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CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

A Perspective From the Global South

Edited by
Andries Bezuidenhout, Sonwabile Mnwana
and Karl von Holdt



Contents

1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11	List of Figures and Tables	vii
12	Notes on Contributors	viii
13	Acknowledgements	x
14	Series Editors' Preface	xi
15	Typographical Note	xvi
16		
17	1 Critical Engagement in South Africa and the Global South:	1
18	An Introduction	
19	<i>Andries Bezuidenhout, Sonwabile Mnwana and Karl von Holdt</i>	
20	2 Critical Engagement and SWOP's Changing Research Tradition	19
21	<i>Andries Bezuidenhout and Karl von Holdt</i>	
22	3 Choosing Sides: The Promise and Pitfalls of a Critically	44
23	Engaged Sociology in Apartheid South Africa	
24	<i>Edward Webster</i>	
25	4 The Decline of Labour Studies and the Democratic Transition	61
26	<i>Sakhela Buhlungu</i>	
27	5 From 'Critical Engagement' to 'Public Sociology' and Back:	78
28	A Critique from the South	
29	<i>Karl von Holdt</i>	
30	6 The Antinomies and Opportunities of Critical Engagement	106
31	in South Africa's Rural Mining Frontier	
32	<i>Sonwabile Mnwana</i>	
33	7 Sociological Engagement with the Struggle for a Just	123
34	Transition in South Africa	
35	<i>Jacklyn Cock</i>	
36	8 Feminist Participatory Action Research in African Sex	144
37	Work Studies	
38	<i>Ntokozo Yingwana</i>	
39	9 Participatory Action Research for Food Justice in	171
40	Johannesburg: Seeking a More Immediate Impact for Engaged	
41	Research	
42	<i>Brittany Kesselman</i>	
43		

_____ 1	10	Dilemmas and Issues Confronting Socially Engaged Research	192
_____ 2		within Universities	
_____ 3		<i>Aninka Claassens and Nokwanda Sihlali</i>	
_____ 4	11	Experiences of Meetings and Cooperation between	215
_____ 5		Academics and Unions: The Work Studies Group from the	
_____ 6		South (GETSUR)	
_____ 7		<i>Dasten Julián Vejar</i>	
_____ 8	12	Critically Engaged Sociology in Turkey and ‘Sociology across	235
_____ 9		the South’	
_____ 10		<i>Ercüment Çelik</i>	
_____ 11	13	Reflections on Critical Engagement	256
_____ 12		<i>Michael Burawoy</i>	
_____ 13	14	Conclusion: Towards a Southern Sociology	265
_____ 14		<i>Karl von Holdt</i>	
_____ 15			
_____ 16	Index		280
_____ 17			
_____ 18			
_____ 19			
_____ 20			
_____ 21			
_____ 22			
_____ 23			
_____ 24			
_____ 25			
_____ 26			
_____ 27			
_____ 28			
_____ 29			
_____ 30			
_____ 31			
_____ 32			
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Reflections on Critical Engagement

Michael Burawoy

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16 In 1990 I returned to South Africa for the first time in 22 years. It was
17 the beginning of the end of apartheid; it was the year Mandela walked to
18 freedom. It was also the year Jack Simons, my teacher in Zambia, and Harold
19 Wolpe, my friend from London – both freedom fighters and members of the
20 South African Communist Party, both sociologists of distinction – returned
21 from over 20 years of exile. It was the year I recharged my relations with
22 Edward (Eddie) Webster and met Karl von Holdt for the first time. It was
23 the year Blade Nzimande, later Minister of Higher Education, Science and
24 Technology, and general secretary of the South African Communist Party,
25 invited me to address the Association for Sociologists in Southern Africa.
26 The topic was the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, based on my
27 decade-long research in Hungary.

28 That year, I came away from South Africa inspired by the engaged research
29 being conducted by sociologists, joined to the struggles against apartheid.
30 It led me to rethink the meaning and potential of sociology. By the end of
31 the 1990s, I was visiting the Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP)
32 regularly, working with students, listening to colleagues, trying to understand
33 the fast-moving changes in South Africa. At the same time, I was advancing
34 the idea of ‘public sociology’ within my own department in the University
35 of California, Berkeley – a challenge to the ‘professional sociology’ that
36 dominated the discipline in the United States and so different from the
37 ‘policy sociology’ driven by what had been the party state in the Soviet Union
38 and Eastern Europe, but also from the ‘critical sociology’ with its origins in
39 Europe, especially in France and Germany. I would take this fourfold scheme
40 back to South Africa, highlighting the changing combination of these four
41 knowledge practices that defined the history of sociology in South Africa.

42 At first there was interest in being brought within the scope of a scheme
43 that was designed to classify different national sociologies. After all,

1 engagement with ‘Northern’ knowledge had been the hallmark of Eddie
2 Webster’s contributions from *Cast in a Racial Mould* (Webster, 1985) to
3 *Grounding Globalization* (Webster and Bezuidenhout, 2011), as it had been
4 of Karl von Holdt’s research on South Africa’s triple transition (2003) and his
5 application of Pierre Bourdieu to South Africa (2018). From the beginning,
6 however, there was rising resentment towards my conceptualizing South
7 African sociology from the outside, made all the more infuriating by the
8 South African inspiration behind public sociology. There was mounting
9 resistance to fitting South African sociology into a scheme elaborated in
10 the North. It was made in the United States for the United States, so what
11 was I doing imposing it on South Africa? I was forcing a false universal
12 onto the particularity of South African sociology – another case of the
13 symbolic violence of the global division of knowledge production, backed
14 up by the material and ideological resources of US universities and its ‘high-
15 ranking’ journals.

16 If SWOP’s first step had been to adapt Northern concepts to the local
17 context, the second step was to challenge Northern hegemony with an
18 alternative ‘Southern’ hegemony – to regard ‘critical engagement’ not as
19 a species of public sociology, what I had called organic public sociology,
20 but as an alternative to public sociology tout court. Rather than repeat my
21 effort to represent different national sociologies as different articulations of
22 the four sociologies, I will examine the concept of critical engagement,
23 starting with Eddie Webster’s formulation:

24
25 Pressure exists on scholars to make a clear declaration that their research
26 and teaching should be constructed as support for, and on behalf of,
27 particular organizations. To prevent this subordination of intellectual
28 work to the immediate interests of these organization, I prefer the
29 stance of critical engagement. Squaring the circle is never easy, as it
30 involves a difficult combination of commitment to the goals of these
31 movements while being faithful to the evidence, data and your own
32 judgement and conscience. (Webster, 1995: 18)

33
34 Critical engagement refers to the contradictory interdependence of social
35 movement actors driven by movement goals and the sympathetic social
36 scientist subscribing to the logic of social science and their own moral
37 judgement, between, as Alain Touraine (1981) once put it, the voice and
38 the eye.

39 Webster’s examples (Chapter 3) are well chosen to illustrate the practice
40 and challenges of critical engagement. In the first case, SWOP collaborated
41 with its sponsor, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), conducting
42 research that showed how the mining companies turned a blind eye to
43 the safety of their African miners and how miners collectively developed

1 protective countermeasures. This research was pronounced a success,
2 enthusiastically endorsed by the NUM, contributing to better working
3 conditions for miners and, thereby, increasing support for the union.
4 Science, moral commitment and the interests of the NUM coincided. In the
5 second case, sponsored by an international non-governmental organization
6 concerned with HIV/AIDS¹ prevention, SWOP research angered the NUM
7 for reproducing racist stereotypes of the sexual mores of African miners.
8 The research explained the spread of HIV/AIDS through the proliferation
9 of sexual partners, itself the product of the system of migrant labour, but
10 the research was conducted without consultation with the mining unions.
11 If in the first case, critique was married to engagement, in the second case,
12 critique was divorced from engagement. There is a broader issue here: when
13 sociologists place their cases in a broader context, they often clash with
14 participants or clients, who are focused on immediate interests.

15 In the HIV/AIDS project, the *research protocols* of the professional
16 sociologist clashed with the interests of the union, whereas in Crispin
17 Chinguno's research, as presented by Karl von Holdt (Chapter 5), it was his
18 *moral judgement* that clashed with the NUM. Chinguno, a graduate student
19 and committed trade unionist, collaborated with the NUM leadership to
20 discover the causes of strike violence on South Africa's platinum belt –
21 violence that would eventually explode in the 2012 Marikana uprising in
22 which 34 workers were killed by the South African police. As his research
23 developed, Chinguno became increasingly sympathetic to the rank and
24 file's charge that the union stifled worker demands and acted as an agent of
25 management. His moral compass turned Chinguno's research against the
26 sponsors of his research; he shifted his engagement from one side to the
27 other. The NUM returned the compliment by labelling him a 'traitor' and
28 blamed him for inciting opposition to the union from its members.

29 Continuing with platinum mining, Sonwabile Mnwana (Chapter 6) takes
30 us into rural areas to study the struggle over land rights and compensation.
31 He shows how interconnected moral and scientific commitments pose a
32 challenge to engagement. To gain admission to the fieldsite, he had to gain
33 support from the local chief, but to accept the chief's conditions would have
34 meant the end of critique – the chief would have controlled the research.
35 Mnwana's patience and manoeuvring paid off, and the chief and his entourage
36 finally gave him the scientific autonomy he requested. Once immersed in
37 the field, however, he discovered chiefs and mining companies colluding
38 in dispossessing villagers of their land rights – rights that had been bought
39 over a century before. His moral compass turned his sympathy towards the
40 villagers, but the fieldwork disclosed a further complication: some villagers
41 were able to establish their lineage to the original land purchase, while
42 others were not. The result was clashing interests among the villagers. For
43 both moral and scientific reasons, Mnwana refused to take sides or be an

1 expert witness in the legal adjudication, even if this risked alienating one
2 or other or both the village factions. It was a risk he was prepared to take,
3 rather than compromising his moral and scientific stance. Torn between the
4 horns of critical engagement, with some trepidation, he negotiated his way
5 through this minefield.

6 As sociologists, we tend to engage those communities with whom we have
7 the greatest sympathy, those whose values are likely to be most consonant
8 with our own, but it can still happen that the values of the sociologist and
9 the interests of the community diverge so that no reconciliation is possible.
10 Jacklyn Cock (Chapter 7) describes her research for a just transition to an
11 ecologically sound future. She engaged coal communities only to discover
12 their immediate interests in economic survival make them uninterested in
13 the restriction of fossil fuel consumption. Once again, the broader concerns
14 of the sociologist are at odds with the community. There appeared to be
15 no space for a negotiated rapprochement. Where Cock hangs on to her
16 ecological critique, the participatory action research adopted by Ntokozo
17 Yingwana (Chapter 8) and Brittany Kesselman (Chapter 9) started out
18 by adopting the standpoint of the communities they study; critique was
19 suspended in favour of engagement. Aninka Claassens and Nokwanda Sihlali
20 (Chapter 10) describe how difficult it can be to work back from community
21 engagement to the research community within the university.

22 These studies, and so many of the studies undertaken by SWOP (see
23 Chapter 2), underline the dilemmas and tensions of critical engagement,
24 but the dilemmas are not confined to SWOP. In a parallel formulation to
25 Webster, Harold Wolpe (1985) argues that committed research takes the goals
26 of the liberation struggle as a point of departure, but then follows its own
27 logic, often coming to conclusions that put him at odds with the movement.
28 He writes: 'In this sense, the priorities defined at the political level became
29 also the priorities of social research. But, and this is the fundamental point
30 which cannot be overemphasized, not as conclusions but as starting points for
31 investigation' (Wolpe, 1985: 75). This got Wolpe into hot water, from those
32 who criticized him for his commitment to the South African Communist
33 Party as well as from those who criticized him for defending his autonomy
34 from the party (Burawoy, 2004).

35 Critical engagement is not confined to South Africa. Ercüment Çelik
36 (Chapter 12) suggests that critical engagement is a feature of research
37 in countries of the Global South. Beset with unstable democracies and
38 authoritarian regimes, there is a fluidity between academic and public issues
39 and discourses. Political and academic fields are often barely distinguishable
40 and theoretical debates flow through into and around the public arena.
41 Critical engagement is part and parcel of everyday life. Still, we can say
42 that critical engagement is hardly confined to the South. For example, it is
43 central to the sociology of Alain Touraine (1988) and his French colleagues,

1 who engage the leaders of social movements in the co-production of
2 knowledge with a view to raising their consciousness through the infusion
3 of sociological insights. We can see a similar critical engagement defining
4 the public sociology of the Community of Research on Excellence for All
5 in Barcelona (Soler-Gallart, 2017), led by Ramón Flecha and Marta Soler. In
6 the United States, there are institutions similar to SWOP, such as the Labor
7 Studies Department at CUNY (the City University of New York), chaired
8 by Ruth Milkman, or the Center for Urban Research and Learning at Loyola
9 University Chicago, led for many years by Phil Nyden (Nyden et al, 2012).

10 An acute tension between autonomy and engagement runs through
11 the case studies brought together under the title of *Precarious Engagements*
12 (Burawoy, 2014). It is present in César Rodríguez-Garavito's defence of
13 the rights of indigenous peoples in the face of paramilitary and guerrilla
14 violence in Colombia; in Nandini Sundar's defence of indigenous groups
15 in India, caught between state-sponsored vigilante groups and left-wing
16 Maoist guerrillas; in Karl von Holdt's recounting of research into the struggle
17 between a new black administrative elite and largely white professionals in
18 the reconstruction of a major hospital in post-apartheid South Africa; in Sari
19 Hanafi's defence of Palestinian refugees' right to work against the interests
20 of both the Lebanese governing authorities and the Palestinian leaders
21 for whom integration threatened the 'right of return'; in Pun Ngai et al's
22 exposure of the conditions of work at the huge Chinese factories of the
23 Taiwanese corporation FoxConn, which manufactured Apple's iPhone; in
24 Fran Piven's strategic analysis of the Occupy movement in New York, based
25 on her idea of 'interdependent power'; in Ramon Flecha and Marta Soler's
26 use of 'communicative methodology' to develop new forms of democracy
27 within Romani barrios in Barcelona; in Michel Wieviorka's sociological
28 intervention, attempting to unseat or weaken deeply held prejudices of
29 racism and anti-Semitism in France through the engagement of militants of
30 right-wing social movements; in Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova's
31 troubled account of the trajectory of gender studies in the face of patriarchal
32 authoritarianism, led by the Russian Orthodox Church; and in Walden
33 Bello's breaking into the World Bank for confidential documents detailing
34 the collaboration between the Marcos dictatorship and the World Bank –
35 documents that became the basis of a book that contributed to the downfall
36 of the regime.

37 These are dramatic cases of sociological intervention at the intersection of
38 *two or more fields* – the intersection of the academic field with the political,
39 the economic, the media and so on. But critical engagement also operates at
40 a more mundane level, most obviously in the practice of ethnography, where
41 the scientist enters the world of the subject(s) and is, therefore, accountable
42 to those subjects while trying to remain morally and scientifically erect. As
43 the literature on participant observation demonstrates, there is a range of

1 responses to the dilemma. From the side of ‘engagement’ one can choose
2 between overt and covert participation, between being a fly on the wall and
3 ‘going native’. From the side of ‘critique’, there are variations too: some
4 assume theory springs spontaneously from the data, while others pursue
5 the reconstruction of pre-existing theory. In the ethnographic vision, then,
6 critical engagement lies at the intersection of *two dialogues* – between theory
7 and data on the one hand and between participant and observer on the other.

8 We can go further to say that critical engagement increasingly captures the
9 more general dilemma of all social science, that of participating in the world
10 we study. We can pretend to hide behind the walls of academia, placing
11 ourselves on a pedestal of objectivity, but social forces swarm around and
12 overflow its ramparts, making it ever more difficult to defend autonomy and
13 to deny that one has a position, even if it is a position ‘on our own side’.
14 Alternatively, we can accept our fate and directly engage the very world
15 we study. In so many countries of the South, including South Africa, the
16 university has not the symbolic, political or material resources to withstand
17 insurgencies from within as well as without. In these circumstances, it
18 is difficult to maintain any autonomous research, as Julián (Chapter 11)
19 describes for his institute in Chile. Even in the richest countries with
20 established traditions of academic freedom and autonomy, the illusion of
21 objectivity, of some sort of outsider, non-engaged position, is ever more
22 difficult to sustain as the storm of capitalism commodifies the production
23 and dissemination of knowledge. In short, critical engagement becomes
24 the defining and underlying posture of all social science – it is necessarily
25 ‘engaged’, and so it has also to be ‘critical’; the researcher is at once insider
26 and outsider, both outsider within and insider without. We can distinguish,
27 therefore, two stances in the production of knowledge: critical engagement
28 founded on the postulate that we are part of the world we study and positivist
29 objectivity founded on the assumption we are outside the world we study.
30 Each has its own challenges and paradoxes (Burawoy, 1998).

31 So what then can we make of the idea of Southern sociology? Is there a
32 Southern sociology, demarcated from a Northern sociology – two sciences,
33 one based on critical engagement and the other based on positivist objectivity.
34 Let us think in terms of fields, as von Holdt suggests. If sociology is a field
35 of domination, is that field national, regional or global? Historically, South
36 African sociology operated within a national container, very much a product
37 of the enclosed and opposed political fields of apartheid. There was a
38 relatively clear demarcation between apartheid and anti-apartheid sociologies.
39 The question of whose side we are on was stark. Today, polarization within
40 sociology is weaker, but at the same time, as Sakhela Buhlungu (Chapter 4)
41 shows, the divide between sociologists and their erstwhile allies in civil
42 society has widened. Trade union leaders have less use for and less trust
43 in sociology, especially if they have their own research establishments. In

1 this context, it is not surprising that sociologists might seek linkages with
2 sociologists in other parts of the Global South, leading to the imagination of
3 a Southern sociology. What is the common interest – moral or scientific –
4 that brings together sociologists from Brazil, China, Russia, South Africa?
5 How homogeneous is this emergent Southern field – what role do smaller
6 nations, satellites of these great nations, play in this Southern field? Are
7 we witnessing a collaboration among leading cosmopolitan sociologists,
8 conversant in English, coalescing into a Southern bloc?

9 What is the nature of the collaboration across national boundaries?
10 Webster et al (2011) offer a rare instance of collaboration around strategies
11 to contest international capital in the white goods industry involving
12 Australia, South Africa and South Korea. That is indeed stretching critical
13 engagement across national boundaries. Alternatively, as von Holdt suggests
14 in his conclusion, one can seek to develop a ‘whole’ sociology, including
15 theoretical perspectives that will substantiate a *Southern* perspective. Does
16 this whole sociology involve more than critical engagement? Is there more
17 to sociology than critical engagement? Does not the idea of ‘critique’ in
18 critical engagement imply some sort of autonomous ‘theoretical practice’,
19 as Louis Althusser once called it? When members of SWOP package their
20 research for academic journals, as they do with increasing frequency, is this
21 work still *part of* critical engagement or is it scientific work *based on* critical
22 engagement? Is knowledge only produced in projects of critical engagement?
23 Is the work of constructing this book and its critique of public sociology
24 reducible to critical engagement? Can any version of Southern sociology
25 leave the development of abstract theory – starting with succinct formulation
26 of the results of research, leading to generalizations – to academics in the
27 North? Or does ‘theory’ spontaneously arise from critical engagement? Can
28 we stretch the meaning of engagement to the criticism of existing bodies of
29 social thought, especially dominant bodies of social thought? What, then,
30 does engagement mean?

31 If we talk of Southern sociology, then we must also talk of Northern sociology.
32 What is the basis of demarcation? Are there two sociologies: Southern and
33 Northern? Or is there a single global sociological field bound together by
34 the hegemony of the North? Is it not the case that many of the criticisms of
35 Northern sociology originate in and develop in the North – whether they
36 be feminist, critical race theory, decolonial, postcolonial. Are they different
37 from the criticisms developed in the South? If there is a distinctive Southern
38 sociology, what are its theoretical and conceptual underpinnings? Reading
39 the contributions to this volume, I am struck how the framing of the projects
40 share so many concepts and concerns of US sociology.

41 In his conclusion, von Holdt claims that there is a Southern sociology that
42 is ‘counter-hegemonic’ to the dominant sociology of the Global North. What
43 should we mean by ‘counter-hegemonic’? Antonio Gramsci, the originator

1 of the theory of hegemony, never used the term ‘counter-hegemonic’,
 2 arguing that most struggles are on the terrain of hegemony as defined by a
 3 dominant group – that the dominant group sets the terms of struggle. The
 4 concept of field captures the same idea – that conflicts are played out in
 5 terms of the underlying values and principles that define the field. To speak
 6 of counter-hegemony is to speak of an alternative hegemony, an alternative
 7 field that offers a set of assumptions and defining values fundamentally
 8 different from the dominant hegemony. In the field of sociology, that claim is
 9 usually made on behalf of an ‘indigenous’ sociology that springs not from the
 10 academy but from the people themselves and which rejects the conventions
 11 of science and modernity. Can there be an alternative hegemony that revolves
 12 around the idea of critical engagement?

13 The criticisms levelled against my notion of public sociology in this volume
 14 have been frequently voiced in the United States, but I don’t believe the
 15 latter have been as successful as sociologists of the South, SWOP in particular,
 16 in developing the alternative practice of critical engagement. Whether
 17 the distinctiveness of Southern sociology be due to unstable democracies,
 18 authoritarian regimes, overlapping political and academic fields, I believe
 19 that the North is following the South. As North and South face common
 20 problems of increasing inequality, pandemics, global warming, precarious
 21 migration and refugees, finance capital, so critical engagement has to become
 22 the defining trope of sociology globally – that is, if sociology wants to
 23 maintain its relevance. This applies not just to sociology, but all the social
 24 sciences. Even economics is developing a new consciousness of the threats
 25 to planetary existence, sceptical that markets are a universal panacea. Under
 26 the rubric of critical engagement, founded on the awareness that we are part
 27 of the world we study, social science not only shifts its priorities towards
 28 communities of suffering, but also traces the source of that suffering to
 29 the global forces of capitalism. As Wiebke Keim (2011) puts it, SWOP has
 30 advanced an engaged sociology that the world badly needs and which has
 31 to spread to other countries in the North as well as the South. That was
 32 what I meant when I spoke of the South Africanization of US sociology!

34 **Note**

35 ¹ Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

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