CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY
A Perspective From the Global South

Edited by Andries Bezuidenhout, Sonwabile Mnwana and Karl von Holdt
Contents

List of Figures and Tables vii
Notes on Contributors viii
Acknowledgements x
Series Editors’ Preface xi
Typographical Note xvi

1 Critical Engagement in South Africa and the Global South: An Introduction 1

Andries Bezuidenhout, Sonwabile Mnwana and Karl von Holdt

2 Critical Engagement and SWOP's Changing Research Tradition 19

Andries Bezuidenhout and Karl von Holdt

3 Choosing Sides: The Promise and Pitfalls of a Critically Engaged Sociology in Apartheid South Africa 44

Edward Webster

4 The Decline of Labour Studies and the Democratic Transition 61

Sakhela Buhlungu

5 From ‘Critical Engagement’ to ‘Public Sociology’ and Back: A Critique from the South 78

Karl von Holdt

6 The Antinomies and Opportunities of Critical Engagement in South Africa’s Rural Mining Frontier 106

Sonwabile Mnwana

7 Sociological Engagement with the Struggle for a Just Transition in South Africa 123

Jacklyn Cook

8 Feminist Participatory Action Research in African Sex Work Studies 144

Ntokozo Yingwana

9 Participatory Action Research for Food Justice in Johannesburg: Seeking a More Immediate Impact for Engaged Research 171

Brittany Kesselman
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Dilemmas and Issues Confronting Socially Engaged Research within Universities</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Experiences of Meetings and Cooperation between Academics and Unions: The Work Studies Group from the South (GETSUR)</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Critically Engaged Sociology in Turkey and ‘Sociology across the South’</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Reflections on Critical Engagement</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Conclusion: Towards a Southern Sociology</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflections on Critical Engagement

*Michael Burawoy*

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

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

At first there was interest in being brought within the scope of a scheme that was designed to classify different national sociologies. After all,
engagement with ‘Northern’ knowledge had been the hallmark of Eddie Webster’s contributions from *Cast in a Racial Mould* (Webster, 1985) to *Grounding Globalization* (Webster and Bezuidenhout, 2011), as it had been of Karl von Holdt’s research on South Africa’s triple transition (2003) and his application of Pierre Bourdieu to South Africa (2018). From the beginning, however, there was rising resentment towards my conceptualizing South African sociology from the outside, made all the more infuriating by the South African inspiration behind public sociology. There was mounting resistance to fitting South African sociology into a scheme elaborated in the North. It was made in the United States for the United States, so what was I doing imposing it on South Africa? I was forcing a false universal onto the particularity of South African sociology – another case of the symbolic violence of the global division of knowledge production, backed up by the material and ideological resources of US universities and its ‘high-ranking’ journals.

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

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

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

Webster’s examples (Chapter 3) are well chosen to illustrate the practice and challenges of critical engagement. In the first case, SWOP collaborated with its sponsor, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), conducting research that showed how the mining companies turned a blind eye to the safety of their African miners and how miners collectively developed
protective countermeasures. This research was pronounced a success, enthusiastically endorsed by the NUM, contributing to better working conditions for miners and, thereby, increasing support for the union. Science, moral commitment and the interests of the NUM coincided. In the second case, sponsored by an international non-governmental organization concerned with HIV/AIDS prevention, SWOP research angered the NUM for reproducing racist stereotypes of the sexual mores of African miners. The research explained the spread of HIV/AIDS through the proliferation of sexual partners, itself the product of the system of migrant labour, but the research was conducted without consultation with the mining unions. If in the first case, critique was married to engagement, in the second case, critique was divorced from engagement. There is a broader issue here: when sociologists place their cases in a broader context, they often clash with participants or clients, who are focused on immediate interests.

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

Continuing with platinum mining, Sonwabile Mnwana (Chapter 6) takes us into rural areas to study the struggle over land rights and compensation. He shows how interconnected moral and scientific commitments pose a challenge to engagement. To gain admission to the fieldsite, he had to gain support from the local chief, but to accept the chief’s conditions would have meant the end of critique – the chief would have controlled the research. Mnwana’s patience and manoeuvring paid off, and the chief and his entourage finally gave him the scientific autonomy he requested. Once immersed in the field, however, he discovered chiefs and mining companies colluding in dispossessing villagers of their land rights – rights that had been bought over a century before. His moral compass turned his sympathy towards the villagers, but the fieldwork disclosed a further complication: some villagers were able to establish their lineage to the original land purchase, while others were not. The result was clashing interests among the villagers. For both moral and scientific reasons, Mnwana refused to take sides or be an
expert witness in the legal adjudication, even if this risked alienating one or other or both the village factions. It was a risk he was prepared to take, rather than compromising his moral and scientific stance. Torn between the horns of critical engagement, with some trepidation, he negotiated his way through this minefield.

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

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

Critical engagement is not confined to South Africa. Ercüment Çelik (Chapter 12) suggests that critical engagement is a feature of research in countries of the Global South. Beset with unstable democracies and authoritarian regimes, there is a fluidity between academic and public issues and discourses. Political and academic fields are often barely distinguishable and theoretical debates flow through into and around the public arena. Critical engagement is part and parcel of everyday life. Still, we can say that critical engagement is hardly confined to the South. For example, it is central to the sociology of Alain Touraine (1988) and his French colleagues,
who engage the leaders of social movements in the co-production of knowledge with a view to raising their consciousness through the infusion of sociological insights. We can see a similar critical engagement defining the public sociology of the Community of Research on Excellence for All in Barcelona (Soler-Gallart, 2017), led by Ramón Flecha and Marta Soler. In the United States, there are institutions similar to SWOP, such as the Labor Studies Department at CUNY (the City University of New York), chaired by Ruth Milkman, or the Center for Urban Research and Learning at Loyola University Chicago, led for many years by Phil Nyden (Nyden et al., 2012).

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

These are dramatic cases of sociological intervention at the intersection of two or more fields – the intersection of the academic field with the political, the economic and so on. But critical engagement also operates at a more mundane level, most obviously in the practice of ethnography, where the scientist enters the world of the subject(s) and is, therefore, accountable to those subjects while trying to remain morally and scientifically erect. As the literature on participant observation demonstrates, there is a range of
responses to the dilemma. From the side of ‘engagement’ one can choose
between overt and covert participation, between being a fly on the wall and
‘going native’. From the side of ‘critique’, there are variations too: some
assume theory springs spontaneously from the data, while others pursue
the reconstruction of pre-existing theory. In the ethnographic vision, then,
critical engagement lies at the intersection of two dialogues – between theory
and data on the one hand and between participant and observer on the other.

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

So what then can we make of the idea of Southern sociology? Is there a
Southern sociology, demarcated from a Northern sociology – two sciences,
one based on critical engagement and the other based on positivist objectivity.
Let us think in terms of fields, as von Holdt suggests. If sociology is a field
of domination, is that field national, regional or global? Historically, South
African sociology operated within a national container, very much a product
of the enclosed and opposed political fields of apartheid. There was a
relatively clear demarcation between apartheid and anti-apartheid sociologies.
The question of whose side we are on was stark. Today, polarization within
sociology is weaker, but at the same time, as Sakhela Buhlungu (Chapter 4)
shows, the divide between sociologists and their erstwhile allies in civil
society has widened. Trade union leaders have less use for and less trust
in sociology, especially if they have their own research establishments. In
this context, it is not surprising that sociologists might seek linkages with sociologists in other parts of the Global South, leading to the imagination of a Southern sociology. What is the common interest – moral or scientific – that brings together sociologists from Brazil, China, Russia, South Africa? How homogeneous is this emergent Southern field – what role do smaller nations, satellites of these great nations, play in this Southern field? Are we witnessing a collaboration among leading cosmopolitan sociologists, conversant in English, coalescing into a Southern bloc?

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

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

In his conclusion, von Holdt claims that there is a Southern sociology that is ‘counter-hegemonic’ to the dominant sociology of the Global North. What should we mean by ‘counter-hegemonic’? Antonio Gramsci, the originator
of the theory of hegemony, never used the term ‘counter-hegemonic’, arguing that most struggles are on the terrain of hegemony as defined by a dominant group – that the dominant group sets the terms of struggle. The concept of field captures the same idea – that conflicts are played out in terms of the underlying values and principles that define the field. To speak of counter-hegemony is to speak of an alternative hegemony, an alternative field that offers a set of assumptions and defining values fundamentally different from the dominant hegemony. In the field of sociology, that claim is usually made on behalf of an ‘indigenous’ sociology that springs not from the academy but from the people themselves and which rejects the conventions of science and modernity. Can there be an alternative hegemony that revolves around the idea of critical engagement?

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

Note

1 Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

References
