

Sociology in South Africa: its past, present and future

Edward Webster

Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP), University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa
webstere@social.wits.ac.za

Burawoy provides a useful analytical history of South African sociology by suggesting a movement during the apartheid period through the four sectors of his matrix, in anti-clockwise direction from policy sociology to professional, critical and public sociology (Burawoy, 2004). His suggestion that in the post-apartheid era sociology has been forced to shift from a reflexive engagement with publics and a critical engagement with societal goals to a defence of the very idea of sociology, is persuasive. 'We are witnessing', he concludes, 'the instrumentalization of sociology, turning it away from an integration of ends to an obsession with means, often its own survival. The post-apartheid state ... has little patience for public and critical sociologies that articulate the disparate interests to be found in society. The assault on sociology becomes part of a broader offensive against active society' (Burawoy, 2004: 15).

The response of South African sociologists to this unprecedented interest by the President of the American Sociological Association in their history was one of bemusement.¹ Why is he interested in the self-evident fact that South Africa has a tradition of public sociology? While it may be self-evident to South African sociology, by naming some of its activities 'public sociology' Burawoy was giving these activities legitimacy. As a participant in the symposium on Public Sociologies at Boston College last year wrote, 'In giving public sociology a name, perhaps Burawoy's enduring gift is to confer it with legitimacy' (Vaughan, 2004: 118). 'Naming' public sociology as a legitimate activity brings to the surface a whole range of activities that are not normally accepted as the domain of a professional academic.

Other South African sociologists challenged Burawoy's categorisation of types of sociology suggesting that he was drawing artificial boundaries at a time when these boundaries were breaking down. Surprisingly, some even denied that sociology is a distinct discipline or that it has any distinct role to play in the social science project. Sociology's historic role, Burawoy has made clear in a separate paper, is quite distinct within the broader social science project. '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

1. Burawoy's paper was first presented as the keynote address to the annual congress of the South African Sociology Association (SASA) held in Durban from 30 June to 2 July 2003. An earlier version of my paper was presented by way of a response to Burawoy at this meeting (see p 11 this issue).

defending society against markets and states, we do not claim that this is some harmonious communitarian terrain. To the contrary, racial fissures, scattered hegemonies of sexuality and gender, cover it, 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' (Burawoy, 2003: 3).

These are inspiring and stirring words. What implications do they have for the practice of sociology in South Africa? I have divided my comments on Burawoy's article into three parts: firstly, I have used his analytical categories to examine the development of sociology in South Africa; I then draw out the lessons that I have learnt from practising public sociology in South Africa; and then, in the third part, I examine the erosion of a public sociology in contemporary South Africa. I conclude by suggesting that, while restructuring threatens to undermine our proud public and critical role, it has also opened up opportunities for South African sociology to strengthen its professional role.

Part one

Let me begin by applying Burawoy's four types to the development of South African sociology.

Policy Sociology

Sociology departments in South African universities emerged as part of a social work programme and contained a strong policy orientation. This type of sociology can appropriately be described as 'policy sociology' as it focused on the limited concerns of a client – welfare agencies, or the broader concerns of a patron – the government. The content and approach adopted by these departments closely echoed trends in the metropolis, where a tradition of sound empirical research was supported by the careful teaching of statistics (Crothers, 1998: 47). The University of Pretoria established a department of sociology and social work in the twenties, while the University of Stellenbosch followed in the thirties. These initiatives were closely linked to the emerging policy framework created to deal with the 'poor white problem' and the creation by the government of a department of Social Welfare in 1936. Launching the Department of Sociology and Social Administration at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1937, the newly appointed Professor, John Gray, defined the object of the department as assisting:

in the growth of an objective or scientific approach to contemporary social problems ... (with) an emphasis ... on work and research in the field of social administration' (Webster, 1985: 47).

Professional sociology

A second type of sociology emerges in the fifties when an attempt is made to professionalise the discipline. The key figure in this development is SP Cilliers, professor of Sociology at the University of Stellenbosch. (Groenewald, 1991) SP Cilliers was 'a second genera-

tion' professor who studied under Talcott Parsons at Harvard University. In the late fifties he introduced Parsonian structural functionalism into South African sociology. The significance of Parsons' work is that it provided sociology with a novel theoretical framework, giving it the confidence to break with social work. All existing joint departments of sociology and social work split in the sixties, creating separate departments of sociology for the first time in South Africa.

However, while South African sociologists were attempting to professionalise sociology as an independent discipline, the South African state was turning inwards under the impact of apartheid. The rise of the apartheid state in 1948 led to a restructuring of society along more explicit racial lines, and in particular the creation of separate black universities through the Extension of Universities Act of 1959. Apartheid, Crothers (1998) argues, created two different knowledge systems: an 'Afrikaner Sociology' which served apartheid, and an 'oppositional Sociology' which opposed apartheid. The origins of this divide go back to the sixties when attempts were made to establish a common sociological association. There were delays with the formation of the association due to discussions on whether or not to open membership to black sociologists. The Afrikaans universities, with the exception of the University of Stellenbosch, supported restricting membership to whites only, while the English-medium universities voted for a non-racial approach. Ultimately it was agreed to restrict membership to whites only and the South African Sociological Association (SASA) was formed in 1967. The controversy over black membership remained unresolved for many years, until 1977 when it was finally decided to open SASA to sociologists of all races.

However, in 1971 a new association had been formed, the Association for Sociology in Southern Africa (ASSA). ASSA was non-racial and incorporated sociologists from the neighbouring countries in Southern Africa. SP Cilliers was the first president of ASSA and the first conference was held in Maputo, Mozambique. The formation of two associations institutionalised the divide between South African sociologists, cementing a bifurcation between the sociology taught in the predominantly pro-apartheid Afrikaans speaking universities, and the sociology taught in the cautiously anti-apartheid English speaking universities.

The subjects studied by these two groups, the theoretical frameworks within which the discipline was taught, and the methodological approaches employed, were all subject to this political dividing line. The separation extended as far as two separate sociological associations, separate sociological congresses, separate languages, and even different academic journals in which sociologists could publish their research (Van der Merwe, 1995).

Sociology was introduced in black universities after the Second World War, in the 1960s, initially at Fort Hare and then extended to the other Historically Black Universities (HBUs). While in most of the HBUs conservative Afrikaner sociologists dominated sociology, there were exceptions. 'The most striking' the report on Sociology: State of the Discipline comments, 'was the University of Transkei, which had appointed Herbert Vilakazi, a Marxist, as the first Professor of Sociology in the early 1980s. Sociology classes attracted big numbers, more than any other classes. Even students from other faculties (for

instance, science) enrolled for sociology because they considered it relevant. Marxism was so well received, and made the management of Unitra and the homeland government so uncomfortable, that it led to the banning and deportation of academics that were teaching it' (Webster, *et al.* 2000:10).¹

Critical Sociology

A third type of sociology emerged in the late seventies when a new generation of sociologists, influenced by New Left thinking, challenged the structural functionalism dominant in both SASA and ASSA. In his presidential address to ASSA, Ken Jubber argued that something akin to a Kuhnian 'scientific revolution' had taken place in some sociology departments in universities in South Africa (Jubber, 1983). I followed as president of ASSA in 1984 and in my presidential address I argued explicitly for a critical sociology in Southern African. 'Authoritarian regimes of whatever kind', I argued, 'generally suppress or severely restrict the scope of sociological thought and research. By promoting a critical view of social arrangements, by its disclosure of inequality, forms of domination, ideological misrepresentations and their sources, sociology has the potential to occupy the place which was held earlier by political economy, as the social science to which the crucial issues of the age need to be referred for analysis and interpretation' (Webster, 1985:47).

Public Sociology

During the eighties ASSA became an academic forum for a rich and vibrant sociological community in close dialogue with the new social movements struggling against apartheid. This marks the emergence of the fourth type of sociology identified by Burawoy, public sociology. The creative tension generated by the interaction between the 'organic intellectuals' emerging outside the university with a new generation of intellectuals inside the university, led to the emergence of a 'hybrid' form of sociology, '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' (Sitas, 1996). This 'indigenous hybridity' is reflected in the main currents of sociological writing and research produced during the eighties.

The Working Groups with the highest output in ASSA were the State and Politics, Labour Studies, Health, Urban and Regional Studies, Education, Popular Culture, Class, Race and Gender. Working Groups on Militarisation, Political Violence and Conflict and Peace Studies emerged in the late eighties in response to the growing political polarisation during the period of virtual civil war between 1984-1992 (Webster, *et al.*, 2000:11).

Ironically, instead of limiting the possibilities of genuine scholarship, this dialogue with social movements seems to have provided the impetus for a flowering of original sociological studies. Furthermore, the engaged nature of these studies inspired a generation of graduate students to work in these new social movements and to establish developmental NGOs and alternative publications. South Africa seemed, for many, to be the model of an

1. I have drawn sections of the next two pages from the State of the Discipline report presented to the National Research Foundation in 2000. I would like to thank my fellow authors: Shireen Ally, Charles Crothers, Fred Hendricks and Nhlanhla Jordan for their participation in this report.

engaged public sociology poised to play a leading role in the transformation of South African society. Indeed in 1995 Mala Singh, previously president of the progressive Union of Democratic Staff Associations (UDUSA), was appointed Executive Director of the Centre for Scientific Development (CSD). In August 1997 she initiated a research project on Transforming the Social Sciences, a title that reflected the spirit of the times.

But this initiative was to be rapidly overtaken by events. In the course of the following two years, the project changed its title to the State of the Social Sciences, suggesting something more neutral. By the beginning of 2000 Mala Singh had been seconded to the Department of National Education for three years – eventually extended to five years – and the CSD had merged with its natural science equivalent, the Foundation of Research Development (FRD) to create the National Research Foundation (NRF). The issue that now preoccupied the NRF was that of research evaluation. More specifically, would the social scientists follow the system of individual ratings of the research performance of scientists, pioneered in the eighties by the FRD? The CSD had developed a different system of evaluation over the years, and Mala Singh had been concerned that the NRF would impose on them the FRD system, a system that many felt inappropriate for the social sciences.

Before we examine the changing external environment, and the restructuring of higher education in particular, it is important to identify the complex set of dilemmas that face any attempt to develop a public sociology. These dilemmas, I want to suggest, are not only external but are also internal to the contradictions that are generated when academics seek to bring sociology to the public beyond the academy. It is to these dilemmas that I now turn. I will draw on examples from my own work as a sociologist in South Africa over the past thirty years.

Part two: The lessons of practising public sociology in South Africa

What are the lessons I have drawn from critical engagement with the public outside the university?

The first lesson is that the public is not some collective *tabula rasa* waiting passively with empty heads for the intellectual vanguard from the university to tell them what to think. They have ideas, traditions, political cultures, organisations and leaders of their own. Indeed they have their own grassroots organic intellectuals whose task it is to interpret, and give direction to, the world around them. The traditional Zulu poet, the *imbongi* for example, may be seen as a grassroots intellectual, educating the workers about their past struggles and at the same time offering interpretations of how the past can affect the present (Bonnin, 1987). I discovered this when, in 1973 in the wake of the Durban strikes, I developed a relationship with the workers' movement, which was emerging among industrial workers in South Africa at that time.

I was anxious to identify who workers felt were their political leaders, so I used the timeworn sociological instrument of a social survey. In the course of the interviews it became clear that a leading communist by the name of Moses Mabhida was one of the favoured leaders (Webster, 1979). At the time, of course, the South African Communist party was banned and Mabhida had long since left the country and was living in exile. He

was, in other words, hidden from the world of the white communities and the white trade union officials who were acting as the gatekeepers in these emerging unions at that time.

When I presented the results of the survey to these officials, they rejected the results of the survey, suggesting that my interviewer (who had himself been a political prisoner) was making it up. I was in no position to refute them at the time but, some years later, I was able to spend time in the university library reading banned copies of left wing newspapers of the fifties. I was not surprised to find the name of Mabhida regularly reported on in these newspapers.

If it is important to recognise that the subjects of your research have deeply committed world views of their own, developing a relationship of trust with them in apartheid South Africa was difficult. Given the sharply unequal power relations between black and white, and the sharp social distance between them, it was easy for the white intellectual to reproduce the apartheid racial division of labour where white intellectuals do the 'expert' functions and black workers do the 'menial' functions.

In general, there has been a silence among scholars and activists alike over these unequal power relations between white and black in the labour movement. Sakhela Buhlungu has begun to explore these relations, arguing that these white intellectuals were never fully integrated into the movement with which they had decided to pledge solidarity. He uses the notion of 'contradictory class location' to explain this incomplete integration (Buhlungu, 2003).

Lesson one, then, is that public sociologists have to recognise that society has its own organic intellectuals and, in intervening, they will either reinforce or subvert existing power relations within society.

I agree with the participants in the seminar on public sociologies at Boston College when they argue for 'a normative model of antagonistic interdependence which holds all four types (of sociology) in equilibrium' (Burawoy, *et al.*, 2004: 103). In other words, managing the tensions between these different types of sociologies can place the sociologist in a contradictory position. Sociologists can be caught between their commitment to open debate in the university (and pressures to publish their work in professional journals) and the discipline imposed by involvement in outside organisations. The tendency has been to resolve this contradiction by either retreating into the safer haven of professional sociology or by making your primary loyalty to public sociology. In the latter case, professional sociology simply provides the base for the public sociologist to create a different world outside the university, populated by activists and public intellectuals.

This was the path taken by the two leading public sociologists during the apartheid period, Richard Turner and David Webster. Both were to pay the ultimate price for their public roles when they were assassinated by the apartheid police, Turner on the 8th January 1978 and Webster on the 1st May 1989. Although neither was employed in departments of sociology (Turner was in political science and Webster in social anthropology) they are exemplars of social scientists that deliberately and permanently shifted their orientation to public sociology.

The main themes of Turner's ideas are set out in a remarkable book published in 1972, *The Eye of the Needle*, in which he stressed the capacity of people to change the world in which they live while at the same time providing them with a vision of a future South Africa based on participatory democracy. Most importantly, Turner placed heavy emphasis on the significance of black workers in the economy. He believed that it was through collective organisation, especially trade unions, that black people could exercise some control over their lives and influence the direction of change in South Africa.

I chose a different path from that of Turner by trying to resolve the contradiction between the professional and public roles by institutionalising the link between these two types of sociology inside¹ the university. The key institutional innovation was the creation of a research programme, the Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP), in 1983, linking high quality academic research on the world of work with a broad range of actors within the world of work. In 1988 I became head of the Department of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand, where I was able to cement the links between the University based research entity and teaching programme with movements outside the University.

These links presuppose a commitment to the university as the central arena of one's work and a belief in the intrinsic value of sociology both as an intellectual activity and a way of creating a better society. This requires that you make academic publications in peer review publications a central goal, but that you do not neglect three other goals: the public dissemination of your research findings, a contribution to policy formulation, and the production of a new generation of social researchers.

To balance these multiple goals, it is necessary to create institutional space within the university where outside communities can interact with researchers and a more participatory approach to research. This raises the question of accountability. By convention academics are accountable to their peers for the evaluation of their work. It is they who decide whether research findings are valid, whether they can be published and what standing you have in your discipline. Once you engage in participatory research relations with outside organisations where you jointly identify the problem to be studied, share ideas on how best to conduct the study, and report back on the results, a number of problems emerge. In particular it can lead to attempts to suppress uncomfortable research findings. Our research programme experienced this when we investigated how the system of migrant labour created a market for prostitution and a potential AIDS pandemic. We needed to negotiate carefully with our research partners before coming to an agreement to publish these unwelcome facts on the devastating social consequences of migrant labour (Webster, 1995: 11).

1. Turner was banned in February 1973, confined to his home and unable to continue in his lecturing post at the University of Natal. However, he continued work in a semi-underground way and was central in establishing an educational institution to train the new generation of union leaders as well as in the establishment of the South African Labour Bulletin, a journal designed to record and analyse the emerging labour movement. As a result of his banning and because of the deep hostility of the state to the project, both projects were established off-campus in the offices of the emerging labour movement. In this sense, Turner did not have the option to establish institutional links between the professional and the public.

Lesson two is that the successful practice of a public sociology depends on a strong professional sociology located in a university with a clear commitment to the autonomy of the researcher.

The impact of the public sociologist on society is not a one-to-one linear relationship. It is not like policy research where the sociologist is commissioned to fill a knowledge gap, which then provides information for a policy decision. Rather, the concepts and theoretical interpretations that the researchers engender permeate society in what Harvard policy analyst, Carol Weiss, calls knowledge creep (Weiss, 1980).

The research we undertook on AIDS in 1989 'percolated' into the consciousness of union officials and, with the support of sympathetic individuals in the union, they overturned accustomed patterns of thought. It helped clarify the union agenda leading this union to become the first to take up AIDS in a systematic way. But this does not mean that the public sociologist wields a lot of power (Webster, 1992: 91).

Lesson three is that the public sociologist wields influence not power.

The production of social knowledge is a political process; it is shaped by the differential access of groups to the producers of knowledge locally and globally. This was brought home sharply to our researchers quite early on in the development of our research programme, when we embarked on research among underground gold miners around issues of health and safety. We were able to show that even so-called 'unskilled workers' exercised a range of tacit skills, tricks of the trade essential to production, but received no formal acknowledgement (Leger, 1992). Workers, we argued, were able to anticipate rock falls underground. We called the project Talking Rocks.

Underlying this research on tacit knowledge was the validity of worker knowledge versus the claims of management to 'scientific' knowledge. The powerful employers' association, the Chamber of Mines, systematically attempted to discredit the research, arguing that it was their prerogative to decide who worked where, and it was only their university accredited rock scientists that had the knowledge to predict rock falls. In the event one of the first pieces of legislation to be passed by the new democratic government was an amendment to the Mine Health and Safety Act to allow mine workers to refuse to work in dangerous conditions.

The importance of by whom and how scientific knowledge is accredited is a crucial issue for the public sociologist. It is necessary to engage directly with the discipline and attempt to shape the production of knowledge in the arenas where the discipline is shaped, the professional associations, the journals and the textbooks.

Lesson four is that the production of knowledge is a contested process and that one cannot ignore the disciplinary foundations of the production process.

The end of formal apartheid changed the terrain in which sociology was practised and created both new opportunities as well as constraints on our activities. In Part three I identify four of these institutional changes.

Part three: Restructuring and the erosion of a critical and public sociology

Early in the post-apartheid period sociologists began to talk of the 'waning of sociology', attributed by Ari Sitas (1996) to the breakdown of the dialogue between sociologists and social movements and the failure of South African sociologists to respond creatively to the transition. The advent of democracy in 1994 had indeed shifted the centre of stage away from the social movements that led to the democratisation process, towards the state whose demands were for more technical policy-oriented research. Government was committed to repositioning South African higher education institutions to global technological and economic competitiveness. To achieve this goal it was necessary to restructure universities as sites of new knowledge production and technological innovation. Jonathan Jansen sums up this dual focus in these terms '... Universities are not only being called on to play a strategic role in meeting national development goals such as human resource capacity, but also to train this new cadre of scientists and technologists to enable global competitiveness' (Jansen, 2003: 304).

This emphasis in government policy on national development and competing successfully in a global economy changed the institutional context in which social science was being conducted in fundamental ways. The clearest example of the strengthening of policy research is the 'radical transformation' of the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) into a body that provides 'high quality applied social science that has policy relevance for large scale public sector users, with an increasing share of contract and foundation support' (Business Day, 2 December 2002: 18). Indeed, the HSRC has increased, under the dynamic leadership of its CEO, Dr Mark Orkin, its revenue from contract research from R6 million per annum in 1997 to R60 million in 2001, a ten fold increase (*ibid*). With a staff of over 140 researchers the HSRC has more social researchers than all of the universities combined¹.

Four crucial changes in the external environment can be identified (see Figure 1). Although these changes constitute potential opportunities, they exert pressure on South African sociologists to move away from a critical and public sociology towards an instrumental approach to knowledge that focuses more narrowly on publishing in professional journals and the generation of income through policy oriented research.

The first institutional change was the creation of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA); a body designed to develop a more vocationally oriented educational system. In terms of SAQA, National Standards Bodies (NSBs) and Standards Generating Bodies (SGBs) were set up to approve the outcomes of universities. These bodies, on which all stakeholders are represented, give SAQA the power to intervene in curriculum planning, as well as to review the academic performance, of universities.

The second institutional change was the establishment of one educational system with a director of Higher Education under which all universities fall. Accompanying this integration of the previously racially divided system, were the recommendations on the merger

1. By the end of 2003 the revenue from contract research had increased to 75 million Rand with a staff of 150 researchers.

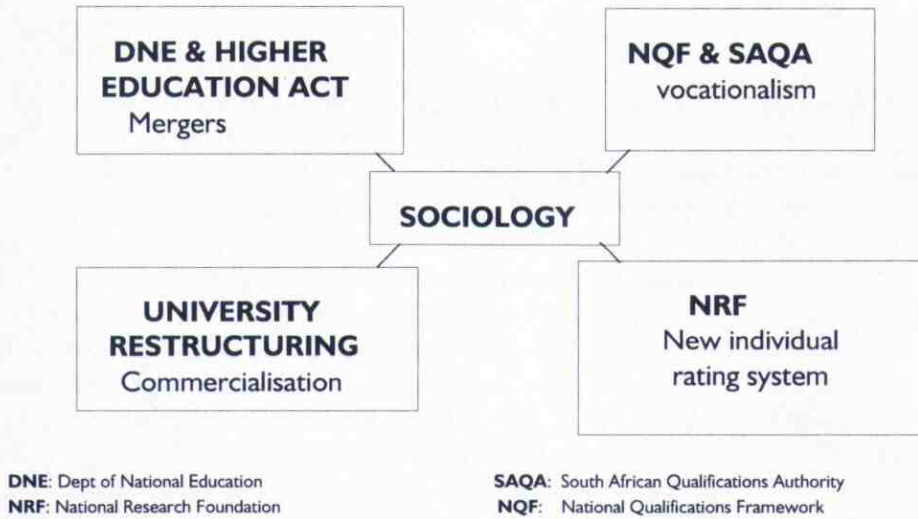


Figure 1 The Changing Institutional Context

of universities and technikons in April 2002 (Jansen, 2003:303). The positive effect of this policy shift towards mergers, Jansen argues, will be the potential for a more deracialised higher education system with a better quality, but smaller number of universities. The proposal by the NRF to establish centres of excellence at a few well-resourced universities flows logically from this policy shift. It is worth noting that Jansen leaves open the question of whether the leadership and commitment exists in these institutions to enhance academic standards, institutional competitiveness, and managerial efficiencies. (Jansen, 2003: 307).

The third institutional change was the merging of the two state research-funding bodies – the FRD for the natural sciences and the CSD for the social sciences and humanities – into one body, the National Research Foundation (NRF). The objective behind the merger is to create one science funding system in order to encourage greater inter-disciplinary work. Concern had been expressed by social scientists that the more powerful and better resourced natural sciences will lead to a reduction in funding to the social sciences, especially with the strong emphasis in government thinking on the need to strengthen our science and technology capacity. While the threat is real, the creation of one system also ensures that the social sciences are kept inside the same funding structure and it clearly opens up the opportunity for innovative inter-disciplinary research¹.

A clear outcome of the merger is the extension of the FRD system of individual rating to the social sciences and humanities. In anticipation of this possible policy shift, the author was commissioned by the NRF in February 2000 to explore different forms of research

1. The director of the Social Sciences Law and Humanities at the NRF, Tessa Marcus, is meeting this challenge by attempting to engage with the natural science paradigm. She has launched a research programme that aims to make clear the role of these disciplines 'in stimulating innovation and technology in a way that addresses human needs and issues' (Marcus, 2003).

evaluation. During May and June 2000 four regional workshops were run for SASA members to explore, *inter alia*, their responses to the idea of individual rating. A final report back was given at the annual conference of SASA in July 2000 at the University of the Western Cape. The discussions in these workshops are summarised in the final report submitted to the NRF (Webster and Fakier, 2001). Six problems with the individual rating system were recorded in the report.

- It was argued that in sociology, to a greater degree than in the natural sciences, there are a variety of approaches and orientations to the discipline. While there is a core subject matter to the discipline, there is no consensus on how to approach this subject matter. The conceptual and methodological diversity that sociology provides, it was argued, is as vital to the social scientific enterprise as cultural diversity is to society or biological diversity is to the ecosystem. But this diversity will make it difficult to get agreement on the ranking of individuals in a simple hierarchy, even if one could obtain agreement on what these criteria for ranking should be.
- A second, and linked point, is that for sociologists their subject matter is one over which vast disagreements exist; for which many have strong views – such problems as war and peace, the relations between black and white, socialism, poverty, unemployment, and so on. To investigate them involves sociologists in great historical arguments, and makes it very difficult for them to divorce their own views as citizens from their work as sociologists. This will make ranking of sociologists more difficult.
- A related, but additional point raised in the workshops, is that the social sciences and the humanities are grounded in a particular geographical and historical context. Indeed, this is why Area Studies has emerged, where the intellectual focus is on a specific region, such as Asian studies or African studies, rather than the discipline. This could create confusion when it comes to ranking; are the researchers ranked by their 'Africanist' peers, or by their disciplinary peers? While of course these problems exist whether you rank or not, it becomes an issue only if you attempt to introduce one inclusive system of ranking for the sciences.
- Sociology is a 'generalist discipline'. Consequently, relatively few fields within the discipline have a critical mass of scholars who share both a subject matter and a method of investigation. It will be difficult to find sufficient numbers of scholars who are familiar both with the substantive focus and the method of investigation of a researcher. This will render the review process vulnerable to errors of judgement and will make it difficult to build consensus among practitioners.
- The focus of the FRD rating is on the individual. Participants felt that it would be fairer to evaluate an entity – a teaching entity such as a department or a research entity such as a unit or an institute. Research is increasingly a 'team activity' and the ability of a team of researchers to produce research excellence should be evaluated.
- Finally, it was felt that the FRD model did not adequately recognise the need to develop the capacity of researchers – through internships, for example – as a central component of any research evaluation.

While the authors of the report identified with many of the problems raised, they concluded that they did not find the above arguments in the workshops for not rating sociol-

ogy convincing. Many of the arguments for the specificity of sociology, they suggested, apply to the natural sciences as well (Webster and Fakier, 2001:26). Instead, the authors recommended a new national system of ranking based on the ranking of entities rather than individuals (Webster and Fakier, 2001: 26- 29)¹.

In the event, the existing FRD system of individual rating was introduced into the social sciences in 2002, and the idea of centres of excellence in 2003. Essentially individual rating is a benchmarking exercise against a notion of 'international standards'. In the first two years of the introduction of the system very few sociologists applied – six in all over the two-year period. To date none have been rated A, i.e. 'unequivocally recognised by their peers as leading scholars in their field', and only two as B, i.e. 'considerable international recognition'. The rest of the applications have been rated as Cs, i.e. 'established researchers' or not rated at all.

The fourth institutional change is within the institutions themselves, with the emphasis on greater commercialisation and a corporate style of management (Webster and Mosoetsa, 2002). In the words of Eve Bertelsen,

A thorough-going commoditisation of knowledge and instruction is well underway, and in the process universities are being systematically transformed into a client-service industry for the late capitalist market system (Bertelsen, 1998; 130).

The implications of the changing institutional context is that a critical and public sociology is being eroded by a combination of external pressures: a decline in an active civil society on the one hand and the restructuring of the higher education system on the other.

Conclusion

Burawoy has stressed the strengths sociology has drawn from engaging with the public². I have identified some of the lessons that could be drawn from practising public sociology during the apartheid period. I then suggest that the tradition of a critical and public sociology that emerged during the eighties is being eroded by a combination of external pressures.

Restructuring is producing what Richard Sennet calls 'chameleon values', where educational values are jettisoned as swiftly as a change of clothing, and long-term commitments dissolve into short-term financial gain. Lucrative opportunities for consultancy work in the post-apartheid state and business have, to use the words of Sennet again, led to 'the erosion of those qualities of character, like loyalty, commitment, purpose and resolution, which are long term in nature' (Sennet, 1998:26).

1. Surprisingly SASA leadership did not take advantage of these recommendations to engage with the NRF over the nature of the research evaluation system nor did they give their members any guidance on how they should respond to the new system. However a decision was made at the annual conference of SASA in July 2003 to engage the NRF over the new system.
2. Burawoy draws a distinction between academic engagement with the mainstream and engagement with what he calls 'counter-publics', that is publics that represent oppositional values and interests. He also distinguishes between those engagements that involve active interaction with the 'public' and those that are more 'passive' (Burawoy, 2004: 7). The cases in part two of this paper fall into the category of active engagement with counter publics.

There is a danger that in our eagerness to 'change our clothing' we forget the core function of the higher education system, which is to build the capacity of our students and produce new knowledge. It takes decades to build an effective research entity or teaching department; decay can happen very quickly. It is important that we begin to 'benchmark' ourselves against the best in the world but, if we are to achieve this goal, then we need to foreground capacity development and provide incentives for those who do.

This is not as simple as it sounds. To concentrate on the long-term goal of capacity building and public engagement may cut across the need for individual scholars to build their own research profile. This tension between short and long-term goals or individual and collective goals has been exacerbated by the National Research Foundation's system of individual rating for the social sciences. While there are positive benefits of such a system, especially the opportunity of self-assessment and peer feedback, there is a danger that researchers become narrowly preoccupied with the singular goal of attempting to publish in what are seen as the leading international journals. Unless carefully managed, this could lead to a neglect of the public role that so effectively defined our sociology in the eighties.

With the opening up of South African universities to the global system of knowledge production, many South African sociologists have become active in the international arena and in the International Sociological Association (ISA) in particular. The ISA has formed a working group to study ways of promoting, within their research committees, recognition of sociological research work carried out in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In the words of one of their recent documents:

The field of sociology has, for historical reasons, been widely defined in Europe and North America, and often reflects the problems, cultural models, modes of access, production and diffusion of knowledge of Western countries or countries where Western intellectual traditions dominate. Social issues specific to non-western cultures or developing countries have frequently been marginalised or ignored. Major sociological communities in Latin America or Asia still find it difficult to situate their research concerns and their theoretical developments not only within the framework and discussion of general theories that the West has universalised, but also in international sociological conferences and world congresses. We all know the role major Western philosophical traditions and social science theories have played in the diversification of sociological discourse. Wider access to work from the South or from Asia would also considerably enrich the perspectives of the discipline

(Cited in Webster and Fakier, 2001: 26-27).

Globalisation has opened opportunities for cross-national links between sociological communities with nodes of scholars linked to each other in cyberspace. But there is a grave danger in the global age of a kind of 'pseudo universalism'. It is only through an understanding of our different histories that we can arrive at an understanding of the many voices in our discipline. We need to remind ourselves that path-breaking cultural creativity in world history has often come, not from the centre, but from the periphery of cultural worlds. This is the challenge, Sitas argues, facing the South African social sciences: to find a

critical space and a voice that is at once particular, unique, and at the same time universal (Sitas, 1996).

To meet this challenge, I have suggested, we need to reflect critically on how to balance the contradictions generated by a public sociology. But the challenge goes beyond reflecting on our past; restructuring has changed fundamentally the terrain on which we act as sociologists opening up opportunities for South African sociology to deepen the professional side of its activities. David Cooper has identified this opportunity and suggested the need for developing what he calls the 'fundamental/applied' side of the academics' role (Cooper, 2003: 15). This would, he proposes, involve research entities emerging alongside academic departments, opening up opportunities for a new type of 'scholar-researcher career track' for sociologists. A key role of these 'research centres of excellence' would be post-graduate teaching and supervision.

If South African sociology is to grasp this opportunity, it will need to find a way of preventing key scholars from being drawn into consultancy work or management at the expense of the 'core business' of teaching and fundamental research. Our challenge, unlike that of our colleagues in the United States, is to establish a more professional sociology that draws on the rich theoretical and methodological traditions that define the core of the discipline. Without these foundations, I fear, there will be no sociology of any type, whether it is critical, policy or public.

References

- Bertelsen, E. 1998. 'The real transformation; the marketisation of higher education' *Social Dynamics*, 24(2):130-158.
- Bonnin, D. 1987. *Class Consciousness and Conflict in the Natal Midlands: The case of BTR Sarmcol*, Masters of Social Science Degree, University of Natal.
- Buhlungu, S. 2003. 'Rebels without a cause of their own? The contradictory location of white officials in Black Unions in South Africa, 1973-1994', Paper delivered at the Sociology of Work Unit Research Breakfast, 31 January 2003.
- Burawoy, M. 2003. 'South Africanizing US Sociology' October Newsletter, From the Left, Marxist Section, American Sociological Association.
- Burawoy, M., Gamson, W., Ryan, C., Pfohl, S., Vaughan, D., Gerber, C. and Schor, J. 2004. 'Public Sociologies: A Symposium from Boston College'. *Social Problems*, 51 (1): 130-150.
- Burawoy, M. 2004. Public Sociology: South African Dilemmas in a Global Context. *Society in Transition*, 35(1):
- Business Day, Corporate Survey HSRC, 4th December 2002.
- Cooper, D. 2003. 'Unlocking Intellectual Capital: Case Studies of research centres/units at universities and technikons of the Western Cape, Department of Sociology, University of Cape Town.
- Crothers, C. 1998. 'Sociology and Social Research in South Africa'. In Silva, T and Sitas, A (eds) *Gathering Voices: Perspectives on the Social Sciences in Southern Africa*, Madrid: International Sociological Association: 43-58.
- Groenewald, C. 1991. 'The context of the development of sociology in Southern Africa: A Reply to Visser and Van Staden'. *South African Journal of Sociology* 22(2), 46-49.
- Jansen, J. 2003. 'The State of Higher Education in South Africa: from massification to mergers' in Daniel, J., Habib, A and Southall, R (editors), *State of the Nation: South Africa: 2002-2003*. HSRC

Press. Cape Town: 150-159.

- Jubber, K. 1983. 'Sociology and its sociological context: The case of the rise of Marxist Sociology in South Africa'. *Social Dynamics*, 9: 50-63.
- Leger, J. 1992. 'Talking Rocks': An Investigation of the Pit Sense of Rockfall Accidents amongst Underground Gold Miners', Unpublished PhD thesis. University of the Witwatersrand: Johannesburg.
- Marcus, T. 2003. 'Developing a National Research Agenda for Social Science, Law and Humanities Project - Shifting Boundaries of knowledge - The Role of Social Sciences, Law and Humanities, National Research Foundation. October 2003.
- Sennet, R. 1998. *Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: WW Norton.
- Sitas, A. 1996. 'The Waning of Sociology in South Africa', Presidential address, South African Sociological Association, University of Natal, Durban.
- Turner, R. 1972. *The Eye of the Needle: Essay in Participatory Democracy*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Van der Merwe, A. 1995. 'Introduction'. In Van der Merwe (ed.) *Industrial Sociology: A South African Perspective*, Johannesburg: Lexicon Publishers, i-iv.
- Vaughan, D. 2004. 'Public sociologist by accident', *Public Sociologies: A symposium at Boston College, Social Problems*, 50 (1), 115-118.
- Webster, E. 1979. 'A Profile of Unregistered Union Members in Durban', *South African Labour Bulletin*, Volume 4, Number 8: 43-74.
- Webster, E. 1985. 'Competing Paradigms – Towards a Critical Sociology in Southern Africa'. *Social Dynamics*, 11(1): 44-48.
- Webster, E. 1992. 'The impact of the intellectual on the labour movement'. *Transformation*. 18/19: 88-92.
- Webster, E. 1995. 'Taking labour seriously: Sociology and Labour in South Africa' in Van der Merwe (ed.) *Industrial Sociology: A South African Perspective*, Johannesburg: Lexicon Publishers: 1-27.
- Webster, E., Ally, S., Crothers C., Hendricks F., Jordan, N. 2000. *Sociology: State of the Discipline*. National Research Foundation.
- Webster, E. and Fakier, K. 2001, 'Evaluating Research Performance: The Need for a Developmental Approach in Sociology', *Sociology of Work Unit*, February 2001.
- Webster, E. and Mosoetsa, S. 2002. 'At the Chalk Face: Managerialism and the Changing Academic Workplace 1995-2001', *Transformation*, Volume 48: 59-82.
- Weiss, C. 1980. 'Knowledge creep and decision accretion'. *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion and utilisation*, 1 (3): 15-25

Copyright of Society in Transition is the property of South African Sociological Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.