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Coverage of African Related Studies in International Journals: Greater Exposure for 'Public Intellectuals' in Sociology and Industrial Relations?

Abstract

This paper assesses the coverage of African topics in leading international journals, focussing on sociology and an important sub-discipline, industrial relations. In doing so, it evaluates whether the number of articles with an African focus has grown or declined over the last decade. The findings reveal a very limited exposure of African and related debates. Moreover, the number appears to be declining, with periodic bulges in publication activity linked to journal special issues. However, there appears to be no relationship between the ranking of journals and the appearance of articles on African issues; scholars working on Africa have published in the most highly ranked journals in the field. There are therefore some grounds for optimism. But for African scholars, this is heavily dependent on the availability of resources. Without such resources, some doubt is cast on the future ability of 'public intellectuals' in Africa to influence international debates.

Introduction

African and related studies have much to offer to an international audience. This is at least partly due to the varied and challenging political and economic histories of the various countries within the continent, which provide a rich background to current debates. More importantly, however, the way in which such challenges have been, and are being, dealt with offer lessons to both developing and developed countries. This is true for the wide spectrum of societal changes charted by sociological studies, and in particular for studies of the changing fortunes of the labour movement. Without broad and international dissemination of research, such lessons will not receive the audience that would otherwise be possible.

The need for such dissemination places further demands on academics as public intellectuals. The role of the public intellectual is one that has been the subject of much debate (Small 2002; Poyner 2003; Williams 2006), but includes the expectation that academics will critically engage with societal

changes and the broader public, and encourage the development of scholarly activity. Against this background, the publication of articles in leading international journals can be seen as unwanted pressure.

Sociologists, along with social scientists in other fields, are now rated according to their 'international standing' (Burawoy 2004), and at the same time, raising the international profile of studies of African topics can provide the broader academic community with much-needed stimulation and insights. Thus, those engaged in research in fields such as sociology and industrial relations are under considerable pressure to publish more widely, irrespective of the severe constraints that are ever present for many academics working within the continent. These constraints are at least partially due to the implementation of structural adjustment programmes in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, which have had devastating consequences for higher education on the continent (Ghai 1991). Not only did chronic under-funding greatly detract from the learning experience of students, but it greatly reduced the scale of research at tropical African universities. Although universities in South Africa remain very much better funded, staff have faced the challenges of servicing relatively large classes, with limited administrative resources.

The need to track the extent of publication of African related studies is not a new idea, and in the 1950s, a list of publications on tropical Africa compiled by the International African Institute included over 5,000 entries. A list of publications on African topics, which spans a wide range of subjects as diverse as agriculture, languages, social sciences and literature is, moreover, now updated quarterly in the International African Bibliography (Barbour 1984). As yet, however, there appear to have been limited attempts to assess these publications according to internationally recognised rankings. This is at least partly due to the difficulty in obtaining agreement on which journals should be included, and how highly they should be ranked. Nevertheless, an attempt to measure the number of international publications might provide a valuable insight into the spread and scope of studies on Africa. This paper therefore tackles this challenge, and in doing so focuses on those journals that fall within the broad subject of sociology and an important sub-discipline industrial relations.

African Studies and the Role of the Public Intellectual

The role of an academic has arguably changed significantly over recent years, with pressure to deliver on both teaching and research outputs. At the same time, the traditional role of the academic has been challenged by factors such as consultancies, technocracy, commodification and the politicisation of universities (Burawoy 2005). Such factors can inhibit the ability of the academic to engage in activity that may mark them as a 'public intellectual'. This term has been characterised in numerous different ways, but for the purpose of this paper

is taken to include the wider dissemination of research to an international community of scholars that may yield benefits for the public good.¹

For sociologists, there has been a similar debate about 'public sociology'. In 2005, at the 99th American Sociological Association annual meeting, Michael Burawoy called for a renewal of commitment to this aspect of sociology, but also acknowledged the complementarity of other perspectives, namely 'critical', 'professional' and 'policy' dimensions. For Burawoy (2004), 'public' or 'liberation' sociology in South Africa has entailed a dialogue with social movements, and a focus on industrial sociology and labour, gender, violence, education and popular culture. This engagement between the use of sociology as an intellectual activity and as a way for creating a better society has been taken forward by eminent scholars in the field through public dissemination of findings, contribution to policy formulation, and the encouragement of a new generation of social researchers. However, in addition to these endeavours, a central goal has been the publication of academic papers in peer reviewed publications (Webster 2004).

The wider dissemination of African issues through academic publication is an important challenge, not least because such debates can challenge the insularity and hegemony of the United States sociology. As Burawoy (2005) argues:

... critical perspectives from different parts of the world must be developed and must be taken up by US sociologists, who have a special responsibility in contesting the hegemony of their own sociology (Burawoy, 2005b: 427).

Without such influences, United States sociology can be immune from international agendas. At the same time, it also has the ability to influence scholars who study and work in the US to take up the methodological frameworks and subjects that are relevant to that country (Inglis, 2005), which could again lead to a rather narrow sociological framework.

Other countries can, however, pro-actively set the agenda. One example of this is the massive debate that has emerged around the concept of 'social movement unionism', which was used to characterise the labour movement during the anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa. This term has since been applied to a variety of regional contexts, including the United States. Somewhat controversially, it has been suggested that although this concept was developed in South Africa, the term was 'reinvented' in the US, oblivious to African debates (Burawoy, 2005: 427). If this is indeed what happened, then the lesson is obvious: the fact that a major strategy for union organisation that emerged in Africa was not attributed to the work of African-based scholars presents strong challenges to those studying African issues.

The Crisis of African Universities

It is generally recognised that one of the most invidious long term effects of structural adjustment has been to weaken the university system within much of tropical Africa (cf. Harvey 2002; Ghai 1991; Ekong 1996; AAU 2006); part of the World Bank/IMF mantra in the 1980s was that money spent on universities was better spent on basic primary education (Szanton and Manyika 2006). Declining pay in real terms, and increasing teaching loads, forced many African academics into exile or into other areas of economic activity. Remaining academics have often been forced to supplement their incomes through consulting or commercial activities, leaving little time for research (Akilagpa 2004; Webster 2004). Finally, most African universities have been forced to cut back heavily on library holdings (Szanton and Manyika 2006). Again, this has discouraged scholars from publishing in leading journals – it is very difficult to prepare articles for, or get published in, leading journals without having seen back copies, both to obtain pointers in terms of issues and writing style, and to locate empirical research findings in terms of broader debates. Although many African universities have since sought to improve their position through re-attracting donor support and through greater numbers of fee paying students (Szanton and Manyika 2006), the major setbacks of the 1980s and 1990s have yet to be reversed.

Whilst, as noted earlier, South African universities tend to be very much better funded, again, library holdings have often faced heavy cutbacks. Moreover, South Africa's democratic transition has led to a 'rain drain' of many talented scholars into government and independent policy organisations. At the same time, a 'managerial revolution' at universities has in many cases led to instability, uncertainty, and an increased administrative burden on staff, again reducing time available for research output (Southall and Cobbing 2001). All of these factors have implications for the international dissemination of academic publications.

Selection of Data

The analysis that follows focuses on international 'core' general journals in sociology, and on those covering an important sub-discipline, industrial relations. It is recognised that African scholars may prefer to publish in African-based journals, in area studies journals, and/or in those specifically dealing with development. However, it should be noted that the funding crisis facing African universities has greatly thinned out the range of journals based in the continent. There are only two broadly sociological journals with strong international profiles, the *African Sociological Review* and the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. However, both have a very much smaller circulation than major journals based in Europe and the United States, and hence reach a smaller audience in both the developed and large areas of the devel-

oping world. There are also a number of other well-established broadly sociological journals in South Africa, including *Society in Transition* (now renamed the *South African Review of Sociology*), *South African Journal of Labour Relations*, *African Studies*, *Transformation* and *Social Dynamics*. However, all of these currently have quite small circulations and tend not to include many articles dealing with tropical Africa. Finally, there are a number of well-established international African studies journals, including *African Affairs*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, and *Review of African Political Economy*. However, only the first two have 'high impact factors' (in terms of Social Citations Index scales). The low impact factors of the others may make these less attractive outlets in environments where publication in highly ranked journals is prioritised.² Again, work published in such journals is specifically aimed at 'Africa specialists', and, hence, while a high quality of work is often found in these journals, they are less likely to impact on the discipline at large or mould central debates within sociology generally.³

In the following sections, we summarise the number of articles published on African topics and/or which develop broader theoretical insights, based at least in part on the African experience, and analyse their relationship to journal rankings. A different approach would have been to examine the number of articles by scholars actually based at African universities, but this proved very difficult given the scale of the African diaspora, with many scholars actually working abroad whilst retaining formal links to African universities.

Exposure of African Topics in International Sociological Journals

The frequency with which African related studies have appeared in international sociological journals is presented in Table 1 below, which summarises the number of articles on Africa or African related topics published in general sociology journals over the years 1996 to 2006. This list was compiled by analyzing the content of articles appearing in top ranked journals (Harzing, 2003) and through the use of key word searches in two major electronic databases of journals, JSTOR and Swetswise.⁴ In addition to showing the number of articles published in these journals, the table also shows the journals' respective citation impact factors – the frequency with which a particular article has been cited in a specific year – defined in the Social Citations Index as the ratio between the citations and citable articles published (Harzing 2003). Those journals with no impact factor given have not registered with the Social Citations Index.

Three major issues are readily noticeable from the above list. The first is that – given that most of the above journals appear at least four times a year – the number of articles published on Africa or Africa related topics is relatively small. Secondly, the exposure of African issues or perspectives in primarily

theoretically orientated journals is particularly slight. This is grounds for some concern given that theory is about summarising, ordering, and making predictions from prevailing social realities; the dominant sociological theories of the day have little grounding in, or make little reference to African social realities. Thirdly, most articles on Africa or related topics were concentrated in a handful of journals: *Contemporary Studies in Society and History*, *International Sociology*, *Current Sociology* and *Gender and Society*. Whilst all of these journals include some excellent articles, and are generally well regarded, their impact factor (and overall ranking in journal league tables) ranks well behind the *American Sociological Review*, the *Annual Review of Sociology*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, or the *British Journal of Sociology*, although certainly ahead of the bulk of sociological journals. In part, this reflects the dominance of particular methodological tools: the ASR and the AJS are dominated by articles centring on the use of advanced quantitative methodologies; in contrast, most African sociological departments have tended to focus on more qualitative methods. However, this would also reflect the limited nature of journal holdings in most tropical African – and South African universities. This would mean that many African scholars lack exposure to the most recent debates, as well as the most recent advances in quantitative data analysis.

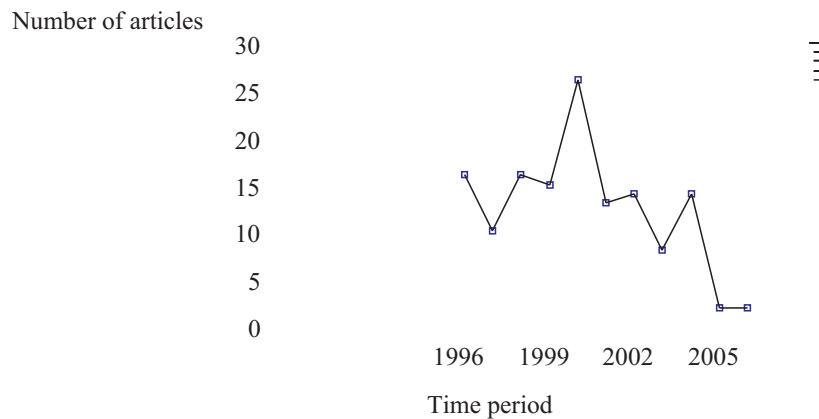
Table 1: Number of Articles on Africa or Africa-Related Topics Published in General Sociology Journals 1996-2006

Journal Title	Number of articles	Impact Factor
American Journal of Sociology	3	2.12
American Sociological Review	3	2.85
Annual Review of Sociology	3	2.75
British Journal of Sociology	3	1.58
Comparative Studies in Society & History	15	0.6
Contemporary Sociology	4	0.83
Current Sociology	21	–
European Sociological Review	1	–
Gender and Society	10	–
International Sociology	14	0.346
Journal of Sociology	1	–
Revue Francaise de Sociologie	1	–

Social Forces	7	–
Social Problems	1	1.1
Social Science History	5	–
Sociological Forum	6	–
Sociological Perspectives	5	–
Sociological Theory	3	–
Sociology	1	1.07
Sociology of Education	2	–
Theory and Society	7	–

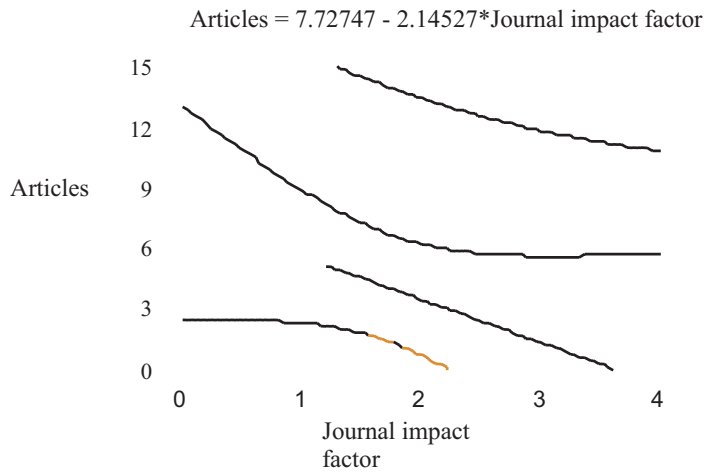
In order to evaluate the extent which the exposure of African studies has changed over time, Figure One depicts a summary of the number of articles published on Africa or related topics in general sociological journals from 1996 to 2006. The bulge in 2000, and again in 2004, in part reflects the effect of special editions. Again, overall trends are grounds for some concern: the number of articles is not only relatively small, but appears to be declining.

Figure 1: Time Series Plot for Number of Articles Published in General Sociology Journals on Africa and Africa-Related Topics 1996-2006



A further concern is the quality of the journals in which the articles appear. In order to assess this, we subjected the relationship between journal impact factor and number of articles to a simple regression analysis, as shown in Figure Two. Tables 2 and 3 present the relevant statistics.

Figure 2: Plot of Fitted Model – Number of Articles versus Journal Impact Factor



Dependent variable: Articles
 Independent variable: Journal impact factor
 Linear model: $Y = a + b \cdot X$

Table 2: Coefficients

	Least Squares	Standard	T	
Parameter	Estimate	Error	Statistic	P-Value
Intercept	7.72747	2.42388	3.18806	0.0086
Slope	-2.14527	1.21306	-1.76848	0.1047

Table 3: Analysis of Variance

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-Ratio	P-Value
Model	60.0353	1	60.0353	3.13	0.1047
Residual	211.153	11	19.1957		
Total (Corr.)	271.188	12			

Correlation Coefficient = -0.470509
 R-squared = 22.1379 percent
 R-squared (adjusted for d.f.) = 15.0595 percent
 Standard Error of Est. = 4.38129
 Mean absolute error = 3.3118
 Durbin-Watson statistic = 2.63929 (P=0.8597)
 Lag 1 residual autocorrelation = -0.329164

The output in Table Two shows the results of fitting a linear model in order to describe the relationship between Articles and Journal impact factor. The equation of the fitted model is:

$$\text{Articles} = 7.72747 - 2.14527 * \text{Journal impact factor}$$

With regard to the data in Table Three, given that the P-value is greater or equal to 0.05, the relationship between Articles and Journal impact factor at the 95 percent or higher confidence level is not statistically significant. Moreover, the R-Squared statistic indicates that the model as fitted explains 22.1379 percent of the variability in Articles, while the correlation coefficient equals -0.470509, indicating that the relationship between the variables is relatively weak. The standard error of the estimate reveals that the standard deviation of the residuals is 4.38129, and the mean absolute error (MAE) of 3.3118 is the average value of the residuals. Finally, the Durbin-Watson (DW) statistic shows that, since the P-value is greater than 0.05, there is no evidence of serial auto-correlation in the residuals at the 95 percent confidence level; in other words, there was no significant correlation based on the order in which the observations were captured.

In summary, the lack of a relationship between specific topic and journal focus shows that Africa and Africa-related articles are not necessarily clustered in inferior journals. This would reinforce the viewpoint that the lack of exposure of Africa and Africa related articles in leading general sociological journals is not so much a problem of the quality of work submitted but of volume – the relatively limited number of articles prepared for international journals (even lower ranked ones) in this area, and the choice of methods: most of the articles that appeared were based on purely qualitative methodologies, when many international journals favour more quantitative methods.

In order to assess whether similar issues emerge in a sub-field where studies in Africa can make a potentially wide impact on debates, the next section of the findings examines the exposure of Africa-focussed and related articles in leading industrial relations journals, an important sub-discipline of sociology that has relevance in almost all national contexts.

Exposure of African Studies and Issues in Industrial Relations Journals

Table Four depicts the number of articles on Africa or Africa related topics published in leading industrial relations articles from 1996-2006. Although not strictly an industrial relations journal, the *Academy of Management Journal* does carry articles within the broad area of employment studies, and is extremely highly ranked. It also has carried four articles with an explicit focus on African issues over the past decade – a relatively small number, but far more than many other highly ranked journals.

Table 4: Number of Articles on Africa or Africa-Related Topics Published in Industrial Relations Journals 1996-2006

Journal Title	Number of articles	Impact Factor
Academy of Management Journal	4	2.54
British Journal of I. R.	1	0.83
Employee Relations	3	–
Industrial Labor Relations Review	1	1.47
Industrial Relations Journal	2	2
International Journal of HRM	13	0.423
Journal of Human Resources	2	1.26
Journal of Industrial Relations	1	–
Labour	1	–
Labour/Le Travail	2	–
Relations Industrielles/IR	2	–
Work and Occupations	2	1.44
Work Employment and Society	2	

The journal that has carried by far the most articles on African or related topics is the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. Not only has this journal had a special issue on African topics (see Kamoche 2002), but it appears to be generally receptive to a range of different perspectives, country studies, and viewpoints on issues relating to employment relations on the continent. Also encouraging is that debates within the journal have led to new theoretical insights based on the African experience being developed, which have also been consolidated and further developed in two edited volumes (Budhwar and Debrah 2001; Kamoche et al., 2003).

The remainder of papers – in general industrial relations journals – represent the efforts of a relatively small pool of South African scholars, and scholars with strong links with South Africa. However, encouragingly, there has been a growing trickle of articles dealing with employment relations in the Horn of Africa.

Does Marginalisation Matter?

The exclusion of the experience and lessons of large number of societies from broader sociological debates and theory building is a matter of great concern; the bulk of the analytical tools forged to understand societies and social

relations within tropical Africa have been developed in the light of social experiences elsewhere. At the same time, theoretical insights developed in the light of the African experience may have some relevance to understanding the broader operations of global capitalism.

Africa's marginalisation within the global economy can result in research on Africa being cast as peripheral and of limited interest to an international audience. This is despite the fact that socioeconomic happenings in Africa are intensely relevant in understanding the nature of contemporary capitalism. Conversely, if the analysis of African social reality becomes more central to international sociological debates, this may have an impact on the broader perceptions of Africa's relevance to the global and political economy.

In seeking regional integration, the temptation might be to take an insular approach, and ignore the need for wider influence. However, as Burawoy (2004: 25) comments on the state of South African sociology: 'It is one thing to be embedded in national publics, national issues, but it is quite another to attempt an impossible and dangerous isolation from the global'.

The number of ways in which African scholars can potentially influence debates is huge, and admittedly, this paper does not attempt to cover all means of dissemination to an international audience. One such measure that is not included here is discussion of the changing focus of international conferences. In this respect, there is a need to develop initiatives such as those already established by groups such as the International Sociological Association and the American Sociological Association, who are seeking to open and expand US sociology to other forms of sociological knowledge (Webster 2004; Inglis 2005). At the same time, it is acknowledged that this paper does not cover all areas of academic publication. A fertile area for future research would be an investigation into the relative exposure of specifically Africa-related studies – and African scholars – in international/cross-national development studies journals, as well as in those concerned with general management topics and social policy.

Nevertheless, the paper does offer insights into the current state of publication within both sociological and industrial relations journals, and presents important challenges both to African scholars, and to others who are engaged in research on African related topics.

Conclusion

Burawoy asks how national sociologies can become 'full participants in a global vision and division of sociological labour' (2005: 431). This paper seeks to address this concern by examining the extent to which African studies have broken through to an international audience.

The findings reveal a very limited exposure of African and related debates within international sociological journals with a general focus. Moreover, the

number appears to be declining, with periodic bulges in publication activity in the area being linked to journal special issues. However, there does not seem to be a relationship between the ranking of a journal and its willingness to publish articles on Africa or related topics: given the necessary resources, it is possible for scholars working on Africa to publish in the most highly ranked journals in the field.

This raises the question as to what could be done to raise the profile of Africa and Africa related research within the broader sociological review. The principle cause – the chronic under-funding of African universities – will be difficult to resolve without broader structural changes in the global economy. However, given that many of the other problems faced by scholars in Africa centre on the lack of availability – and access to – international journals and cutting edge texts, the availability of free online access to journals produced by the major journal publishers – Taylor and Francis, Sage, Blackwell, Frank Cass and Elsevier – would provide a major boost to scholarship on the continent. Whilst this could result in a potential loss of revenue to the major publishing houses, it should be considered that journal subscriptions by most tropical African universities are very limited; restricting free online access to physical university campuses located in very poor countries would preclude the spread of free access beyond such areas. Again, publishers could gain through boosting their journals citation profile, and through the possibility of obtaining a greater number of high quality article submissions. Finally, we would suggest that those journals who do not wish to do this could experiment with ‘research note sections’. This would provide scholars who have first rate primary data, but a lack of access to the most recent literature, an opportunity to showcase their research findings in front of an international audience.

Notes

1. There has been much debate about the term ‘public intellectual’, and this term can also be used to denote the practical activity of political activism.
2. A caveat is in order here. This system is most associated with US-based journals. Whilst increasing numbers of European journals have sought to be listed in the indexes, there are many other excellent journals which remain outside the system.
3. It also should be noted that articles in such journals are dominated by European scholars and members of the African diaspora, rather than by scholars based on the continent, while the same is true for the range of journals dealing with Development Studies, and, more controversially, Anthropology.
4. The list includes those journals that were listed in Harzing (2003) in addition to those which were entered in the Social Citations Index after that time.

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