

SOUTH AFRICANIZING U.S. SOCIOLOGY¹

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June, 1990, South Africa. Nelson Mandela had been released from Robben Island in February, Freedom Fighters had returned from exile, including such noted (and brilliant) Marxist sociologists as Jack Simons and Harold Wolpe. Unions and civics were galvanizing African urban society. The South African Communist Party (re)launched itself with a tumultuous send off in Soweto. Throughout the country the air vibrated with impending freedom, even in and through the violence that continued, unabated. I was there addressing the multi-racial Association of Sociologists of Southern Africa on the fate of socialism -- after the Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) but before the disintegration of the Soviet Union (1991). Just as Soviet sociology had joined hands with an erupting civil society, so South African sociology had become inseparable from the struggle against apartheid. It was a moment of glasnost and perestroika all round, in which sociologists were united in a common project -- to repel authoritarian states.

What about today? I was in South Africa this July (2003) (and several times in between), again addressing the annual meeting of its sociologists. Ten years after the fall of apartheid, the government of liberation had set in motion a neoliberal juggernaut (privatization of utilities, anti-union offensive, informalization of the economy), a demobilization of civil society, the restructuring of higher education according to the prescriptions of the World Bank, the commodification of social research (and if not commodification hitching funding to Western publications). In higher education as well as in the wider society, the ascendancy of a black bourgeoisie has turned a racial divide into an ever more polarized class divide. Despite all set backs and the turn from Marxism to Afropessimism, South African sociology still bears its distinctive stamp that so amazed me in 1990 -- a deep engagement with public issues of the communities in which it is embedded, that is, with questions of ethnicity, violence, AIDS and patriarchy, labor movement, privatization and anti-privatization, world economy, NGOs, the alliance and the communist party, and so forth.

This year my address to the assembled South African sociologists was not about socialism but about public sociology. The audience was bemused. For how could sociology be anything other than public? Indeed! Only in America do we need to discover and defend the idea of public sociology, only in America is professional sociology so powerful that it calls forth an antidote of public sociology! With a wink and a nod, I told the assembled audience in Durban that my goal was to South Africanize U.S. sociology. They were amused.

They were amused not only because only in the United States do we have to defend sociology's public face, but because they were skeptical that we could learn from the periphery. But that is the hope, at least, for four days, August 14-17th in San Francisco. This year the American Sociological Association will host Arundhati Roy,

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Indian novelist, public intellectual at large, activist against population-destroying dams as well as Mary Robinson, ex-President of Ireland, ex-High Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN, and thorn in President Bush's side. They will both make public addresses in San Francisco bringing with them critical winds from abroad, from burgeoning transnational movements in human rights, from movements for environmental justice. They will be supported by a series of thematic panels and fora on public sociologies in different regions of the world – East Asia, Africa, Latin America, PostSoviet World, Middle East, India, and, yes, the United States. Funded by the Ford Foundation, some 50 scholars and students will be coming from the farthest corners of the world to join us in a public debate – a sort of mini World Sociological Forum.

But we need to set our own house in order too! We need to think about the meaning of public sociology on our home terrain. This year instead of having the usual 14 Thematic panels and some 50 Special Panels, we will have only thematic panels, about 65 of them, dealing with different aspects of public sociology, many proposed by our members engaged in community and movement projects. There are thematics on public sociology in action, on the shifting boundaries between public and private (the colonization and erosion of the public), the multiple ways of reaching and engaging publics, and the multiple publics to be engaged. In addition, there will be thematics on how the discipline of sociology has confined public sociology, but also the possibilities the discipline has opened up. To top it all off we will have three plenaries: an opening plenary, co-sponsored with SSSP, ABS and SWS, on W.E.B. Du Bois at which Manning Marable, Aldon Morris, Patricia Hill Collins and Gerald Horne will discuss the 21st century lessons to be drawn from this preeminent public sociologist of the 20th century. That will be followed by two other plenaries, one on speaking to power organized by Immanuel Wallerstein with an international cast, and one on speaking to publics with such familiar figures as Frances Fox Piven, Barbara Ehrenreich, Eric Wanner, Juliet Schor, and William Julius Wilson. The conference will be closed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, 8 years President of Brazil, who will give a public address on being a sociologist in power!

The outward looking character of the San Francisco meetings augments the expanding discussion of ASA's contributions to civic politics. The ASA has defended human rights abroad, such as those of the Egyptian sociologist, Saad Ibrahim. It has defended its own interests at home in the right to do research, fighting for a reasonable human subjects protocol or opposing attempts within Congress to defund research into sexual health. The ASA has also ventured into political debates about race, submitting an *amicus brief* to the Supreme Court that defended affirmative action, authoring a "race statement" that insisted that race still matters -- that there is racial discrimination and sociologists know a lot about its causes and consequences. The ASA opposed the Racial Privacy issue in California that would have prevented state collection of statistics by race. This Proposition 54 went down on the same day that Arnold Schwarzenegger was hoisted. The ASA waded even further into politics with an anti-(Iraq)war resolution that was passed in a member ballot with a two-thirds majority. We have become, in other words, more than a self-serving professional association. We have entered the democratic

arena to defend commitments that lie at the heart of our vocation, commitments that underpin our scientific research.

Of course, public sociology is not without its perils and its opponents! If there were no perils we wouldn't have to do it, and if there were no opponents we wouldn't be devoting a whole meeting to it! Venturing into the public sphere could threaten our legitimacy among the powers that be. Those who don't like our views will try to make us appear unworthy of government support – even as we enhance our standing in various public eyes. Yes, taking public stances could lead to reprisals against us, collectively or individually. Furthermore, in our very engagement with publics there is always the incipient danger of know-it-all arrogance and vanguardism, or alternatively of pandering to publics. The traditional public sociologists who write op-ed pieces for *The New York Times* or best-selling books – with their invisible, thin, passive, mainstream publics-- need to be complemented by and attentive to the less glamorous and more arduous organic public sociologists who work in the trenches of civil society, engaging with communities of faith, with neighborhood associations, social movements, labor, etc. That unmediated engagement has to be a dialogue in which each side protects its relative autonomy, in which the educator too has to be educated. For this our sociological research must be of the highest quality. It has to be because people's lives are at stake. Moreover, we need to think about this not just nationally but also globally, to discover the fertile ground of transnational civil society where women's and environmental movements, human rights and immigrant rights organizations, and a host of NGOs criss-cross the world. In short, there is not one public sociology, there is a myriad of public sociologies.

Why this stirring of public sociologies today? Why now? Sociology as we know it was born with civil society at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Europe and the United States – it was born as an engagement with political parties, trade unions, mass education, the proliferation of voluntary associations, all directly or indirectly tied to the state. Sociology disappeared with civil society under fascism and Stalinism. On the other hand, some of its most vibrant moments have coincided with the expansion of civil society, as in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s or the US in the 1960s and 1970s. But public sociology today emerges as a *defensive outpost* against the tyranny of the unconstrained market and the unilateralist state -- both at home and abroad.

September 11th, 2001, consolidated, intensified and justifies these twin transformations that were set in motion a decade before (or some would say even earlier) by the collapse of Soviet Communism. Without Soviet political competition for world hegemony, the United States could now impose its will unilaterally and arbitrarily, just as failed economic competition undermined the plausibility of an administered economy. In rushed the market utopia. We are not political scientists who identify with state power and political order. Nor are we economists who identify with the wonders of the free market. We are sociologists who identify with the resilience of civil society. But in defending society against markets and states, we do not claim that this is some harmonious communitarian terrain. To the contrary it is covered by racial fissures,

scattered hegemonies of sexuality and gender, it is suffused with deepening inequalities and disciplinary regimes – themselves the product of plundering states and invading markets. Working with the positive moment of civil society, sociology defends its own very existence, but at the same time defends the interests of humanity. Sociologists of the world unite for a renascent civil society – a vibrant, participatory, global counter-hegemony!