

## Article

# Southern windmill: the life and work of Edward Webster<sup>1</sup>

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It is exactly 50 years since C Wright Mills (1959) penned his rendition of the sociological imagination as the interplay of biography and history, or, more actively, as transforming private troubles into public issues. Given the currency of Mills's pithy formula, one might expect sociologists to be all the more conscious of the connection between their own biography and history, or between their own personal troubles and public issues. Yet sociologists can be most obtuse about their position in society, silent as to how their ideas are an expression of the world in which they live, and, thus, naïve about the limits and possibilities of changing that world. So often, it is as if their ideas soar above the context in which they are produced, as if their creativity is a unique and ineffable quality divorced from their own social worlds. Sociologists are guilty of what Alvin Gouldner (1970) once called methodological dualism – that sociological analysis is for the sociologised not for the sociologist who miraculously escapes the social forces that pin down and constrain everyone else.

This asymmetry applies to C Wright Mills himself who harboured all manner of illusions about his self-defined isolation at the margins of academia, unshaped by the forces he described. Moreover, he thought that the analysis of the link between social milieu in which people live and the social structure which shaped that milieu would spontaneously give rise to the transformation of personal troubles into public issues. In other words, he seemed to think that knowledge immaculately produces its own power effects. Although he did have political programmes they were divorced from his sociological analysis. He did not investigate the way sociological imagination has to be connected to political imagination via organisation,

institutions, and social movements if it is to contribute to social transformation. In the final analysis, he shared with the academics he criticised the illusion of the knowledge effect, and thus like them justified his separation and insulation from society.

In this paper I wish to suggest that, because it is a dominated sociology, Southern sociology more easily recognises its own place in society, which sets limits and creates possibilities for sociology's participation in social transformation. Moreover, *sociological imagination* is no guarantee of social transformation, the turning of personal troubles into public issues, as Mills implies, but this requires in addition a *political imagination*, forged through collective and collaborative practices with groups, organisations, movements beyond the academy. The expansion of Southern sociology depends on the dialectic of political and sociological imagination.

I will make this argument through the interrogation of the life and work of Edward Webster, one of South Africa's most distinguished sociologists. He is a perpetual motion machine – a windmill. A typical day in the life of Edward Webster might start out with a run on the golf course, interrupted by a conversation with local workers, then a debate on the radio with the head of the trade union federation, moving on to a meeting of SWOP (Sociology of Work Unit that he founded in 1983), and then to a lecture to SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) journalists, who are taking the two week course at the university, to the completion of a scholarly article, to a meeting with NUMSA (National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa) who want him to undertake research on workplace control. Perhaps during the day he will find some time to visit with his grandsons. He gets home late, energised by the day's activities, to be cooled out and debriefed by his wife, the renowned biographer and popular historian, Luli Callinicos.

What marks Webster's sociological practice is not just hyper-activity, but the intimate connection between his academic and his public lives: the one inseparable from the other. The Webster windmill takes in the winds of change – social, political and economic winds – and turns them into a prodigious intellectual engagement. As the winds intensify the windmill accelerates, generating ever higher voltage sociology. Sparks fly, igniting the political will as well as the sociological imagination of all those around him, and thus feeding more energy into the windmill. We are not here talking so much about the personal career of Eddie Webster as the way his life comes to be embedded in movements and organisations. While such engagement is by no means confined to the Global South, nonetheless the turbulence of

social transformation creates a fluidity between university and the wider society – rarely observed in the North – encouraging deep involvement, often at great personal risk.

### Foundations

Any windmill is only as strong as its foundations. The Webster windmill is founded on a *moral vision* that propels his engagements, early examples of which can be found in his student years at Rhodes, 1961-1965. In a reflection entitled, 'Rebels with a cause of their own', Webster writes about the way he discovered Marxism in the writings of Christopher Hill and of how he disappointed his 'opinionated and demanding' teacher, Winnie Maxwell, who would tell him, 'Laddy, history is not a railroad and you should beware of simple answers to complex and individual events. This is not a sociology class and we are not socialists' (Webster 2005:100). But it was not Marxism that impelled his moral vision, or at least that would only come later, but the patent injustice of apartheid. One of his earliest protests occurred when he was President of the Rhodes Student Representative Council (SRC) – the demand to lift the ban that prevented Africans from watching university rugby. As he writes, in a self-critical vein, 'We were protesting on behalf of black supporters to watch *our* rugby not for non-racial rugby teams or the right of all players to participate in the same league' (Webster 2005:104).

He was sowing the seeds of a life of protest not just on behalf of but also in collaboration with the African working class. That deepening engagement, however, was rarely revolutionary in intent but it took the form, as he puts it, of *radical reform*. In those early years, and indeed throughout his life, he maintained a critical distance from the ANC and the SACP and any sort of vanguardism, but that did not mean he did not engage with them. For he always believed in starting from actually existing institutions and actually mobilised movements, and for Webster these tended to revolve around labour unions and labour movements. He would take their issues as point of departure if not point of conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

No windmill can withstand gale force winds without a strong foundation – in this case an abiding moral vision combined with radical reform – but it also needs a powerful fulcrum for its rotating blades. That fulcrum did not arrive ready-made but was built over time and would eventually in 1983 become The Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP), housed in the University of Witwatersrand. After a stint at Unilever and then teaching history in high school, especially King David's High School, Webster was ready to return

to academic studies but now with a new political mission. He was admitted to Balliol College, Oxford, in 1969 to study for an MA in PPE where he imbibed the fashionable Marxism of the time, influenced by among others Steven Lukes, before taking off for York University where he began to develop a dissertation on the so-called Durban riots of 1949 – a dissertation that was intended to bring together Marxism and the pluralist perspectives of MG Smith, Pierre Van den Berghe and Leo Kuper. It was in Yorkshire that Webster had his first engagement with adult education, which anticipated his future connection to worker education.

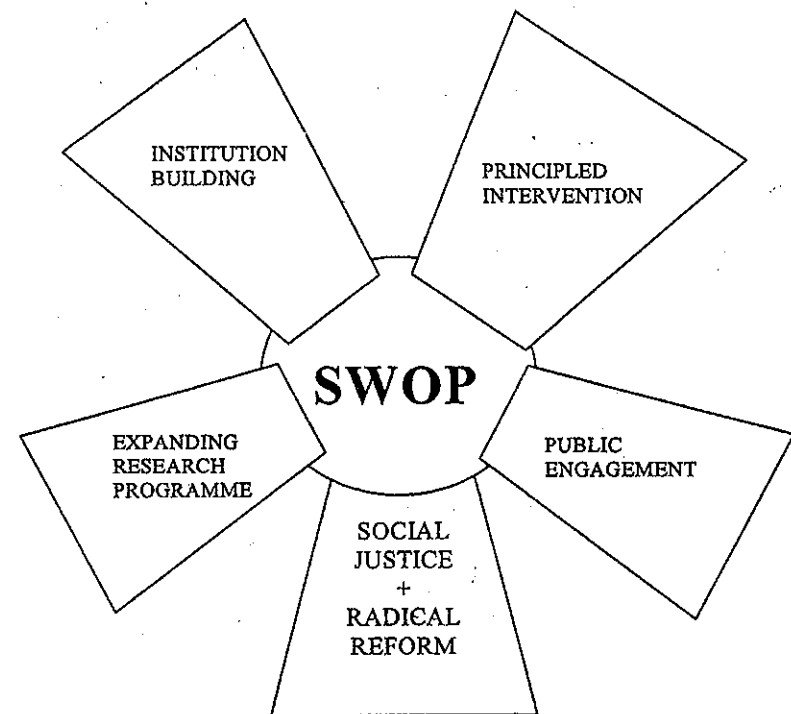
When Lawrence Schlemmer offered him a position at the University of Natal (Durban), it was natural he would take it and return to South Africa. He arrived in February 1973, just after the Durban strikes which had absorbed the attention of his colleagues, but especially Richard Turner, a young philosopher himself recently returned from the Sorbonne with New Left thinking and a commitment to participatory democracy. At that time Turner was under house arrest, but nonetheless the two became close friends and collaborators. Under the influence of Turner and the changing tide of events Webster turned from his interest in the Durban Riots to the insurgent African working class. The seeds of SWOP were born in Turner's vision of an Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) that would be devoted to advancing the working class movement through workers' education, labour research and a labour journal. The IIE was founded in Durban but Webster would leave for the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) in 1976 where he would continue the project that would eventually become SWOP. Turner himself was assassinated by the Security Police in 1978 but his ideas lived on in Webster's political vision, even into post-apartheid South Africa (Webster 1993).

SWOP was Webster's brain child and it grew into his 'Modern Prince', advancing the interests of the working class, but from within the relatively protected arena of the university. When formally established in 1983, it already came with its four arms in embryo. The first arm is an expanding research agenda that responded to changing political winds; the second arm is a public engagement, bringing research findings into the public arena for discussion and debate; the third arm is policy work – or, for reasons that will become clear, what I will call principled intervention – for trade unions, and, in the post-apartheid era, for government agencies and corporations; the fourth arm is institution building within the university, most notably SWOP

itself and the department of sociology itself, but also beyond the university, he began to redefine the meaning of sociology.

At the core of this reenvisioning of sociology lies the interconnectedness and inseparability of the 4 blades, joined together in SWOP. They whirl around together at speeds determined by the winds of change. Indeed, when the winds are gale force it is impossible to get close to the Webster windmill without being drawn into its vortex, and the participants in SWOP have to hang on for dear life. When a political storm rages, it is hard work to make sure none of the blades break off. As we explore these blades one by one it will become apparent just how interconnected they are. Moreover, their interconnectedness constitutes the political imagination – an interconnectedness rarely found in the North with its entrenched division of sociological labour.

### The Webster Windmill



### Expanding research programme

We start with Webster's expanding research agenda, ever sensitive to the issues thrown up by engagements with the world beyond. It began, however, with the more remote project of the so-called Durban Riots of 1949 that were aimed at Indian commerce. Webster's interpretation developed under the influence of both Marxist and pluralist understandings of South Africa. He argued that Indians' access to land ownership, their control of transportation, their facility with English, as well as their ease of movement gave them significant advantages over the emergent African petty bourgeoisie in controlling commerce and services. Through the eyes of Africans, especially the African petty bourgeoisie, Indians were perpetrators of a secondary colonisation, and it was this that lay behind the Durban riots. At the focus of the proposed research was the racial divide within the petty bourgeoisie based on 'differential incorporation' into the apartheid order. The project was formulated in England but Webster was deterred from pursuing this topic when he arrived in Durban in 1973.<sup>3</sup> Instead he turned his gaze on the African working class.

Through the 1970s and early 1980s the African working class advanced toward a class for itself, joining with community organisations and the UDF to become ever more militant both at work and in the community. Webster was never far from these struggles campaigning for the recognition of trade unions. Once he arrived at Wits he turned to write his dissertation now on the topic of working class formation. Influenced by the rising interest in labour process theory, that is the transformation of work with the development of capitalism, generated by the publication of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974), Webster took advantage of the minutes of the meetings of the moulders' union that had been deposited in the Wits archives. Originally a craft union for whites only, its monopoly of skill was retained in the face of mechanisation by appeal to job reservation. Racial solidarity successfully held up deskilling until after the Second World War when slowly jobs were diluted and Africans were deployed as semi-skilled operatives. As the induction of semi-skilled Africans accelerated so the craft union dissipated and in its place there arose an industrial union, explicitly recognised as such when the Wiehahn Commission established the right of Africans to form trade unions. The last part of the dissertation reflects on the burgeoning social movement unionism that united community and workplace struggles against apartheid.

*Cast in a Racial Mould* (1985) emerged from Webster's dissertation. It made a number of significant contributions, but let me mention two. First, it showed how the labour movement was shaped by the transformation of work. In the labour process literature, with the partial exception of Richard Edwards's *Contested Terrain* (1979), there was little that linked labour process to labour movement over the long durée. Equally in the South African literature there were analyses of working class struggles, such as the classic *Class and Colour in South Africa* by Jack and Ray Simons (1968), but these were not traced back to the transformation of work. Second, whereas the labour process literature has been inundated with critical commentary from feminists who insisted on the importance of gender in the regulation and transformation of the labour process, there has been very little analysis of the impact of racial orders on the labour process. *Cast in a Racial Mould*, therefore, remains a classic in these two respects, reflecting a century of capitalist development in South Africa, seen through the lens of the emerging labour movement in the decade after the Durban strikes.

Absorbed in the labour struggles against apartheid Webster would elaborate different aspects of *Cast in a Racial Mould*. We would have to wait for the end of the apartheid for the next phase of his research agenda which would dwell on the democratic transition, dubbed the double transition, interconnecting democratisation and economic class compromise. With Glenn Adler (Adler and Webster 1995) he would take on board the literature on the Latin American transition to democracy, which focused on pact making among elites to the exclusion of popular participation. In South Africa, at least, the legacy of a strong labour movement would provide the opening for a different path of development. As the 1990s wore on Webster became less optimistic about the transition but he never lost sight of economic development through redistribution, and the creation of the institutions of class compromise (Webster and Adler 1999). His research agenda shifted to the effects of a market driven economic policy that involved privatisation and dismantling protections for labour. Working with Bridget Kenny, Sarah Mosoetsa, Karl Von Holt and others, Webster would refocus his research on the informalisation of the economy, those expanding sectors of the economy that were beyond the reach of trade unions, and from there it was a short step to the examination of survival strategies of households (Webster and von Holdt 2005).

This led to a fourth phase of his research trajectory – the move into comparative studies. If Braverman (1974) and Richard Edwards (1979) had

shaped his approach to the labour process and its connection to the labour movement, and if pact theory and class compromise had framed his analysis of transition, it would be Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944) that provided the basis for teasing out the specificity of South Africa's response to neoliberalism. Problematising Polanyi's countermovement of society against the market he, Rob Lambert and Andries Bezuidenhout (2008) compared the responses to neoliberalism in South Africa, South Korea and Australia by focusing on community responses to the restructuring of the white goods industry. *Grounding Globalisation* studied on-the-ground responses to global patterns of marketisation, responses that ranged from informalisation to building an international labour movement.

Each phase in the expanding research programme was a quite specific response to the immediate political and economic context of South Africa, but it also drew on different strands of theory being developed in the UK or the US. The dynamism of this localisation of theory from the North came less from the pursuit of its internal contradictions and more from the external anomalies, issues thrown up by the context within which he worked. If in the North we have the luxury of developing a *research programme*, in which its empirical belts are driven primarily by an internal logic, and only secondarily by the world beyond, the appeal of the Southern windmill is the way it develops a *research agenda*, primarily responsive to emergent public and policy issues. That is why it is impossible to disconnect SWOP's blade of theory from the blades of public engagement, policy intervention, and institution building. That is how the sociological imagination can quickly become a political imagination.

### Public engagement

It is difficult to grasp the scope and intensity of Webster's public engagement that ranged from debates in the media (television, radio, newspapers), to worker education, and the famous SWOP breakfasts. But public engagement can be a life and death matter as Webster would learn very soon after he returned to South Africa. In 1973 Charles Nupen, President of NUSAS (National Union of South African Students), invited Webster to give a paper to a student seminar on the implications of the Black Consciousness Movement for the White Left. Webster (1974) distinguishes three responses of whites: the uncomprehending traditional liberal who responds defensively, reiterating commitment to equality, and non-racialism, arguing for slow assimilation; the despairing liberal who accepts collective white guilt for

racism, seeing no way out and so either 'withdraws from the country or joins Anglo American'; the committed radical who adopts a more critical stance toward Black Consciousness, carving out a space for political activism.

While recognising the importance of Black Consciousness and the cultural recuperation that lies behind it, Webster, standing as a committed radical, points to the potential reemergence of a black bourgeoisie that advances its own class interests in the name of race. But his most challenging intervention was to call on whites to examine how their institutions are implicated in the reproduction of racism, and to make white society 'more receptive to the kind of change that the oppressed will force upon it'. Webster drew on black radical thought from the Black Panthers in US to Steve Biko and BCM, on debates about African socialism and neocolonialism in independent Africa, but also derivatively on Frantz Fanon. He directed his concerns at white South Africans, argued that they have to change to meet the challenge of the rising tide of struggles against apartheid. This was as forthright and radical a statement Webster would ever make and, indeed, it attracted the attention of the Security Branch, leading to his arrest two years later, at the end of 1975, under the Suppression of Communism Act.

Webster moved to the University of Witwatersrand in 1976, the year of his trial. George Bizos (2007) one of the defense attorneys, called it the trial of the NUSAS (National Union of South African Students) Five, since with the exception of Webster the accused were all NUSAS leaders. Among other things they were accused of calling for the release of political prisoners, fighting for the recognition of African trade unions, and advocating the violent transformation of society. Webster defended himself with a lecture on the virtues of institutionalising industrial conflict through establishing African trade unions. Rather than stimulate violence trade unions would minimise violence. 'Trade unions', he said, 'were not the institutions that conservatives fear and that revolutionaries hope for'.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, even if trade unions were not a weapon of revolution, this view – stemming from elementary functionalist theory of conflict – had radical implications simply because Africans were not allowed to form them.

In the United States the same theory was being branded conservative, precisely because it reproduced the social order, absorbing, channelling, and taming class conflict. Indeed, in the US sociologists had developed social movement theory to valorise the transformative potential of non-institutionalised conflict in civil society – the civil rights movement, the student movement, the women's movement, the anti-war movement. They

wrote off the labour movement precisely because it was institutionalised. When confronted with violence in South Africa, however, Webster would always underline the importance of recognising actors and organising conflict.

The accused were found not guilty but the magistrate, commenting on the speeches Webster made, was compelled to declare Webster 'an arrogant young man' and in response his father called out, 'And that's no crime!' At the end of the trial Webster had a telling exchange with head of security police, Colonel Johan Coetzee, himself a trained and sophisticated political scientist. Webster approached Coetzee, 'Well, I've been found not guilty', to which Coetzee responded, 'Yes, but you are not innocent'. And, of course, he was right. Webster's address to the NUSAS seminar was far from innocent. It was a radical statement for reform. The fact that the state was so handsomely defeated in the trial showed that charges against intellectuals would not stick in South Africa's law courts with its independent judiciary. If it wanted to quash the spread of ideas hostile to apartheid, then the state would have to assassinate their authors. This is precisely what happened to Rick Turner, David Webster, and Ruth First, and indeed there were also attempts Edward Webster's life.

Webster may have been found not-guilty but, as Colonel Coetzee intimated, he was a marked man. A lesser man would have withdrawn from public engagement, but not Webster. Nonetheless he had to be more circumspect. As we will see he did turn inward, building sociology within the university, but he also continued his outward orientation with the *South African Labour Bulletin* and workers' education. The *SALB* was founded by Turner and Webster among others in Durban in 1974 (see Webster 2004) and it continues to this day. Webster was on the board for 27 years. Widely read in the labour movement, it was host to some of its most important debates. Especially noteworthy was the intense debate over union registration. After the Wiehahn Commission had proposed recognition of African unions there ensued a major debate among unionists as to whether it was better to boycott the new legislation, resisting cooptation by the state, or to register in order to exploit spaces that opened up within the state. Alec Erwin would pose the dilemma in these terms: should one use the state to undermine capital or attack capitalism to undermine the state. Together with the editors of the *SALB* Webster would come down in favour of registration, another case of hoped-for radical reform. Over the years every major issue affecting the labour movement has been debated in the pages of the *SALB*.

The other prong inherited from Turner's brainchild, the Institute of Industrial Education, was worker education. The IIE had introduced a diploma course in Durban for which they produced four books that presented a working class perspective on the economy, on society, on the factory and on organisation. The books were translated into Zulu and played a pivotal role in the project of worker education that would bring together incipient unionists, and build a democratic base for unionism within the factories.

After he arrived at Wits Webster and his colleague, the historian Phil Bonner, developed courses in worker education for the new leadership of the trade union movement. Initially, the course was held on campus, but later Wits administration would ban worker education as political and therefore in violation of the university's statutes. Despite protest Webster was forced to take worker education off campus. The university did not want to be seen as harbouring forces for social upheaval, especially given its close links with business. With the formation of COSATU in 1985 worker education was taken away from Webster and his colleagues, but SWOP would develop other forums of public education. More recently, for example, it has begun annual courses for journalists from the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

In 1992 it started monthly SWOP breakfasts at which SWOP researchers would present their findings and analysis to interested bodies in the community – trade unions, businesses, educators, politicians, journalists and civil servants. This has been one of SWOP's most successful, long-standing and innovative initiatives – a prototype of public sociology in which the researcher and researched meet in public discussion. The researcher reports back to those who sponsored the research as well as to those who were the object of research, and, in the case of work in progress, rethinking its direction. It is much more than a conversation among those immediately involved in research, but involves developing new concepts, new understandings of public issues that are of a broad interest. There is a regular core audience of some 40 people who always appear, and then in addition are those attracted to a particular topic. As recorded in the 2008 Annual Report of SWOP, the topics for that year were:

- Edward Webster and Luli Callinicos, 'Elephant in the Room: a sociology of Polokwane'
- Jacklyn Cock, 'Challenging the "Tyrannous" Power of Iscor and Mittal: the struggle for environmental justice in Steel Valley'

- Sakhela Buhlungu and Andries Bezuidenhout, 'Spaces of Union Organising: the National Union of Mineworkers and the demise of compounds'
- Karl von Holdt, 'The Developmental State in South Africa: an unlikely prospect'
- Malehoko Tshoaedi, 'COSATU Women and the Politics of Transition'
- Devan Pillay, 'Labour and the Challenges of Globalisation: what prospect for transnational solidarity?'
- Karl von Holdt, Andries Bezuidenhout, and Khayaat Fakier, 'Precarious Society: work, households and the state in South Africa'
- Andries Bezuidenhout, Christine Bischoff and Kezia Lewins, 'An Evaluation of the Implementation and Impact of the Employment Equity Act'.

The SWOP breakfasts serve multiple functions, generating public debate but also building a network of institutions upon which SWOP can draw in pursuing further research.

What we see, then, over time is the movement from individual initiative to the cautious institutionalisation of public sociology. What is institutionalised, however, is not the recognition of public sociology as a criterion of academic promotion, not incentivising public sociology within a professional career but establishing the means and resources to communicate sociology to broader audiences on a regular basis, contributing to a public sphere of dialogue. Clearly, these outward looking projects are rooted in a research agenda which SWOP manages to translate into the language and concerns of a variety of interested parties whose responses feed back into the research agenda. This organic public sociology is very different from the traditional public sociology in which the sociologist broadcasts his or her ideas via books, op ed pieces, interviews and the like, although of course the former does not preclude the latter.

Above all, public sociology in the South can be a dangerous enterprise that puts lives and not just careers at risk. Even though Webster steered clear of the ANC and the SACP – although he was a supporter of the first union federation (FOSATU) – still he like others was deemed an enemy of the state, all the more dangerous because his critical independence proved unassailable in a court of law. In political regimes hostile to free speech and open debate public sociology, especially the organic variety, can be a potent political force but one that comes at enormous cost. Democratisation has brought

greater freedom for public sociology but also limited its political significance. With the evisceration of civil society and the corporatisation of the university, public sociology is driven in the direction of policy intervention, thereby creating a host of new dilemmas.

### Principled intervention

The distinction between policy and public sociology is often difficult to draw. If public sociology aims at broadening public dialogue, policy intervention aims at a particular client, indeed it is often in service of a particular client, accepting parameters defined by the client. If the danger of public sociology lay in alienating the apartheid state that sought to control the limits of public dialogue, the challenge of policy research is to avoid a compromising relation with the client who sponsors the research. Webster has always been careful to avoid being captured by the clients for whom he undertakes research, retaining the autonomy necessary to adopt a critical stance toward the client whether it be union, party or corporation. I call this principled intervention. The following cases, just a few of the many policy projects undertaken by SWOP, illustrate its achievements and dilemmas.

SWOP was originally founded as a policy unit when a group of engineers, known as the Technical Advice Group (TAG) approached Webster in 1983, hoping to deploy their skills and knowledge for progressive ends. This group included people who would become major players in the struggles around work and trade unions – Jean Leger, Judy Maller, Freddy Sitas, Yunus Ballim. As Webster completed his dissertation on the moulders he developed a concern for respiratory diseases, associated with foundry work. One of the members of TAG – Freddy Sitas, a student of medicine – followed this up and later published an analysis of the link (Sitas, Douglas and Webster 1989). Jean Leger would collaborate with Webster on another project concerned with occupational health – mine accidents – which had always been a thorn in the side of mining companies. Leger's research would take several years and it was done with the support of the new National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). In the end he showed how work organisation, in particular racial despotism, was at the heart of the high number of fatalities. White miners paid on an incentive bonus scheme would drive their African subordinates to work in the most unsafe of conditions.

The report (Leger 1985) was discussed in 1985 at a most dramatic public event organised by the then emerging SWOP. Webster invited both NUM and the Chamber of Mines to discuss the report on the Wits Campus.

Workers came on foot and managers by helicopter. Webster chaired the meeting of the two sides of industry, pointing out that the university had long supported the mining industry with regard to matters of engineering, but it should also be concerned with the livelihood of African labour. A heated debate ensued in which the representatives of the companies questioned the findings by attacking the methodology used in social research – snow-ball sampling. Webster and his colleagues were able to roll out experts in social science methodology that would justify the method, putting the Chamber of Mines on the defensive.

This intervention on behalf of and commissioned by NUM was relatively successful. NUM would later put out a popular version of the Leger report under the title *A Thousand Ways to Die* (National Union of Mineworkers 1991) and the mining companies would modify their operations underground. But the next project showed just how delicate the relation between sociologist and favoured client can become. It was an investigation initiated by Webster and his colleagues, with the tacit approval of the local branch of NUM, on the causes of HIV/AIDS among mineworkers. The research, conducted in 1988 when there was still silence around HIV/AIDS even as it was already taking so many lives in South Africa, pointed to the system of migrant labour as the ultimate source of the problem. Separated from their wives in the homelands, African miners took on multiple partners – women desperate for income – during their stints on the mines, spreading the HIV virus at alarming rates. In this case the NUM refused permission to publish the research since, from NUM's point of view, it pathologised the sexual behaviour of Africans, feeding the long history of racist views of Africans as uncivilised – even though the ultimate culprit was seen to be the mining industry's system of migrant labour. SWOP was caught in a bind as the NUM was trying to censor its research, but eventually a compromise was reached and the paper written by the researchers – Jochelson, Mothibeli, and Leger (1991) – was published in a foreign journal, the *International Journal of Health Services*.

The clients of SWOP have changed in the post-apartheid period. SWOP now undertakes membership surveys for COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and for the ANC (African National Congress). It undertook commissioned research for the mining companies such as a study of occupational cultures in deep level mining, and then making proposal for training miners who would work in such conditions. But SWOP was also asked to advise government agencies. In 2007 the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) asked Webster and Buhlungu to make an assessment of the

increasing violence in and around industrial plants. The two sociologists first asked their union partners whether to accept the invitation. With union encouragement Webster and Buhlungu made a presentation to the NIA on the importance of having strong unions to channel conflict if violence was to be avoided. This was a familiar argument that Webster had made on numerous occasions, not least as an expert witness in the case of workers indicted for killing scabs (Webster and Simpson 1991). The NIA was so pleased with SWOP's presentation that it would then request their assistance in dealing with specific strikes. Here Webster drew the line, turning down substantial payment in order to preserve the integrity of SWOP – not to be captured by any agency, but particularly one that was hostile to labour.

One might say that Webster's policy intervention was governed by the principle of never crossing a metaphorical picket line, that is to say he insisted on maintaining autonomy in face of client pressure to come over to its side. This is as true for labour as it is for capital. Thus, he can sit on the boards of the Chris Hani Institute, a research arm of the South African Communist Party, as well as of the Southern African Development Bank. The picket line is never clear. It is an imaginary line that Webster continually draws and redraws as he is sucked onto different terrains of conflict, and as the overall political context changes. Like public dialogue, principled intervention translates personal troubles into public issues, but he always tries to ensure that the link does not back fire, that it does not exacerbate the personal troubles of those whose cause he seeks to defend.

### Institution building

At every point the contrast with Mills is stark, but none more stark than in Webster's relation to the university. Mills constituted himself as a lone martyr at the fringes of the academy. He criticised those who would get their hands dirty in policy research or in anything like an organic public sociology. He spoke to his mass society from the rafters of society, condemning its dominant institutions, not least the university. He stood at the fringes of an elite academic world, mocking those who ran it, not taking his teaching especially seriously. How different is Webster's engagement with the world, always trying to build and rebuild institutions that would carry forward his ideas, his research, his teaching.

Before the NUSAS trial (1976) Webster had been following Turner's ideas for the Institute for Industrial Education, embracing research into working class culture that would shed light on the Durban strikes (Webster 1978),



developing worker education, and creating a journal that would address the interests of the emergent African trade unions. The arrest and then the trial taught Webster much about the thinking of the police and security forces, and the possibilities of fighting the state on the terrain of law. But he was now a marked man and had to be more cautious in his political engagement. So after the trial Webster turned to the university that had supported him throughout the trial by continuing his employment on the grounds that he was innocent until proven guilty.

Webster set about changing the curriculum in the sociology department at Wits. He transformed the existing course in industrial sociology by drawing on critical theory, largely Marxist theory. Building on that success he introduced an honours programme in industrial sociology which attracted some of the best and brightest students, including such figures as Karl von Holdt, Kate Philips, Jane Barrett, Avril Joffe, Darlene Miller, all committed to a critical engagement with South African society. Many of these students would go on to play a major role in the labour movement but also transforming sociology in a Marxist direction with a focus on labour.

This was, of course, a period of escalating protest in industry but also in the townships in the wake of the 1976 Soweto Uprising. FOSATU (the Federation of South African Trade Unions) was launched in 1979, after the Wiehahn Commission had endorsed African trade unions, and it was then that Webster and his colleagues Phil Bonner, Halton Cheadle and Duncan Innes introduced their three-week courses for trade union leadership. As Webster was slowly transforming the Wits sociology department he was also working on his dissertation on the history of the moulders. As already recounted SWOP would develop later (1983) out of a group of progressive Wits scientists and engineers (TAG) who had come to Webster in search of a social scientist who might help them with their research.

SWOP was very different from the other group that had emerged at the end of the 1970s – *The History Workshop* – that was intent on forging a history of South Africa from below. It championed rank and file workers and the marginalised, but many of its key members were less committed to active engagement with society, intent on protecting the autonomy of academic pursuits, but also suspicious of organisations such as trade unions as leading to bureaucratisation of social movements. Despite overlapping membership, the tension between these two academically-rooted organisations became palpable in the 1980s, especially as SWOP became

immersed in quite concrete and controversial projects, such as the study of mine accidents and HIV/AIDS.

Webster became chair of the sociology department from 1988 to 1994. As he tells the story he had three agenda: staff development, especially young faculty; curriculum changes, in particular the creation of an MA programme; and building a common vision in what was a deeply divided department. This was a period in which the department expanded and moved left. It was perhaps one of the most vital periods in the department's history, reflecting its engagement in the unfolding transformation of society. It was also a period in which Webster became more active in the Association of Sociologists of Southern Africa (ASSA), a multi-racial organisation that had split off from the white sociological association (SASOV). Webster would become President of ASSA 1983-1985 and enlarge its size by giving it new energy and direction. In the wider society, this was a period of virtual civil war, signalled on the one side, by the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983 and COSATU in 1985 and, on the other side, by the declaration of a state of emergency with all manner of repressive counter-moves from the apartheid state. It was in this climate that Webster sought to make ASSA reflective of the growing engagement of sociologists by creating working groups that captured the public issues of the time – education, labour, gender, urban, militarisation, and the state. He brought in figures from other disciplines but also leaders from the labour movement and UDF to give sociology a sense of its public mission. And it was under his reign that ASSA launched its own journal.

The transition brought a new set of problems in some ways more challenging than the struggles against apartheid. How does one transform the university from a bastion of white privilege to a more open and inclusive institution that would cater to new generations of African students. SWOP turned to an ambitious internship programme that would train young black South Africans in the sociology of work and employment relations, attaching them to research projects on the transition. Here it should be said that Webster's teaching style is of a piece with his public sociology, constituting students as a public that comes to the university with its own lived experience, a lived experience he engages, elaborates and transforms. He thinks of his students as themselves teachers, returning to society endowed with new imaginations and a model of how to communicate them to others. As the festschrift dedicated to Webster-the-teacher underlines, he has a rare ability to draw students into a critical understanding of the worlds from

which they come, seamlessly knitting together sociological and political imaginations (Mosoetsa 2009).

In training Africans his project, of course, was impelled by the desire to transform the racial despotism inherited from apartheid. This turned out to be a far greater challenge than even he imagined. In many contexts the colour bar simply floated up, leaving racial patterns intact. Ironically, the university seemed the most intractable to change. Webster turned his sociology onto his own workplace – the chalk face as he called it – just as he had turned it on to the apartheid workplaces of industry. He saw how the University of Witwatersrand could not reform itself easily, facing as it did the legacy of an entrenched white oligarchy. At the end of the 1990s the university system of South Africa as a whole underwent change through amalgamations that were intended to dissolve the divide between the historically black and historically white institutions. Within the university there was a move to absorb the old disciplinary departments into schools, that is inter-disciplinary units. Webster viewed this as a destructive restructuring – eroding two decades devoted to building the sociology department. The restructuring justified an insurgent managerialism within the university, building up the ranks of professional and highly paid administrators.

That was at one end of the university. At the other end there had begun a process of outsourcing low paid service jobs, replacing workers with employment guarantees (and even access to free university education for their children) with contract workers employed by labour brokers. When the plans for outsourcing were revealed members of SWOP organised public support for the displaced workers, much to the chagrin of the then Vice-Chancellor, Colin Bundy, who called Webster into his office to tell him to discipline his troops. Webster refused. Here in his own backyard he could observe the very processes of informalisation that SWOP had been studying in the wider economy. Not only was the wave of neoliberalism flooding back into the university but at the chalk face racial dynamics had an obduracy of their own.

No matter what the frustration and aggravation, the Webster windmill kept on revolving. The work of SWOP and of Webster in particular took a global turn. As early as 1994 Webster had attended the embryonic Research Committee on Labour Movements (RC44) of the International Sociological Association (ISA) and by 1998 he was elected to become its secretary and in 2002 he became its President. Once again he brought new energy and direction to this fledgling group, building global relations not only among

labour sociologists but also between labour sociologists and labour movements, showing his own unit, SWOP, but also other units in other parts of the world in which academics had developed partnerships with labour movements. It was at this time that he re-established relations with South African Rob Lambert, now teaching in Australia, who had been building SIGTUR (Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights). Together they injected RC44 with a new vitality and global vision that would crystallize in their collaborative book *Grounding Globalisation: labour in the age of insecurity* (2008) that won the book award from the Labour Section of the American Sociological Association in 2009, marking the influence of SWOP on Northern sociology.

Consolidating this global engagement at the local level is Webster's involvement in GLU (Global Labour University), an ILO project that connects universities in Germany (University of Kassel), India (Tata Institute, Mumbai), South Africa (Wits) and Brazil (State University of Campinas). Trade unions send officials from all over Africa to study at Wits, under the direction of SWOP, for a year and to receive an MA diploma or degree in labour studies and development. This created its own dilemmas and Webster was again caught straddling the exigencies of the life of the union official on the one side and demands of an academic curriculum on the other.

Throughout his career the university has been the base of his principled interventions, public engagement, research programmes. Without this fourth arm the windmill would be uncoordinated and its energy would flag. He has only been able to build SWOP as the fulcrum of his activities because it is grounded in the relatively protected environment of the academy. It is the relative autonomy of the academy that has allowed him to sustain intellectual critique alongside close collaborations and intense engagements with groups, organisations and movements outside the university. The coordinated and interdependent blades of Webster's windmill cut deeply, bringing sociological imagination and political engagement into close connection – the hallmark of the best of Southern sociology.

### For a Southern sociology?

The metaphor of windmill captures what is distinctive about Webster's sociology but is there something distinctively South African or Southern about his engagement, his theorising? Can one make any general claims about South Africa or the South that distinguishes their sociology from the one found in the North? To be sure one can characterise Northern sociology

as dominated by a division of labour in which sociologists are first and foremost defined by their professional role, barricading themselves within the university, only rarely to venture forth. If they pursue public or policy sociology it is often on the side and subordinated to professional sociology. Their research programmes tend to follow an internal logic impervious to the winds beyond, even those beating down on the university. With the windmill, by contrast, the winds become the source of power, converted by the four blades, each revolving with the other, each inseparably connected to the other. Rather than division of labour, SWOP works with flexible specialization, just-in-time adaptation to the pressures of the moment, or what Sizwe Phakathi called 'planisa' – the spontaneous planning of underground workers, responding to the exigencies of deep level mining. Yet we can find examples of similar engagements in the North, ranging, for example, from Huw Beynon's organisation of the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University to Ruth Milkman's work as head of the University of California's Institute for Labor and Employment to Ramon Flecha's CREA (The Center for Research for Overcoming Inequalities) in Barcelona. Are these, however, more the exception than the rule, an oasis of activity in a desert of professionalism?

Even if we grant a certain distinctiveness to the North can we make sweeping claims about the South? Certainly, many countries of the South are either so poor or so small that the university is overrun by political demands and pressures that make such projects as SWOP untenable. Indeed, that is true of many universities in South Africa. In so many Southern universities faculty are living from hand to mouth, often employed in several jobs to make ends meet. This, of course, is the other side of the Southern windmill where foundations and fulcrum are too weak to withstand the political and economic storms, too stretched to sustain any coherence. Moreover, in our era of marketisation, Southern research units are more likely to develop outside the university, siphoning off the best talent from the university, separating teaching from research, responding to ephemeral demands of well-resourced clients, often sponsored by international agencies with their own agendas. SWOP, too, has had difficulty reproducing itself in the neoliberal governmentality of post-apartheid South Africa – a climate in which independent political imagination is harder to sustain, in which commitments are more ephemeral and visions more limited. Difficult though it is, only in dynamic developing countries such as South Africa, India and

Brazil, can the best universities provide the resources and protect academic autonomy to make windmills feasible.

But what about the sociology itself – simultaneously the ingredient and product of the windmill? Here it is worth distinguishing between 'Sociology in the South', 'Sociology of the South' and 'Sociology for the South'. Sociology in the South is simply Northern sociology, presented as a universal sociology, transferred to the South. Like McDonalds this is a mere replica, usually a poor replica of sociology of the North, using its textbooks, its concepts, its theories as though they applied directly to the South. Modernisation theory was especially well adapted to this transplantation as the gap between theory and reality could be explained away as a mark of inevitable backwardness or the result of a stalled evolutionary process. Sad to say much sociology taught in the South is of this character.

Precisely, because of its ubiquity this Sociology in the South has spawned indigenous or alternative sociologies, a nativist sociology against the North. The most recent version is Raewyn Connell's *Southern Theory* that starts by dismissing canonical Northern sociology as an arbitrary and artificial construct – whether this be the classical theory of Marx, Weber and Durkheim or the contemporary theory of Coleman, Bourdieu and Giddens – that seeks to universalise and impose on the rest of the world what is quite particular and peculiar. Against a reductionist homogenisation of 'Northern theory' Connell presents us with an array of forgotten or silenced theorists from the South – Africa, Latin America, India, Middle East, and Asia. Sol Plaatje, for example, is the representative from South Africa but Connell cannot tell us what it is about his writing that was not absorbed and elaborated in the enormous wealth of South African historiography. What purpose would be served by returning to Plaatje?

Apart from having lived in the South it is not clear what makes these thinkers 'Southern', since many were trained and spent much time in the North; or what makes their thinking 'sociological' since many are more clearly philosophers, economists, historians. Even more problematic Connell decontextualises their thinking so that there is no reason to believe that they can become part of any grounded sociological engagement with the realities of the South, whatever those realities might be. The importance of *Southern Theory* is to reiterate the critique of Sociology in the South – a diluted, text book version of Northern sociology – but *Southern Theory* is not yet Sociology of the South.

Very different from Connell, Webster's engagement with Northern theory *has* developed a Sociology of the South. Thus, he has argued that US sociology presents itself as a false universal, which he particularises in two ways. First, he deploys Northern theory in the South to reveal its very different significations. What is conservative in one place may be radical in another. Thus, taking the functionalist theory of conflict and the idea that trade unions manage dissent and limit violence, Webster challenged the anti-unionism of apartheid South Africa, and indeed of post-apartheid South Africa. Second, he has taken Northern theories and shown that they are false when applied to South Africa. Thus, his critique of transition theory pointed to the limitations of the theory of pacts that political scientists had applied to Latin American transitions to democracy and instead underlined the importance of class struggle and class compromise.

But Webster has done much more than particularise Northern theory. He and his colleagues developed new theories of the relation between work organisation and working class mobilisation. The concept of social movement unionism was debated in South Africa long before it was reinvented in the United States. Webster and his colleagues advanced novel theories of the double and then the triple transition, the links between formal and informal economies as specific responses to globalisation. More than that, as I have been at pains to underline, they have developed a methodology of research and theorising that is not simply grounded in but deeply engaged with the local.

This is, indeed Sociology of the South but it is not yet Sociology for the South. Particularising and even expanding Northern theory is not the end of the road, but a necessary step in the development of Sociology for the South – a sociology which is not content with a particular sociology of the South, but makes its own move toward universality. It is a theory that binds the South to an emergent counter-hegemony that presents the interests of the South as the interests of all. We have examples of this in the broad appeal of dependency theory that emerged from Latin America or subaltern studies that originated in India, each of which incorporated a theory of the North, but from the standpoint of the South. Here too Webster and his colleagues have innovated. In its investigation of the specific responses to marketisation in different countries *Grounding Globalisation* takes a major step toward theorising the place of the South within a world order dominated by the North, addressing the North as well as the South. Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout's Polanyian framework, bringing together market

fundamentalism, fictitious commodities and counter-movement through historical and cross-national comparisons, provides the basis of a sociology for the South – a sociology that selectively embraces theories from all regions of the world, that dissolves the blunt reifications of North and South, a sociology that can excite sociologists from Europe and North America as well as from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but a sociology that never forgets its political origins and its political context.

Of course, it's never easy and there are downsides to the Southern windmill. It is so continually in motion that it is difficult to find time to consolidate insights, deepen partial theories into something of more general applicability. The wind blows eternally, and the blades turn relentlessly. Research is driven frenetically from topic to topic. The foundations of Webster's political imagination reside in his sustained collaboration with students, colleagues, subjects of research – can such collaboration, even with Northern theorists, offset the continual pressures to meet the turbulence of the moment? Indeed, Latin American sociologists, no less embedded in society than their South African colleagues, were able to forge all sorts of synergies with the action sociology pioneered by Alain Touraine and his Parisian team.

Across the planet a destructive combination of marketisation and governmentality is transforming the university – corporatising its management, auditing its output, and commodifying its knowledge. We are searching the world over for models of how to contest the often surreptitious onslaught against the academy. SWOP is one such model. It emerged under the exigencies of the South but it has universal relevance. It provides a vision that defends the integrity of the university, not as a retreat into the ivory tower but as an advance into the trenches of civil society, that sees the sociological imagination and political engagement not as antagonists but as partners. The life and work of Edward Webster, institutionalized in SWOP, must command the attention of us all.

## Notes

1. This paper was first presented at the Colloquium in Honour of Professor Edward Webster (June 27, 2009). It is based on a 40-year friendship and a series of interviews I conducted in July, 2008, as well as extensive reading of his papers. Still, it only scratches the surface of his public and academic engagements. Thanks to Siri Colom, Eddie Webster and an anonymous reviewer for their comments.

2. In similar fashion, another great South African sociologist, Harold Wolpe, also insisted on taking the priorities of movements as point of departure if not point of conclusion. But, unlike Webster who forged on-the-ground collaboration with labour movements, Wolpe was of the view – perhaps not surprising since he was in exile – that ‘consciousness’ should be left to the liberation movement. See Burawoy (2004).
3. For a subsequent rendition of what had been the intended dissertation see Webster (1977).
4. These quotations are from my interviews with Webster in July, 2008.

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