Speaking 'Truth' to All Forms of Power

Reflections on the Role of the Public Sociologist in South Africa

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abstract: The political and socioeconomic transformations across the globe in the last two decades make it necessary for public sociologists to bring their collective accumulated knowledge and methodological skills to an engagement with subalterns on the political strategy appropriate to this historical epoch. They must recognize that subaltern groups have insights into their subjugation, and solutions to transcend it. Public sociologists must deploy their skills in an inclusive way to engage the issue of political strategy: how to subvert power in favour of the agendas of subaltern groups.

keywords: engagement ✦ power ✦ subaltern groups ✦ subversion ✦ truth

The final presidential panel of the International Sociological Association Congress in Durban, South Africa in 2006 focused on the role of the sociologist in the contemporary world. This concern with the role of the academy is not only confined to the discipline of sociology. Indeed, it is a debate that has emerged in almost all of the disciplines of the social sciences. Moreover, it is a concern that has not only emerged from within the academy. Rather, it has become one of the big concerns of governments and public officials, a number of whom, in contexts as diverse as the Netherlands and South Africa, have undertaken investigations into the impact of the social sciences and how research and teaching should be institutionally organized. In fact, so urgent is the concern that UNESCO hosted an international conference in Argentina in 2006 on the issue, and the International Social Science Council (ISSC) has proactively decided to initiate a global study on these questions.

This issue of *Current Sociology* must therefore be welcomed. It is also refreshing that the articles in this issue are freed from the stricture of addressing these questions in accounting terms. The focus in this debate is not how much the discipline costs, or the financial benefits it generates. Rather, the collection of reflections is very much focused on the intrinsic benefits to society, and the role of the sociologist in contributing to the establishment of a more just and equitable social order.

At the outset, it would be useful to note that there is a large degree of agreement among the first three articles in this issue of the journal on the role of the sociologist.[1] All recognize the need for the sociologist to go beyond the academy, to engage with social agency and support the cause of the subaltern, a term seemingly referring to the poor, and used very differently from its original formulation in the Indian academy (Prakash, 1994). To paraphrase Burawoy (this issue, pp. 351–9), this process involves the transformation of the sociologist from a traditional to an organic intellectual. Moreover, all three articles seem to agree on the role of the sociologist in this engagement. Again, in the view of Burawoy, the public sociologists' theatre of operations should be the global plane where they act as 'interpreters, communicators and intermediaries, tying together local movements across national boundaries'.

Despite this consensus, however, there is a serious disagreement particularly around the terms of engagement. Martinelli (this issue, pp. 361–70), for instance, fears that Burawoy's idealized advocacy of the public sociologist's engagement in public discourse in the service of the subaltern, may lead her or him to lose the ability to be the scientist, which involves in part the ability to critique the common sense of the subaltern. Similarly, Smith (this issue, pp. 371–79) is concerned that the public sociologist's role is not simply to articulate the common sense of the subaltern, but rather to bring to this engagement the knowledge already developed in the academy on the dynamics of humiliation.

This contribution focuses on these issues. It does this in two distinct ways. First, it comments on the dispute among the lead articles on the terms of the sociologist's engagement with the subaltern, particularly bringing the South African experience to bear on the global debate. Second, it critiques all three articles in their implied consensus on what is essentially an unimaginative intellectual agenda for the public sociologists and intellectuals. On the basis of this critique, it advocates a more ambitious agenda, one that is deemed more appropriate to the demands of the contemporary epoch.

The central dispute in the contributions of Burawoy, Martinelli and Smith relates to the relationship between the public sociologists and the subaltern group. Burawoy, in his noble desire to be of service to the subaltern, remains silent on this question and may even imply that it is

appropriate for the subaltern to play the lead in this interaction. Martinelli and Smith, on the other hand, are more cognizant of the dangers of sub-verting the public sociologists' intellectual independence, and demand not disengagement, but a critical distance. Martinelli, for instance, main-tains that science and politics are two different forms of action that require different mindsets and Smith reminds us that the sociologist has an intel-lectual knowledge to bring to the relationship that may be as significant as that which she or he may take away from the engagement.

These warnings are worth noting, especially given Edward Said's oft-quoted phrase that 'the essential purpose of the public intellectual is to speak truth to power' (Said, 1996). However, Said spoke of state power. But what about the power brokers within the subaltern groups them-selves? Is it not necessary for the public sociologist to speak truth to the general secretary of the trade union movement or the chairperson of the civic association? The South African experience suggests that herein lies the danger for the progressive public sociologist. The progressive anti-Apartheid public sociologist never had any difficulty to speak truth to state power. Indeed, many did so at great cost, and some even paid with their lives.[2] Yet public sociologists often found it difficult to be critical of the subalterns themselves. Essentially, they fell into the role of servicing the power brokers among the subalterns, and found it increasingly diffi-cult to be critical of their behaviour, strategies and tactics.

Examples of this abound in the South African case. The mainstream academic left, the group of intellectuals associated with the trade union and national liberation movement, has over the last 10 years merely legit-imized and justified the strategic political orientations of the power bro-kers among the subalterns themselves. The central message of their research has been to legitimize the subaltern power brokers' call for cor-poratism, and a tripartite alliance with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). These strategic initiatives were first decided upon by some within the leader-ship of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and within the ANC and SACP. The shift to a corporatist discourse and the adoption of this strategic orientation were first recommended by leader-ship figures within the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) (Bird and Schreiner, 1992; Schreiner, 1991), many of whom sub-sequently went on to play roles as cabinet ministers or senior officials in the public service. The strategic alliance with the ruling party was first decided upon a couple of months after the launch of COSATU in December 1985, when the federation's general-secretary and a subsequent cabinet minister in South Africa's first post-Apartheid government, Jay Naidoo, led a delegation to ANC headquarters, then located in Lusaka, Zambia. Since then, the alliance has been deemed sacrosanct within the

federation and very few individuals have been able to survive organizationally once having become critical of it. The public sociologists, many of whom were originally critical of these strategic perspectives, fell in line within a couple of months. Moreover, their research largely legitimated these actions over the next few years, with serious consequences for the quality of the science that was produced.

Many examples can be used to demonstrate this. In the early 1990s, John Saul published a series of articles calling for the adoption of a strategic perspective of structural reform, reforms that he argued had a snowballing effect and facilitated the emergence of other reforms, all of which would collectively constitute a project of structural transformation (Saul, 1991: 6). But Saul floundered when it came to specifying the reforms that had to be defined as structural. Caught up in the euphoria of the transition, and the rhetoric of intellectuals, progressive academics and union leaders, he proceeded to give credence to a whole slew of policies, both economic and other, that would by no stretch of the imagination be described as transformative (Desai and Habib, 1994). Indeed, many of these same policies had the effect of disarming popular initiatives and reinforcing the shift to neoliberal economics, a consequence he himself lamented a few years later (Saul, 2001). Saul's weakness was not his conceptualization, but his methodology. His problem was that he simply believed the rhetoric of both the leadership figures of the trade union federation, the power brokers of the subalterns, and the progressive academics. Their behaviour and rhetoric were not subject to reflection per se.

At the same time, a series of research efforts emerged from within the South African academy, with similar weaknesses. Johan Maree, from the University of Cape Town, tried to make the case for corporatism and the implementation of its institutions and processes in South Africa (Maree, 1993). Yet his comparative case to demonstrate the success of these institutions and processes was Western Europe in the postwar era, and there was no attempt to justify why the use of such a different regional context and historical epoch was methodologically legitimate.

Even the doyen of South African public sociology, Edward Webster, was not immune to this heady optimism, and only later became more sober and realistic in his assessments and analytical judgements. This is most evident when comparing two of his interventions on labour and democracy, written in partnership with Glenn Adler. The first, written in 1994 and published in 1995, is largely an actor-based theory of the transition that prioritizes agency over structure, even though the authors deny this, and demonstrates the central role played by COSATU in the transition and its evolution. Their central message was that 'the South African transition may constitute the first significant challenge to the predictions of orthodox transition theory, [which suggested] . . . that the democracy

resulting from the transition process is conservative economically and socially' (Adler and Webster, 1995: 100), if COSATU continued to adopt the strategy of radical reform, whose constituent elements involve, among others, participation in corporatist forums, seconding COSATU leaders as ANC MPs to national and regional parliaments and participation in the formulation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Their second intervention, written in 1998 and published in 1999, was theoretically and conceptually more nuanced, recognizing the conditioning effects of structures on actors, and comparatively more relevant, for it reflected on the experiences of both the developed and developing worlds.[3] Although the message was similar, that class compromise was still possible, they tended to be less sanguine about its realizability and more aware of the structural conditioning effects on the ANC to abandon the interests of workers and marginalized communities in favour of an 'elite compromise'. The article still betrayed an exaggerated assessment of the capacities of the labour movement, which was reflected in their conclusion that South Africa is in the throes of a class stalemate (Webster and Adler, 1999). But their intervention suggested that at least some of South Africa's public sociologists had graduated to a more sober assessment of the prospects for a worker-friendly political dispensation.

I raise these examples not to denigrate a collection of scholars who have truly made a remarkable contribution to both the South African academy and sociology. Rather, I do so to bring to the fore the dangers of the lack of a critical distance between public sociologists and subaltern groups. The weaknesses in all of the research cases cited earlier emanated not from the intellectual deficiencies of these scholars. Indeed, many of them actually taught a new generation of scholars the methodologies by which to avoid these very problems. Their weaknesses emanate from their reluctance to subject the subaltern, and in particular the power brokers within the subaltern, to critical scrutiny. Science would have dictated that the rhetoric, behaviour and interests of the subalterns were to be identified, scrutinized and assessed in relation to the context within which they were located. Yet it is precisely this that was not undertaken. In part, this may have had to do with the romanticism of the period. South Africa was after all a new democracy, and there was reluctance among many to criticize so soon. But it also emanated from a desire not to offend the subaltern powers brokers, for that had consequences. As academics, you could too easily be labelled and marginalized, and not have access to the power brokers who had increasing influence over their movements and the state institutions.

A more critical discourse has of course emerged from these public sociologists in recent years. This may in part have to do with the fact that the initial euphoria of the honeymoon period has begun to recede. It may also

have to do with the fact that many of these same scholars feel marginalized from the political process. Yet it is also worthwhile to note that the openness to engage also emerges in a context where social movements, including the trade union federations, have become more critical and have begun to distance themselves from state agendas (COSATU, 2006; SACP, 2006a, 2006b). In this period, as in the earlier ones, there is a need for the public sociologist and intellectual to speak truth to both state and subaltern power, and it is not clear that this is being done equally to both stakeholders.[4]

A second related, but distinct issue that should be reflected upon is the research and intellectual agenda of the public sociologist. As indicated earlier, Burawoy sees this role as one of interpreting, communicating and linking movements together. This is an agenda of interpretation and description of social action. It is meant to popularize social struggles and explain their rationale, with the obvious intention to challenge hegemonic beliefs, discourses and values within the society. Martinelli and Smith seem to broadly agree with this research agenda by their silence on the issue, although some of their ideas could imply a much more ambitious research and intellectual agenda for the public sociologist. After all, why else would Smith want the public sociologist to bring his or her accumulated knowledge to an engagement with the subaltern if he did not envisage a more ambitious role for the former?

What, then, should be the intellectual agenda of the public sociologist? Earlier on, I suggested that in South Africa both public sociology and subaltern power brokers simply utilized a set of strategies that were developed and were more appropriate for a different geographical context and an earlier historical epoch. This was the result of a common sense approach to the issue of strategy. A recipe book detailing strategies and tactics derived from past social struggles of the West was developed and then mechanically applied to very different geographic and historical contexts. These scholars had forgotten the simple lesson of the social sciences, that context is important. Identical institutions and processes employed in different contexts can have very different outcomes. The result was that instead of empowering the subaltern, realizing alternative development trajectories, and achieving social justice, it produced cooptation of subaltern power brokers, the strengthening of neoliberal socioeconomics and the expansion of unemployment and socioeconomic immiseration.

The critics of the mainstream academic left were not any better. Many of these public intellectuals, both global and local, seem to be confined to a politics of rage and critique (Bond, 2000; Desai, 2002). They focus on description of social struggles, parroting out the tactics that have been used, often romanticizing and sometimes even justifying questionable behaviour of the subalterns themselves. While they have almost always effectively critiqued the strategies of the mainstream left, rarely have they

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offered realistic alternatives appropriate to the particular context and historical epoch. Again, while they have done much to expose the hypocrisy of our elites and the injustices of the social order, they have not been responsive to the great intellectual demand of our time: to develop ideas on how to subvert power so alternative political and developmental trajectories become feasible.

Given this, is it not incumbent on public intellectuals to establish a research agenda on the issue of political strategy, which takes as its starting point this historical epoch and has as its research question how to subvert power in favour of the agenda of the subalterns? Elsewhere, I have argued that the comparative literature on corporatism, the development state and democratization speak in different ways as to how human-oriented development emerges from a particular political condition where elites feel uncertain of their futures (Habib, 2008). This condition, which Schedler (2001) terms 'substantive uncertainty' as distinct from 'institutional uncertainty', is the necessary precondition,[5] I argue, for a human-oriented development to occur. The research question for investigation is how can this political condition emerge in the very different global and national contexts of today? In the postwar period, the political condition of substantive uncertainty was in part produced by the bipolar character of the international system. Now, it has to be generated through appropriate nationally based strategic political interventions supported by foreign policies and international engagements particularly directed at hemming in and constraining increasingly empowered multinationals and a unilateralist global superpower.

I have suggested that this political condition can be created through strategic interventions that divide existing political and economic elites, and that conversely empower subalterns and give them leverage. For the South African context, I support five policy innovations and strategies to realize this end: reform of the electoral system to a mixed member proportional system, a break in the tripartite alliance as a prelude to the launch of a political party to the left of the ANC and centred on the unions, the abandonment of corporatist institutions, support for the development of a plural civil society and a foreign policy focused on strategic South–North alliances, which favour multipolarity and curbing the unilateralist tendencies of the US. The first two strategic and policy reforms are intended to strengthen the representative character of the political system so as to promote a contestation between political elites. The second two speak to strengthening the participatory character of the political system, to facilitate what Steven Friedman has so often termed 'providing voice to the poor' (Friedman, 2005). This mix of representative and participatory democratic elements is meant to create the substantive uncertainty, which is the political foundation that generates the accountability between elites and their citizens so necessary for realizing a human-oriented development agenda.

The strategies and tactics identified above are simply an example of how I believe power can be subverted in this historical epoch in favour of the agendas of subalterns. Many more can be identified and developed that are more appropriate to other geographic contexts. The point of summarizing them here is to demonstrate the kinds of issues that should become the focus of the public sociologist. It should be borne in mind that the real genius of Lenin, Gramsci, Luxemburg and the early generation of organic intellectuals whose legacy Burawoy and others draw on was their ability to focus on political strategy appropriate to their historical epoch. The political and socioeconomic transformations of the globe in the last two decades make this necessary once more.

The public sociologist of today is confronted with the same historical task that confronted the earlier organic intellectuals, namely to bring their collective accumulated knowledge and their methodological skills in an engagement with subalterns on the political strategy appropriate to this historical epoch. Of course, this role must not be performed in the chauvinist way sometimes depicted in the writings of Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). They must recognize, as Burawoy does in his article, 'that subaltern groups have insights into their subjugation', and solutions to transcend it. Public sociologists must deploy their skills in an inclusive way to engage the issue of political strategy: how to subvert power in favour of the agendas of subaltern groups.

Notes

1. This article was submitted before the paper by Michel Wieviorka was available – Ed.
2. Two valiant examples are Neil Agget and David Webster.
3. There is, for instance, a very useful reflection on the experiences of the Indian state Kerala, and the lessons this may hold for democratic transitions in the South (see Webster and Adler, 1999: 356–8).
4. Note, for instance, the deafening silence that accompanies COSATU's and the SACP's promotion of the presidential candidature of Jacob Zuma, as if a developmental agenda would materialize simply from getting 'your man' into the union buildings.
5. Schedler (2001) argues that 'institutional uncertainty' involves the rules of the political system, and suggests that it is bad for democracy, whereas 'substantive uncertainty', which relates to political elites being uncertain about their continuity in office, is really good for democracy.

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