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The Rise and Fall of South African Sociology

Introduction

Sociology played a crucial role in rewriting South African history and in recasting approaches to the study of our complex and ever-changing social reality. It was at the forefront of a materialist broadside which challenged the intellectual hegemony of the liberal school in South Africa in the late 1960s and early 1970s and its connections with the rising anti-apartheid movement were often very intimate. There was a vibrance and relevance which animated the discipline and excited its students frequently into direct action against the apartheid regime. The sociological debates about race and class as explanations for the nature of apartheid exploitation and oppression were directly and often crudely translated into political programmes for democratisation and nation-building. There were, of course, other sociologies at the Afrikaans-language universities, but these had been left behind by the vanguard of materialist sociologists who came to dominate the social science intellectual scene in the country. Martin Legassick, Harold Wolpe and Frederick Johnstone were the torchbearers of this approach even though they embarked on their mission with little reference to earlier African scholars, like Govan Mbeki or Isaac Tabata, who had been completely immersed in the politics of liberation.

Today however, there has been a massive exodus of sociologists from academic departments into state departments or into lucrative consultancies providing social recipes to the government and big business. The discipline has not navigated the post-apartheid terrain with quite the same confidence as it had challenged apartheid. In the process, its connectedness with organisations of civil society has been severed in favour of a dull professionalism with an instrumentalist and opportunist project. There are no longer any cutting edge debates emerging from the discipline, there is virtually a complete amnesia about race and class, and sociologists are certainly not leading in the intellectual arena.

There can be little doubt that the discipline has descended from its lofty heights and it is thus important to map the contours of its intellectual decline by emphasising the ongoing legacy of institutionalised apartheid in the sphere of higher education. This is the surest manner to enhance its chances of revival. Sociology is practised in entirely different worlds at Historically White Universities (HWUs) and at Historically Black Universities (HBUs) and this discussion hopes to chart a course towards a relevant sociology which is committed to undoing the horrors of apartheid and concerned to preserve and promote the basic precepts of the discipline. The article is divided into five

sections. It starts by outlining an abiding schism within sociology between its European origins and its African location. It goes on to elaborate on the demise of debates within the discipline. Thirdly and fourthly it briefly surveys the staff and the course content in sociology departments and finally, it proposes a way forward for the discipline to re-establish its relevance.

Sociology in Africa: whose modernity?

Like all social scientists, sociologists are subjected to many different intellectual influences, but all sociologists must have an understanding of the crucial contributions made by two Germans and a Frenchman, during the middle of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Marx, Durkheim and Weber constitute the essential sociological canon and the origins of the discipline are therefore unmistakably European. However, just as the particular experience of Europe has been universalised by colonialism and the spread of capitalism, so has sociology been marked in very definite ways by the particularity of its origins.

If there is one strand common in sociology then it is the compulsion to uncover the hidden, to explore the underlying generative mechanisms for social behaviour, to remove the many layers of distortion and to discern the many different layers of meaning. As Peter Berger argues, ‘... the first wisdom of sociology is this – things are not what they seem’. For example, an outcome can be presented in a way which does not accord with reality at all. This is clearly the case in respect of South Africa’s transition to democracy. It is widely perceived as a peaceful transition – as a miracle, based on the magic of Mandela. However, twenty thousand people died in politically related violence in the decade prior to the first elections based on universal franchise in 1994. The fact that the overwhelming majority of lives lost were black has something to do with the perception of a peaceful transition. Since so few whites died in the political contestation, although many perpetrated gross violations of human rights, it has become easy to erase the deaths of blacks as insignificant to the democratisation of South Africa.

Whether we like it or not and many of us do not like it, as sociologists we have to contend with the enormous popularity of various versions of postmodernism. The shift to the amorphous category of cultural studies as the disciplinary boundaries have been restructured has left sociology severely weakened, since work under the rubric of cultural studies would ordinarily have been done by sociologists. There can be little doubt that postmodernism has had a potent impact on setting the agenda for intellectual debate in the current period. South African sociology is no exception. One of the crucial historical questions of our time, informed very much by this influence, is whether or not there has been a fundamental rupture in the nature of contemporary capitalism. A number of binary opposites are proposed in a

periodisation of capitalism which suggests that there has been a movement from industrialism to post-industrialism, from Fordist mass production to post-Fordist flexible specialisation, from a production-led to a consumption-driven version of capitalism, aptly captured in Foucault's phrase, 'the stylization of existence', from class antagonism to the disappearance of the working class, from attempts to provide grand narratives which purport to offer coherent accounts of the totality of the human existence to a celebration of fragmentation and difference, to connect all of these, according to Lyotard – a movement from modernism to post-modernism.

But what does the evidence say? We live in profoundly different times, there is no doubt about that – but have things really changed so fundamentally for the vast majority? For example, revolutions in media and communications technology supposedly fuel this global flow of ideas and products. Yet this is not the full story, in South Africa, like in many parts of deep rural Africa, many people still do not have access to a radio as the hard realities of poverty and illiteracy batter down the myths of a glorious globalisation. At the same time we must take account of the uneven nature of this development – in the squalor of rural Africa, we do find Internet cafes.

Sociology tends to look for patterns and regularities, it inclines towards the general rather than the particular and it ignores the aberrant. This is the core of the sociological project but there are any number of separate research agendas and traditions. At heart, sociology is concerned with so-called grand narratives, with asking the big questions and with attempting to provide broad interpretive schemas for understanding. In this sense, there is an inherent antagonism between sociology and postmodernism, especially in so far as the latter is concerned with debunking grand narratives. The intellectual conversation with the ideas of the Enlightenment continues to inspire social theoretical debates about how best to understand the world and how to change it. In many ways these are totalising theories attempting to explain the broad sweep of history. But social theory is not confined to these only. Many sociologists are also deeply concerned with the immediate experience of individual action and their meaning for the actors – while simultaneously asking huge questions about the nature of capitalist development as a world system.

There is a sense of schizophrenia running through this discussion which I cannot avoid mentioning, difficult as it is for me. Virtually all the sociological theories, all the major concepts come from outside the continent while we are firmly rooted here and our major intellectual and political preoccupations are located in our national and continental homes. I feel this schizophrenia very deeply because I know that I am an embodiment of it. Virtually all my formal learning has been Euro-centric. At school we studied European and American history but nothing on African history. We knew more about the North than about the South. Our self-knowledge was woeful but we grasped the intricate details and finer points about insignificant episodes in European history. Our

political education was homegrown but it was informed by strategies and tactics in the struggle against apartheid rather than an overarching analysis of our society. Developing an African sociological discourse through the promotion of an African sociological community is an extremely difficult exercise against this background and in the current environment. African sociologists have applied metropolitan ideas and concepts without subjecting them to critical scrutiny and they have not, in the main, developed concepts appropriate to the study of African societies. Attempts to indigenise sociology in Africa have been inchoate, unsystematic and anecdotal. It is not surprising that these have thus far not accomplished much popular acceptance by African sociologists.

As if to remedy this schizophrenia, there is a recent resurgence in sociological interest in the writing and social theory of the Tunisian-born Muslim philosopher and historian Ibn Khaldun, who lived during the fourteenth century at least four hundred years before the growth of sociology as an independent field of inquiry. In many ways this reflects an attempt to universalise the local Arab experience of North Africa to counter the European claims of universality. There are now endless discussions on whether Khaldun was indeed the source of all systematic sociological inquiry and whether his contribution signalled the beginning of economic theory. Arnold Toynbee, the well-known English historian, thought that Khaldun's magnum opus, *Muqaddimah* – actually an introduction to his six volumes on the history of the Arabs and the Berbers – was '... the greatest work of its kind ever created by any mind in any time and place'.

While it is satisfying to provide such a singular corrective to the monopoly over social thought and theory enjoyed by the West, Khaldun does not provide the conceptual tools to deal with the many problems currently facing the African continent. In my view, this backward-looking romanticism is not the answer. To be frank, Khaldun's work is stuck in Islamic philosophical thought with very strong religious overtones. Being a medieval scholar, his cyclical view of history, no doubt the reason for Toynbee's admiration of him, is based on a description of the repetitive social and political trajectories in North Africa, with little reference to the notion of progress – one of the central features of modernity and sociology is a child of modernity.

The enlightenment roots of sociology create a seemingly inescapable disciplinary bias which measures societies broadly on a continuum between traditional and modern. When applied in this teleological manner to Africa it necessarily finds the continent lacking in the supposed essential ingredients for progress. Thus Weber's rational bureaucracy is largely absent, Marx's modernising bourgeoisie is ill-formed and Durkheim's sophisticated division of labour is missing. This teleological perspective does very little to understand Africa's current political and economic predicament in historical and global terms.

Explanations are largely missing from this sort of tick box approach to current realities.

Yet we still seek explanations and the big ideas of distribution and equality continue to arouse interest in sociology. Although there are now any number of sociologies, the discipline should still be animated by an abiding conceptual concern with the plight of the downtrodden and on various ways in which their condition might be improved. It should be remembered that the discipline has its origins in a conservative response to the revolutionary ideas of the Enlightenment. It was conservative because it questioned the boundless optimism of the Enlightenment that individuals could discover the laws of the social world through reason and that the findings of science could be utilised in pursuit of human emancipation. While the thinkers of the Enlightenment mounted a frontal attack on the irrational aspects of tradition as a fetter on the freedom of individuals in communities, sociologists were concerned with the role of customs, norms and values in the maintenance of social order. Sociology thus encapsulates the debate between the infinite possibilities of individual human agency and the structural constraints which envelop that agency. Karl Marx's famous lines from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* serve as a constant and graphic reminder of this dialectic, 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living'.

In disciplinary terms, this is known as the sociological perspective or the sociological imagination, the particular manner in which we understand human behaviour in a social context in order to make sense of what would otherwise be a rather chaotic world. The structure and agency divide permeates virtually all sociological work. By this we mean the dialectical relation between the manner in which individuals both shape the world they live in and are shaped by it. The intentions and motivations which drive people to engage in particular forms of social action and the very many constraints and parameters which together determine the outcome of these actions lie at the heart of the sociological perspective and the sociological imagination.

The intellectual schizophrenia of South African sociology finds expression in a range of different contexts. It is clearly evident in the division between HBUs and HWUs. It can also be noticed in our course offerings and how we as a sociology community avoid teaching courses on African societies north of the Limpopo and how we evade engaging with African social thinkers. It is also readily perceived in our intellectual output. Our journal articles and books rarely involve cooperation with African scholars north of the Limpopo. This schizophrenia is also present in an emerging racial polarisation of South African sociologists between whites hankering after recognition in North America and Europe (and perhaps Australia) on the one hand and black sociol-

ogists (certainly those at HBUs) with a keen interest in establishing contacts with other African scholars.

Debates in Sociology

The historiography of South African social science is premised on a number of critical debates. Sociology eclipsed History via a materialist broadside in the late 1960s and early 1970s only to be surpassed first by the riposte of the social historians in the 1980s and then by the market and the exigencies of the new democratic state in the 1990s. Since there is now a generalised amnesia around the crucial debates on race and class upon which the earlier materialist broadside was grounded, sociology in South Africa has shrunk into a crouching shadow of its former self. The confidence and optimism in the possibilities of the discipline to explain our complex reality have given way to an enduring pessimism and the instrumentalism of preparing students for jobs in industry. As some sociologists scurried about trying to make their discipline more marketable, they effectively presided over its demise as a functioning area of study at their universities.

There is clearly a generational aspect to this change. The sociological generations of the 1960s up to the 1980s were preoccupied with ways in which the battle against apartheid should be waged. Different viewpoints of the struggle often represented different theoretical choices and ideological predispositions. The linkage between some sociologists and the struggle against apartheid was often very direct. One of the unintended consequences of apartheid in South Africa was that it gave people a sense of real control over their own lives in the battle against racism and oppression. Social scientists played a crucial role in this struggle. In the labour movement and in student politics, the theories we taught in the classroom were used to propagate the struggle against apartheid. Some sociologist immersed themselves totally in the struggle without any notion of the differentiation between their roles as activists and as scholars. Others remained tied to the apartheid structures acting as its organic intellectuals or active spies. Still others preferred to remained aloof from the hurly burly of politics and the messiness of the real world. They could not avoid it though. The Durban strikes of the early 1970s and the student revolt of the mid-1970s had a profound impact upon the lives of all South Africans. Almost simultaneously there was a major historiographical change in the country as the liberal tradition gave way to a materialist broadside. The history of South Africa was being rewritten just as it was being made. It is not easy to chart the lines of causation, but the timing of these changes suggests a link rather than a coincidence. Sociologists reflected the transformation unfolding in South Africa and contributed as apologists or activists, to the nature of the process and its ongoing outcome.

There was a relevance to the work of Sociology and our classes were bursting at the seams since students thought that we could offer them explanations for the contemporary situation as well an understanding of their own individual places within society. But where is the discipline today? Ari Sitas (1997: 16), writing about the 'Waning of Sociology' in *Society in Transition* is very frank about this: 'Since 1990 and especially over the last two years sociology's prowess has waned'. Since the discipline has so effectively severed its links with civil society, there are no longer any cutting edge debates emerging from its ranks. Ideas about the future trajectory of our society are now private affairs, discussed in sociology staff tearooms, but not articulated in any systematic debate or ongoing discourse about the problems confronting the country. The discipline has splintered into a myriad of different atomised opinions and unconnected perspectives.

Institutional matters

The challenge for South African sociologists is how to reestablish and institutionalise the legitimacy of the discipline while retaining the crucial links to a strong civil society and especially the burgeoning social movements in the post-1994 period. Currently, the critical edge of scholarship connected to the struggle against apartheid has given way to the exigencies of government-defined national priorities. The effect has been quite devastating on the discipline and this is reflected in a variety of different ways, not least, the parlous state of its organisation.

The South African Sociological Association (SASA) is a product of a merger in 1993 between the pro-apartheid and formerly whites-only Suid Afrikaanse Sosiologiese Vereniging (SASOV) and the anti-apartheid Association for Sociologists in South Africa (ASSA). Today, its membership is below that of either of its former constituent parts. Now that it is neither a professional stiff collar organisation, nor glad neck appendage to the democratic struggle, it has lost a clearly identifiable core. In this regard hybridity has certainly not produced the desired effects. In fact, the lack of identity in the new organisation has had the effect of instilling a dullness into the organisation and there is very little commitment by the broad sociology community to see to it that the Association survives, let alone prospers under the new circumstances. There can be little doubt that the intellectual lowpoint for SASA, coincided with the Dasrath Chetty as president. This is represented in one major area. The convention in SASA was for the president to deliver an address on the current state of the discipline at the annual congress. Chetty scuppered this tradition and presented a business plan for the organisation as his address. Most recently Jimi Adesina, the well-known Nigerian sociologist, has taken over the presidency of SASA. He has brought a refreshing level of energy and commitment to the organisation and there are real signs of revival.

The two journals of these respective organisations, the *South African Journal of Sociology* and the *South African Sociological Review*, were replaced in 1996 by a new journal of the association, *Society in Transition*, which '...was initially not accredited' (Webster et al., 1996: 6). It appeared irregularly and often with multiple numbers in a single volume. The *South African Sociological Review* has been incorporated into the *African Sociological Review* published and supported by CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa) with headquarters in Dakar, Senegal but edited and printed in South Africa. Although still firmly rooted in South Africa with many of its articles drawn from here, the ASR is a serious attempt to shift the focus of social science research beyond local borders and to offer an alternative site for publication.

There have been attempts to reverse this deterioration and decline. But the direction of these efforts has been towards greater institutionalisation and professionalisation. For example, SASA spent an inordinate amount of time in setting up a Standards Generating Body (SGB) for the discipline in line with the prescriptions of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The idea was that there would be national unit standards as little parcels of knowledge with very specific outcomes, usually tied to the demands of the marketplace. Thankfully, this idea has been jettisoned in favour of the flexibility of registering entire degrees as qualifications around which programmes can be devised. This has effectively eliminated the necessity for individual disciplinary based SGBs. The whole exercise would have had the effect of bureaucratising the academic world and of stifling the independence of academics.

Sociology Staff

Just like all other aspects of South African society, the discipline of Sociology was deeply racialised. Located in separate, but extremely unequal institutions, sociology is still practised in entirely different worlds at historically black and historically white universities. The results of this inequality remain with us today as the troubles in South African society are reflected in South African sociology. The huge chasm which exists between practising sociology at historically white and historically black universities mirrors the persistence of black poverty and the deep inequality in the society. It is an inequality which the demise of apartheid has done little to alter. In fact, the differentiation of the university system has been entrenched rather than undermined by a haphazard process of mergers, incorporations and take-overs.

A cursory examination of the web-sites of sociology departments reveals just how little tertiary education has changed since 1994. Besides the Universities of the Western Cape and Venda, none of the other historically black universities have web-sites with useful information on their sociology depart-

ments. This in itself is a telling reminder of the gap between HBUs and HWUs. The polarisation is acute and it is manifest in the concentration of black sociologists in the HBUs.

What can sociology do within the context of a divided university system where the level of intellectual discourse in the main remains dull (despite some welcome flashes of inspiration) and where the intellectual community remains fractured along race lines? A critical moment in the transformation of universities and sociology departments in particular will be when there is a black majority of staff members. In terms of permanent staff this has not happened at any of the historically white universities, although some have performed better than others in the promotion of equity.

The euphoria around the fad of programme-based education since 1994 has had a deleterious effect on the discipline nationally, both in terms of the administrative structure of departments as well as the demographics and intellectual output of sociologists. Some departments have ceased to exist as functioning entities. For example, the University of Port Elizabeth no longer has a sociology department because the power-brokers at the university took the jargon of outcomes-based education far too seriously and ended up by splitting up the department into a myriad of different programmes. The impact was severe at the staff level as the former head of department of sociology has effectively been demoted to being the head of a programme with two staff members.

Course content

There are some patterns in the course offerings, but in the main, the full range of sociologies is evident. Besides the obvious introductory courses at the first year level, most departments offer courses in social theory at the second year level. UCT has theory at the second year, but not at the third. Virtually all departments teach research methods in some or other form. The postgraduate offerings reflect a very wide variety, but in the main industrial sociology emerges as the major strength of South African sociology. There is an interesting mix of traditional areas (such as deviant behaviour at the former RAU – now the University of Johannesburg after its merger with the Wits Technikon – political sociology at Stellenbosch, social problems at UNISA) with more recent trans-disciplinary courses such as globalisation at the University of Johannesburg and gender studies at Pretoria. Stellenbosch University and the University of the Western Cape have joint anthropology and sociology departments but joining these has not resulted in a collapse of the disciplinary apartheid between them as the anthropology and sociology offerings remain quite distinct.

An interesting change in the sociology department at Rhodes University is the dramatic shift in student interest from industrial sociology to general sociology. The student enrolment in general sociology has overtaken that of industrial over the last three years. For as long as industrial sociology had been

offered at Rhodes it was always the more popular course as students perceived it to be more vocational – providing them with a marketable skill. This has now changed dramatically in favour of general sociology.

How does one practise the craft of sociology under such enormous disciplinary diversity, in the context of such very different research agendas and priorities and within such a grossly unequal university sector? If we follow Bourdieu that sociology is a discipline that causes trouble or an undisciplined discipline then we need to ask just how we can disturb the current malaise in order to deal with the lack of intellectual moorings in sociology.

It seems obvious that African sociologists need to use the continent as a source of theory and not only for data collection to prove or disprove inappropriate models and hypotheses derived from the West. However, there are powerful forces which mitigate against the emergence of such an African conceptual corpus. For example in South Africa we do not really have a sociology textbook which deals exclusively with our concerns. There was an abortive attempt to apply David Popenoe's well-known introductory text to Africa in the most crude and mechanistic fashion, deservedly criticised by Margo Russell (1998: 74) as '... a flawed text by any standards'. More recently, Oxford University Press has tried to capitalise on the obvious market by producing little booklets dealing with specific issues in South African sociology. The first of these, *What is Sociology* by Johann Graaff was similarly attacked by Lionel Thaver (2002: 158):

(T)here is a studious avoidance of dealing with South African realities warts and all. In other words in the entire text all sixty eight pages of it there is not a single mention of apartheid. This is a South African sociologist producing a text of sociology published in South Africa, yet with the exception of migrant labour there are no empirical references whatsoever to South Africa, Southern Africa or Africa.

There remains a desperate need for a South African sociology textbook informed by local concerns but not in a narrow parochial manner. It seems clear to me that a re-orientation of South African scholars towards the rest of the African continent is absolutely vital in respect of how we position ourselves in the world. Yet, courses on Africa are conspicuous by their absence in our sociology curricula and so are African social thinkers.

Towards a relevant sociology

The South African Sociological Association is making a valiant attempt to survive but I think it is fair to say that the discipline in South Africa is in crisis (while it is thriving internationally). The debates at our conferences are sterile with very little engagement with the public discourses that incite such heated controversies. The recent conference in Durban was a case in point. It was supposed to be a thirty-year anniversary of the Durban strikes of 1973, that crucial moment in South African labour history in which a number of sociolo-

gists were directly involved. But it turned out to be a great disappointment indeed. There were no representatives from civil society at all at the conference, there was no engagement with the many local struggles for which Durban has become particularly well-known since 1994. The conference symbolised the organisation's estrangement from its roots of the 1970s. Instead, there was a genuflection towards the sociology of the North as we clamoured for an illusive international recognition. The keynote speaker at the conference was none other than Michael Burawoy, then president-designate of the American Sociological Association. His lecture did not bother to address the theme of our conference, which conventionally is the task of the keynote – to prepare the ground for the debates that follow in the rest of the conference. After making some platitudinous remarks about South African sociology, he went on to talk about public sociology in the United States of America.

While we have separated ourselves from civil society and the enormous creativity invariably involved in the process of struggle, we have settled instead for a dull professionalism which hankers after misplaced allegiances with the North. It seems as if there is a growing schism in South African sociology between black sociologists reaching out to the rest of the continent and white sociologists trying their level best to cultivate contacts with scholars in Europe, North America and Australia. While black sociologists are committed to a Pan-African ideal, this is rarely the case for white sociologists. It is a racial polarisation which mirrors the persistent divides in our society.

If sociology is to be true to its craft then it has a very definite role to play in the lives of ordinary people. We need to ask what sociology can do and indeed what it must do about the critical development challenges facing South Africa and Africa as whole. It is easy to draw up a wish list. The difficulty lies in ensuring that there is a realistic chance of realising at least some of the expectations and charting a role for sociology in this process. I think we should be quite clear that sociology has a role to play in making the world a better place. Our relevance as a discipline depends not only on our ability to rationally interpret the world but also on the extent to which we may have an impact on the processes of eliminating poverty, disease and ignorance as well as on how much we can contribute to the difficult transition from subjection to citizenship in South Africa and further afield. This is the social landscape which confronts us and it is both professionally and morally incumbent on us to assist in reshaping it. Hence, we have a dual role and a double responsibility. We are charged with the task of describing and explaining the nature of the social problems in our world. This in itself is a form of agency. But our roles should not end there. Both the instrumentalist notion, that social scientists should be tied to the apron strings of the government and serve the national interest as defined by ideologues, as well as those who prefer an extreme position of intellectual autonomy, are limited. The former because there would be no possibility for developing independent knowledge and the latter for a lack of

engagement and relevance. When sociologists forsake their critical edge in support of particular political regimes they lose their ability to develop sociological knowledge.

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