

The waning of sociology in South Africa

Ari Sitas

Department of Sociology, University of Natal, Durban

The paper describes the traditions of sociological scholarship in South Africa. It traces how an inter-disciplinary and often varied project responded to the rise of social movements in the Apartheid period and discusses the turning of this "discourse" into a scholarly discipline. It finally describes the difficulties sociologists and sociology departments encounter in the post-apartheid period due to a range of unforeseen circumstances that have weakened both research and the lecturing in the subject.

I would like to argue that Sociology's powers are beginning to wane and that such waning is partly due to what Sociologists do, partly it has to do with what Sociologists do *not* do and partly it is due to what is happening to us - sometimes through us and often despite us. So, before we get muddled up, I would like to distinguish between the concepts of "disciplinarity" and "intellectual formation" and argue that our craft is waning because of troubles in the areas these concepts denote.

In the first part of this paper I trace how a broader intellectual formation, broader than sociology and broader than the Universities themselves animated the concerns of pedagogic and research agendas; in the second part, I trace how this intellectual formation gets institutionalised by the mid-1980s and how it begins to construct its own "lineages" and "tradition"; in the third, I trace how scholarship and curricula interacted during the years of insurrection from 1984-90 and finally, I trace the marks of a fatigue and

exhaustion. The conclusion raises the challenges that confront US.

I sensed a need for distinguishing between "disciplinarity" and "intellectual formation" when we (Mare & Sitas: 1992) wrote a textbook which introduced sociology to post-matric students through Natal University's Teach Test Teach Programme.(1) The excitement of meeting our changing student population's needs, of incorporating materials that made sense in the life worlds of young people from all over Kwa-Zulu Natal, of distilling vibrant issues through the sieves of our "sociological imagination" (C Wright Mills: 1970) was tempered by a pressing dissonance: I was becoming an *ideologue* for lineages and intellectual traditions that felt meaningless. At the same time paging through the commentaries of such traditions (Aron: 1965-7; Giddens: 1989; Abrams: 1982) and scouring through the texts of its most convincing critics (Gouldner: 1971; Therborn: 1976) I could not but marvel at its integrity and resonance. From Comte to Goffman, ideas evolved, got chal-

lenged, got borrowed and reshaped, were changed and renovated in a continuum that had a logic, a historical consistency and a purpose. The problem was that *our* intellectual formations were at a point of peculiar dissonance from the canon.

There is a fashionable way out of this dissonance: if I had the inclination I could have, following RW. Connell's (1995) fascinating account of the formation of sociology's canon and its lineages, and traced the *post facto* construction of sociology by its originating ideologues as a selective appropriation of what was current during its first and founding years. This as he did, could be traced to the self-discovery of Europe's imperial mission. By framing such ancestry and linking it to the "colonial", I could have read my disquiet in a range of post-colonial sentiments and declare the opening of new post-marked vistas. But I won't, because this would trivialise both the significant scholarship that marked the last hundred years in the metropolis and within our own, local, micro-foundations.

Another response marked by our well-groomed *narcissism*, leads straight to an argument of "exceptionalism". our local conditions, their framing by Apartheid strictures and forms of racial domination, have made our thinking, and our sociological traditions, like our colonialism, of a special type. What is glaring though is not the presence of our Apartheid shackles but the absence of the "discipline" of sociology as a serious and coherent intellectual tradition.(2) There was a brief period, in Durban between the late nineteen-fifties and the 1960s where sociological work led by Leo Kuper (1965) which was sensitive to the "murmuring of the masses" and anti-apartheid in inspiration, begun developing a serious home-spun scholarship. But the period was ended with Apartheid's suffocating grip.(Sitas: 1995) Neither departmental work nor the Association of Sociologists managed in the ensuing years to distinguish itself as an intellectual, scholarly exercise. Debates initiated by Kuper's work were taken up internationally by scholars who were part of the Apartheid

Diaspora.(Magubane:1979, Mafeje: 1971, Rex: 1979)

Alongside sociology, anthropology as the systematic study of the African "other" to white society and, African Studies, at its crudest, a multi-disciplinary extension of the first world's academies,- a kind of academic foreign service in the post-colonial period,- gained some ground in South Africa. It has proven difficult though to find our familiars there.

The obvious point is that within the University context there existed a routine sociology, more or less conventional, covered by the state and reaching a small number of students. Then there were the divided Sociological Associations (neatly broken as we all know by a serious division between state supportive and supported sociologists and those who were uncomfortable with Apartheid strictures) What can be traced as an intellectual formation started being developed outside and despite University "disciplinaries".(3) What started from the early 1970s onwards through marginal and harassed groupings of left intellectuals, white and black was a social discourse which had a normative and political foundation; it was such a formation that provided the culture levers to prize open departments and disciplinary fields of inquiry. And such a formation, contained different narratives of emancipation and was animated by egalitarian norms.

Many debates of the period were happening outside the Universities: black consciousness intellectuals were **developing** their arguments about the centrality of psychological liberation as a pre-requisite for a black renaissance (Pityana et al: 1993); ANC-linked intellectuals, in and out of Robben Island castigated the culturalism of BC positions; discussion groups and study circles on Robben Island debated the nature of peasant society, the specificity of the third world, revolutions and the relationship between nation and class; academics inspired by the 1960s upsurges in the US and Europe started finding strategies of using such ideas without incurring the wrath of the state; young trade unionists argued out the priority of the black working class; understandings of ethnicity and traditional-

ism were to be translated later into what was to become Inkatha; women found through feminism a new language of equality. The clandestine distribution of the writings of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Fanon, Césaire, Cabral, Nkrumah and Mao were being passed from hand to hand. Finally talented young scholars would discover in England at the Universities there a critical scholarship pioneered by South Africans who had left the country and inspired by new left debates.

At the same time such formations were gaining ground in the Universities, always in dialogue and sometimes in friction with emerging social movements. For example, black consciousness ideas were being consolidated through networks at the Medical School in Durban, at Durban-Westville through the University Christian Movement and SASO; on the "white" campuses such ideas were spread by NUSAS and isolated academics in Politics, Philosophy, English, Sociology and History departments.

Slowly and persistently a range of journals begun circulating left-ish ideas under very difficult circumstances: the **Black Review**, the **Saso Newsletter**, the **South African Labour Bulletin**, and later **Staffrider**, **Africa Perspective**, **Work in Progress** and an array of newspapers, pamphlets, photostats. But the intellectual formation and the networks that sustained it were inside and outside the Universities, their debates were mostly oral and when written they were watered down, and to this day they are all crying for an oral history of the times to restore them.

In short, the formation linked as it was to a sense of emancipation was marked by a cross-disciplinary ethos where history, sociology, philosophy, politics and so on, interacted through various versions of historical materialism and critical social science to find answers to pressing problems.

According to the memories of some key participants, the period between 1969-74 was brewing with ideas: the formulation by the ANC after the Morogoro Conference of 1969 that the African working class will lead the struggle for national liberation was thoroughly debated and through various discussion groups different ideas around

its meaning found a broader audience after the release from Robben Island of inter alia, Dhlomo, Mxenge, Gwala in the early 1970s; all these were happening alongside the libertarian lectures of Richard Turner at Natal University which interacted with the BC movement on the one hand, radical theologians in the Catholic Church, and radicalising scholars who found in his ideas of participatory democracy and his Sartre an emphasis of "doing" and "praxis" the courage to start organising black workers (Turner: 1978); these were happening alongside the publication of Shula Marks's work on the Bambatha Rebellion (Marks: 1970) and Johnstone's piece on "White Supremacy and White Prosperity" (1970) showing how interlinked capitalism's wealth was with Apartheid; at the same time, essays by Legassick (1971) on the Frontier Tradition, Van Onselen's work (1971) on worker consciousness in the interstices of the Rhodesian Mining economy at the turn of the century; Arrighi and Saul's work (1973) on the Political Economy of Africa, emphasising the necessarily different currents the South African revolution had to follow as against the peasant and migrant societies of the rest of the continent; Bundy's work (1979) on the rise and decline of a black South African peasantry; Wolpe's (1972) seminal essay on cheap labour power; Eddie Webster's (1974) essay on the labour aristocracy and finally, J. Rex's (1974) defining statement that the compounds and the reserves under Apartheid were the most diabolical (my word) "system of exploitation yet devised". Finally, alongside these formulations and scripts there were also cultural interventions: e.g. Wally Serote's *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972) with its focus on the grime of black urban experiences and the pass-law system and documentary ones: Cosmas Desmond's *Discarded People* (1971) with its caring account of the areas of forced removal and closer settlements.

The sense of discovery and progress that the above created could not but become intense passions after the Durban Strikes of 1973. There: tens of thousands of black workers without prior warning bring the second largest industrial city of the country to a standstill; there: in their tens

of thousands joining trade unions; there: strikes start spreading throughout the country; there: the first text of Industrial Sociology: *The Durban Strikes*, (1974) produced by the IIE involving surveys, fieldwork, argument and a literature review resonating with the writings of the new intellectual formation; there: its cautious prose as the authors were conscious of possible Apartheid-linked repercussions. This too was the first collaborative book between academics and the social movement, the trade unions that inspired it.

II

In 1984, Eddie Webster gave his first presidential address, *Competing Paradigms- Towards a Critical Sociology in South Africa*, during the ASA Conference. This he followed with *Current Activities and Possible Directions in the Future*, in 1985. Eddie Webster's presidency reflected a broader "take-over" of the ASSA by a left constituency in 1983 which subsisted on the above "intellectual formation" and reinforced within many of the Universities by the proliferation of Marxist, Neo-Marxist and labour studies-based curricula.

What Webster argued for was the need of establishing Sociology as an independent critical discipline, one that was characterised by competing paradigms and sensitive to the plight of ordinary people and their social and political movements. For him such a Sociology was by definition a "multi-paradigm" enterprise.

The task of critical sociology was "to unmask the material and social reality of our lives as experienced in society." (1985:4) Its task was to "evoke" and to "awaken" in the reader to critically challenge common-sense and the status quo. Our second task was to link our "theory/knowledge to the practical activity taking place among the majority of South Africans" (1985:5)

A feature of the second address was, over and above the extension of the meanings of this critical and multi-paradigmatic enterprise, the consolidation of Sociologists into a **professional** association underpinned by a "social scientific **community**"(1985:5). Finally, he painted a picture of an Apartheid-induced inequality: the pau-

city of black sociologists in a climate where, already (by then) more than half of Sociology students were black. And linked, to that the horrific staff:student ratios and resource mal-distributions between the "White" Universities and the Apartheid-created "Black" ones.

The ASSA Conference was to be, for a few years, a haven of radical debate. It attracted organic intellectuals from the trade unions, the UDF, the National Forum, the civics alongside academics from disciplines beyond sociology. It was animated by an exploding new labour studies scholarship which was located in a growing Industrial Sociology tradition; by also a growth of scholarship linked to transformations at the University of Western Cape, where a black intelligentsia was emerging and finding a new voice (Wilmot James, Ivan Evans, Yvonne Muthien etc.) and of course, by the growing insurrection around us.

Gradually a more profoundly anti-apartheid tradition started emerging in many of the designated "Black" Universities, as the stranglehold of a white, Afrikaner bureaucracy was being loosened through courageous challenges. In many instances, like in the Transkei and Bophuthatswana there was a thorough victimisation of academics and a harassment and incarceration of scholars.

What was unnoticed in the humdrum of ASSA was a subtle shift: Webster, a member of the "intellectual formation" mentioned above, a sociologist since 1974, was for the first time speaking **as** a sociologist. In the early 1970s, the seminar programmes (Africa Perspective 1976: no. 2) at Natal University were cross disciplinary; the debates around race and economic growth (Schlemmer and Webster: 1978) involved economists, political economists, political scientists and sociologists; Webster's first edited book in 1978, involved an intervention in, as his introduction insists, **historiography**; his article/intervention, **Servants of Apartheid**, (1980) is couched in the need for, a move away from service to Apartheid but also beyond "pri-

vatism", pragmatic realism" to create, not a sociology but a broader social science of liberation.

Furthermore, if one reads Webster in the context of earlier work, his presidential addresses are not about shifting or changing "paradigms" but a claiming of a professional plot through which the earlier preoccupations could continue. But gradually, since then this land claim has been expanding to exercise its dominance and create a new "disciplinarity". Parallel processes were afoot in historiography, politics and economics. (4)

Silently and methodically the ideas from the "old" tradition had been transformed into courses; new appointments were turned into career paths; alongside this there was the routinisation of publications into refereed journals; publication formed the substance of a competition for promotions and advantages were used for the procurement of research funds and a need begun to be felt for a self-definition within a sociological canon. This of course was occurring at the same time as the insurrection and the social movements it unleashed, occupied many of the sociologists in their daily work. It is precisely the amalgam of a social movement challenge and the drive for institutionalisation that animated a creative tension that produced new kinds of scholarship. What the "tension" could not produce though was a strictly sociological past and lineage.

Indeed sociology in South Africa is, to use a fashionable term, a **hybrid** formation. I would like to contend that it is only by encouraging its deformities, its indigenous hybridity, as opposed to normalising its practice that we can arrive at real innovations and growth and a real relationship to the broader sociological world.

Throughout the last 25 years most social thinking carried out in international contexts has been thoroughly utilised: Althusser and Poulantzas, EP Thompson and Adorno; Foucault and Barrington Moore Jr; Bendix and Bourdieu; Dahrendorf and Habermas; Mead and Giddens and now, Said and Spivak, the list is large and growing. They have been utilised, re-extruded and applied as concept clusters to answer local problems and interpret local dynamics. The usage of Goffman to reflect on the lives of hostel workers was not

inspired by a debate with Parsonian functionalism but by a desire to demonstrate that black workers were not passive victims of an oppressive and exploitative situation.

Most scholarly questions did not emanate from extensive literature reviews but by problem-contexts of a broader social and political debate. The "Sociological tradition" was a resource, an a historical library of ideas that were consulted, raided and used in an instrumental sense. For scholars who travelled to the metropolis of the world any semblance of a "sociological tradition" was filtered through institutions that were constructed to deal with the periphery: African Studies Centres, Developmental Programmes and Degrees.

Subtly, alongside a consistent professionalisation, the unfolding events of the insurrection, the trade unions, the civic associations, the victims of violence, the objects of state repression kept on throwing up issues and in many cases new demands for research.

The era produced a significant number of publications: whether the field was labour studies (Webster 1985; Maree: 1987, Hemson: 1977, Leger: 1988, Maller: 1991, Bonnin: 1988) or the relationship of capitalism and racial domination and the role of apartheid institutions (Wolpe: 1972, Marks and Rathbone: 1982, Hindson: 1987, Nzimande: 1990, Muthien: 1994, Evans: 1986, Posel: 1991); whether it was in the area of gender studies (Cock: 1974, Walker: 1990, Bozzoli: 1983, Marks: 1994) or political sociology (Mare & Hamilton: 1985, Southall: 1982, Pillay: 1987, Desai: 1993, Hendricks: 1994,) etc., the list can be expanded over a few pages, a theoretically grounded and thoroughly researched contribution was growing. We all expected that the democratisation of our society would have coincided with the flowering of a diverse and challenging sociology.

IV

Since 1990 and especially over the last two years Sociology's prowess has waned: firstly, the collapse of a left hegemony internationally has shattered the confidence of what used to constitute an "intellectual formation". (Sitas: 1995) Further-

more, the **professional** and **institutionalisation** of distinctive social sciences, the growth of unique fields or disciplines, fragmented the ability of intellectuals to communicate with ease across their ghettos.

Secondly, the political and social uncertainty of many power blocs created enormous commercial possibilities: the professional sociologist turned into an expert in a limited area and building on that s/he turned into a consultant. And in turn, the specialist consultant ensured that most empirical research was privatised.

Thirdly, corporations on the one hand and the new government on the other raided through sociology's ranks and lured some of the best talent away from the sociological grind.

Fourthly, for the first time in our history, questions **do** not emanate through a broader dialogue and contestation but rather, through policy structures with generous resources; and also, through international collaboration programmes where questions are defined elsewhere.

Fifthly, the social movements that animated much of the challenge to the social order have been fragmenting and the NGOs that interacted with academic scholarship have been cash-starved. (Sitas: 1995b).

Finally, the material conditions in teaching sociology have been worsening. The rapid growth in student numbers and the lack of resources, the decline in library budgets, the gradual decline of publishing institutions and journals, have conspired to undermine our performance.

At a moment when a remarkable transition is underway with its transformation processes and struggles, with competing status groups and racial tensions, when one of the world's most acute laboratories of social experience is working itself out in front of us, we have lost the capacity to respond creatively. At a moment too, when the state priorities and its research agendas are favouring meeting the majority's basic needs,(5) we look, despite our past, conceptually threadbare.

What seems to be happening is an intellectual version of the third world's relationship to the IMF or the World Bank; we are borrowing cul-

tural capital from the most inappropriate sources to service appropriate needs: like a worn-out version of modernisation theory which we call "development"; a trickle-down economic approach to redistribution; transition theory from the annals of conventional political science; multi-cultural post-modern ideas to restructure modernising organisations; and an effacement of any notion of stratification. Behind every planning committee stand the shares and dividends of the better, dominant world. We are beginning to become, mediocre imitators.

The only way forward,- and unfortunately there is no way back to versions of a romantic past, to our prior intellectual formation -is within a new conceptual and practical struggle that combines four elements:

1. New forms of exemplary instruction that affirms a communitarian ethos and realises the potential of a new dialogue with new emerging constituencies: discontented students, social movements, marginal groups.
2. A new sense of "transdisciplinarity". Let me digress: it was the study of orality, of the voice and performance in mass gatherings, the forms of ritual and communication in new contexts outside sociology and within these noisy experiences that allowed us as sociologists to understand **group formation, mobilisation, identity-formation** and **social movements** (Sitas: 1989 and 1996, Coplan: 1984, Hofmeyer: 1993) These insights then can be mixed with educational, linguistic, economic sociology to arrive at theorisation and at meaningful practical activity. In short, without abandoning "disciplinarity" finding creative ways of co-operating with what at first seems heterogeneous.
3. A search for innovation: theoretical, practical, transformative that could discover appropriate cures for appropriate scars.
4. A search for a negotiation into global "disciplinarity": a negotiation that does not demean our past, that recognises our achievements and limitations but also, a negotiation that problematises the canon. We must abandon the ease through which our past counts as a manifestation or extension of "sociology"

as constructed in the metropolis. Rather, social thinking has its roots in anti-systemic movements as much as it does in scholarship.

I started with the distinction between "intellectual formation" and "disciplinarity". I traced how the discipline of sociology emerged in a **hybrid** form, and how its intellectual impulses are waning. The task at hand is to create a new intellectual formation marked by the challenges of the future. It would be naive of me to claim any prospects of success unless we pull up our sleeves and create a social science that our society deserves.

Notes

1. The Teach Test Teach Programme tries to identify black scholars with potential for success at the University of Natal despite Apartheid and Bantu-education induced disadvantages.
2. There is a history of sociological associations in South Africa but there is very little in terms of a history of exemplary ideas.
3. Some of these ideas were developed in Sitas: 1993; they are now beginning to form a research agenda with old-time left constituencies on the Witwatersrand
4. Of course Bozzoli, the current head of the Sociology Dept. at the University of the Witwatersrand, has recast similar currents as the contribution of people-centred social history. Yet, when the integrity of Sociology was threatened in 1993 she bounced up with a vigorous defence of the discipline claiming similar lineages. What this proves is less the inconsistency of Bozzoli's orientations but rather the "hybridity" of some of our more vigorous ideas.
5. The HSRC and the CSD have prioritised research that conforms with the Government's "Reconstruction and Development Programme".

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