims in newspapers and media, Bernard was affected by anxiety and a feeling of helplessness. Such feelings regularly emerge in people experiencing a growing disjunction between a high level of subjectivation and a far lower capacity of action (Pleyers 2016). However, Jean-Bosco did not give up. In 2003, he founded the 'Citizen Association for the Defense of Collective Interests' to oppose 'the system of collusion and corruption that exists from the top of the ministries to the customs officers'. With the support of international peasant activist José Bové and African peasant leaders, he campaigned to change the law. In 2006, the government finally prohibited the mass importation of frozen chickens.

Likewise, Malet first aim in setting up artistic and economic projects was to promote Cameroon's local artists. He gradually became a figure in the emerging art sector. He was involved in drafting the law for the craft industry in 2007 and initiated the writing of the Cameroon Cultural Charter for UNESCO in 2015. Similarly, Bob considers his management institute a political contribution to promote industrial development and train young engineers to 'design and manufacture what we need in Cameroon'.

Conclusion: the indocile middle class and the slow emergence of another citizenship

Confronted by the political deadlock that followed the repression of democratic mobilisations in the 1990s and the economic turmoil due to the control of leading corporations by the regime patronage system and its docile middle class, some individuals opted to translate their aspirations into economic, social or cultural initiatives. This 'indocile middle class' finds its roots in the aspirations for individual autonomy and self-fulfilment combined with a will to contribute to a more democratic and better developed Cameroon.

Beyond their divergent social trajectories and different economic conditions (often more precarious than their social status suggest), the individuals we interviewed belong to an emerging 'indocile middle class' marked by high social and cultural capital and deep reflexive processes. These have forged their aspiration to be the author of their own lives in a critical stance towards the authoritarian regime and its patronage system. They share both the will and the ability to implement their quest of becoming autonomous subjects in concrete economic, social, media or cultural projects. Based on their biographical narratives and their vision of their professional careers, this article has shed light on their processes of personal subjectivation that are both the products and the producers of a discreet rise of an 'indocile middle class'.

A successful career in Cameroon usually requires showing one's loyalty to the ruling elite. By developing alternative and autonomous projects, these entrepreneurs show different ways of engaging may be successful. Their initiatives produce a different social fabric as well as forms of socialisation, no longer governed by the regime but by the projects in which each one is engaged. In this sense, Bernard's former NGO and magazine, Jean-Bosco's citizen forum, Malet's promotion of local artists and craftspersons, and Madeleine's commitment to helping former prisoners all constitute a contribution to the democratisation processes. They embody subterranean transformations in Cameroon society and call for a more democratic society, of which their projects may constitute some insightful bases.

Note

1. Resistance is a form of contesting 'public transcripts' by making use of prescribed roles and language to resist the abuse of power – including things like 'rumour, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity' (Scott 1985, 137).

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