

South Africa

The Decline of Labor Studies and the Democratic Transition

Sakhela Buhlungu

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

This article explores the ways in which a form of intellectual engagement has gone beyond merely studying society and sought to influence processes of change by engaging with actors outside disciplinary scholarship and the academy. In South Africa, the broad subdiscipline of labor studies provides probably the best illustration of this engagement, which Burawoy has termed *public sociology*. The article traces the emergence and growth of public sociology, initially from the position of relative privilege in the ivory tower and later to more direct forms of engagement with the new publics that emerged in the antiapartheid struggle. The discussion explains why the labor movement became the focal point of public sociology in South Africa. Finally, the article argues that the advent of democracy led to a growing assertiveness among the antiapartheid movements, including labor. Not only did this alter the terms on which public sociology was undertaken, it also resulted in a decline of public sociology inherited from the antiapartheid struggle.

Keywords: *public sociology; South Africa; labor studies; democratic transition*

An important aspect of sociology is the study of society and processes of social change. Only in a few cases has the discipline, or a section of it, gone beyond merely studying society and sought to influence processes of change by engaging with actors outside the discipline and the academy. South Africa is one such case where some members of the discipline were intimately involved in debates and struggles for change and social justice. Although there are numerous examples, the broad subdiscipline of labor studies provides probably the best illustration of this engagement, which Burawoy (2004) has termed *public sociology*. However, sociology in South Africa has not always been engaged in this fashion. Indeed, the discipline emerged and developed within a context of a racially

divided society and a segmented system of education. The education system gave rise to a division of labor between those who were educated to service the labor needs of the burgeoning economy, on the one hand, and those who provided for the professional and intellectual needs of the economic and political structures, on the other. Research shows that up until the early 1970s sociology was oriented toward servicing the existing structures of power (Ally, 2005; Ally, Moon, & Stewart, 2003; Jubber, 1983; Webster, 1978). In this article, I discuss the centrality of labor studies to the public sociology that emerged in the 1970s; how public sociology, in turn, constituted an important intellectual contribution to the democratic transition; and how the conditions under which public sociology and labor studies are conducted have changed in the postapartheid period.

Labor studies, as discussed in this article, encompass contributions from a variety of academic disciplines such as history, political science, and philosophy. But it was sociology that became associated most closely with labor studies, and the reasons for that association are discussed below. The main impetus for the growth of labor studies came from the historic 1973 strikes when thousands of African workers in the greater Durban/Pinetown area embarked on strikes demanding wage increases. In a context where forms of African labor organization had been snuffed out following the banning of nationalist movements and the arrest of their leaders in the 1950s and early 1960s, the strikes inspired hope and confidence among activists. Many of these activists were to constitute the core organizers that spearheaded the formation of unions in the wake of the strikes. But the strikes also inspired a generation of young university-based intellectuals, creating conditions for them to sharpen and apply the Marxist concepts they had imbibed in their studies in Europe or in their reading about the New Left political ferment in Western Europe and North America. It was this group that took the lead in the revival of labor studies. But most important, I should add that it was in the dialogue between both groups—the activists and the university-based intellectuals—that public sociology emerged. Both shared a commitment to equality and social justice and drew deeply from the concepts that animated revisionist Marxism at the time.

Before I proceed to discuss the significance of labor studies for public sociology, let me make a few propositions about South African public sociology itself. First, public sociology emerged in opposition to the dominant power block and in support of the struggle for social justice. In other words, it involved a commitment not only to scholarship but also to equality and social justice. The themes that the scholars tackled in their writing sought to focus attention on the pertinent issues of the times, poverty, exploitation,

violence, forced removals, gender inequality, and so on. Second, public sociology emerged when Africans did not have sufficient resources to represent themselves organizationally and intellectually. Labor studies and public sociology were a response to this problem by helping Black workers in general to form their own movements and organizations and by providing them with ideas and concepts to make sense of their circumstances.

Third, public sociology, as defined by Burawoy (2004), operated at the intersection between intellectual engagement, on the one hand, and political commitment and activism, on the other. The dynamism and significance of labor studies compared with other areas of scholarship can be attributed to its visibility as an engaged form of scholarship. As Webster (1982) has shown, this places intellectuals in a contradictory position where they have to balance the imperatives of political struggle against the need to maintain autonomous spaces for critical intellectual reflection.

Fourth, public sociology was not a one-way street. At the same time as it sought to communicate and engage with members of different publics, it was also shaped by those with whom it engaged—particularly labor, women, youth, and community organizations. Concepts that public sociology presented and debated were often appropriated by these groups and given new meanings that were more in tune with the lived experiences of members of the public.

Finally, public sociology was never fixed, both in terms of its modes of engagement as well as the objectives it sought to achieve. This has to do with changes within the dominant economic and political structures, the changing nature of the relationship between scholarship and political activism, and changes in the composition and interests of the different publics. The postapartheid environment provides the most vivid portrait of these changes.

Labor Studies and Public Sociology

Although many scholarly disciplines made immense contributions, it was the discipline of sociology that left the most indelible mark on how scholars engaged with members of the public and their collective organizations. In a similar way, although other disciplines made their contributions, the study of labor continues to bear an especially strong imprint from sociology. The reasons for this are multiple. First, the subject matter of labor studies is located firmly within the concerns of sociology, particularly in a context where the Marxist paradigm serves as an overarching framework. Theoretical concerns such as the labor theory of value, class, class struggle, collective organizations,

and social change were all standard fare in the sociology that was introduced in the English-medium universities in South Africa from the mid-1970s onwards. Second, sociology produced (and continues to produce) the largest number of graduates in the social sciences and so had a much wider reach and impact. Unlike other disciplines, which produce mainly undergraduates, sociology also produced many postgraduates up to and including the level of PhD. Third, a large number of these graduates found their way into the labor movement and other community organizations as activists, and as such became important interlocutors and public sociologists in their own right. Fourth, labor was also prioritized by the student organization, the National Union of South African Students, which had dedicated Wages Commissions in all the White English-medium universities. These commissions did research, outreach, and advocacy work and sought to build awareness among students on labor-related matters. Fifth, in the period 1971-1999 there emerged a large number of support organizations dedicated to the study, research, and support of the new labor movement. At least 57 support organizations were active in this period, with some providing specialized labor support whereas others also worked with other community organizations (Buhlungu, 2001).

Finally, the period from the 1970s to the early 1990s saw a proliferation of writing on labor. Whereas some of the writing was clearly targeted at academic audiences, a fair amount was presented in a popular form accessible to members and activists in the labor movement. In this regard, the *South African Labour Bulletin* came to play a pivotal role to bridge the academic-activist divide and as a vital platform for public sociology. Established in 1974 to provide intellectual support to labor activists, the *Bulletin* is today one of very few surviving organizations and publications from the 1970s and 1980s.

To illustrate the centrality of labor studies to public sociology in South Africa, I have chosen to trace the relationship back to the early 1970s, and in doing so, I have identified four different periods.

Public Sociology From the Ivory Tower, 1973-1978

Two watershed events took place in South Africa in the 1970s. The first was the wave of strikes that hit Durban in 1973, setting in motion a phase of union mobilization that was to result in the emergence of one of the most militant and resilient union movements of the late 20th century. The second event was the explosion of youth anger and militancy in June 1976 following an attempt by the apartheid regime to impose Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in African schools. Although the student revolt was more dramatic and its consequences

more dire given the brutal response of the government, neither did it attract as much academic interest nor did it generate as much focused scholarly attention as did the Durban strikes and the worker mobilization that followed it. To this day, youth studies have not taken off in South Africa. In contrast, the strikes gave rise to a groundswell of academic interest and support for the burgeoning labor movement. Although the support and interest are understandable given the sense of mission that workers and the working class enjoy within the Marxist paradigm, it does not explain the near total lack of interest in the youth movement that, after all, comprised children of the very working class that was generating so much intellectual excitement.

Part of the answer to this puzzle lies with a small group of university-based intellectuals who wanted to transplant political trends and intellectual fads from other parts of the world onto the South African social and political landscape. At the same time, their interventions were extremely important and successful in forging engagement with the new labor movement that desperately needed intellectual legitimation and respectability at a time when all forms of African organizations faced demonization and repression by the state and employers. Engagement with the new movement often took the form of transferring information or knowledge drawn mainly from local and international networks of the engaged academics. In the early years, for example, the *South African Labour Bulletin* regularly published reviews of new books on unions and the shop stewards movement in England and Europe as well as essays on topics that animated revisionist Marxism of the time.

Significantly, during this period, public sociology was often a one-way process with little or no involvement of the workers themselves. Where there was engagement, it was usually between university-based academics and White activists working in the union movement who, according to Maree (1982), at that time, had undisputed power and control in the unions.

The dominant labor studies at the time drew heavily on history and other experiences on the African continent and abroad. Scholarly output was replete with texts that sought to excavate lessons and examples about unionization, leadership, and strategies from history, particularly that of the early to mid-20th century (see Maree, 1982, 1987; Webster, 1978). Although the *South African Labour Bulletin* was an important platform by then, it also suffered from an academic condescension toward workers. A survey of the contributions in the *Bulletin* from that period would show them to be a very diverse group of academics and researchers but with very little engagement by African workers and activists. The vast majority of the contributors to the journal were academics and researchers from English-medium universities and White activists within the union movement.

At this point I need to add another tradition of public sociology that then existed outside of labor studies, namely, that practiced by the Black Consciousness Movement. It was marked, however, by limited resources, a lack of a secure base in the academy, and the continued harassment from the state. Unfortunately, this tradition suffered a major setback following the death of Steve Biko and the banning of several organizations allied to it in 1977. Its legacy did survive in the student movement, in some unions, and within the national liberation movements.

In the early years, labor studies and public sociology did not face the dilemma identified by Erwin (1992), namely, whether to lead or to follow. Under apartheid there was a vast asymmetry of power and resources between those drawn from the ruling racial power block, on the one hand, and those from the oppressed and exploited majority, on the other. The majority of intellectuals who engaged in labor studies and public sociology were Whites, drawn into these kinds of intellectual engagement precisely because they desired to break away from the ruling block. Thus, like the White union officials and activists that I have discussed elsewhere (Buhlungu, 2006a), these intellectuals were rebels with a contradictory relationship to the majority of the country's population. Their most important contribution was their knowledge and skills.

However, in seeking to find common cause with the excluded sections of the population, they often engaged in a morality play in which the virtues of socialism and its historic agent, the industrial worker, were extolled while the evils of capitalism and apartheid were condemned. The category of worker became synonymous with righteousness, courage, and resilience, and problems in the movement were blamed on "leadership," the bosses, and the apartheid regime. Many of the intellectuals went further and cautioned against the dangers of nationalism and populism. An example of this morality play in public sociology and labor studies is Friedman's (1987) account of unionism among African workers in the period from 1970 to 1984. The book does an excellent job describing and analyzing the courageous actions of African workers as they went about building the new unions. But it plays down contradictions and weaknesses within the ranks of the unions and workers, and where these are too glaring to ignore, they are blamed on leaders, the bosses, and the state. In these narratives, the complexities of the existing social worlds inhabited by African workers as well as the realities of a divided society were downplayed or ignored. Liberation was presented as a panacea that would resolve these problems and level the playing fields for all.

Sociology and the Emergence of New Publics, 1979-1984

The decade of the 1970s ended well for the new labor movement. Not only had it survived the backlash unleashed by employers and the state, it was beginning to consolidate its strength. The formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in 1979 marked the beginning of a new assertiveness. But this period also marked a new challenge for public sociology and labor studies as new collectivities and organizations emerged. Several of the new formations fell outside the ambit of traditional labor studies, so that public sociology had to adjust its dialogue to be responsive to these organizations and developments (see Von Holdt, 1987). For the purpose of this discussion, I will single out four organizations that presented such a challenge to public sociology and labor studies. First, the formation of the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), a general union aligned to the African National Congress tradition of liberation politics, introduced a new diversity into its repertoire of alliances that took it beyond the “FOSATU tradition.” SAAWU made a strong case for building strong union–community links, a dimension that had been missing in union mobilization up to that point. Second, there was the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983, a development that changed the landscape of political contestation and also gave the community a powerful voice. The UDF was a national coalition of numerous community organizations that was formed to oppose the cosmetic reforms introduced by the apartheid government of President P. W. Botha. “Community unions” such as SAAWU were affiliates of the front whereas the “shop floor unions” tried to distance themselves from it. Third, there was the upsurge of unrest in African townships from 1984 onwards, which put the spotlight on problems faced by workers in their residential areas. Many unionized workers, particularly in the Transvaal, supported the community struggles and brought pressure to bear on their union leaderships to follow suit. Finally, the trade union unity talks that began in 1981 created new conditions for the practice of public sociology. The credibility and authority of university-based academics and their colleagues, some of them inside the unions, was challenged from certain quarters of the labor movement. The evolution of unity talks saw a growing assertion of the need for a leadership that came from workers and was rooted in the workplace but had strong links to communities and their struggles. This growing assertiveness within the union movement set the tone for what was to happen after the formation of Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985.

During this period, the changing landscape of union organization posed new problems for labor studies and its university-based intellectuals, especially with regard to the ascendant national liberation politics. A growing number of unions and unionists began to reject the binaries that labor studies had been founded upon, namely, that the struggle was either about race or about class, that its locus was either the shop floor or the community, or that the goal was either national liberation or socialism.

The Labor Movement Begins to Speak for Itself, 1985-1993

The formation of the COSATU in December 1985 marked the beginning of a new era for labor studies and public sociology. For the first time the labor constituency was finding its own voice, thus changing the terms on which public sociology and labor studies were conducted. In his opening address at the inaugural congress of COSATU, convener Cyril Ramaphosa proclaimed boldly,

We have seen in the past four years that organizations of the oppressed have grown stronger. And at the same time we have seen trade unions growing stronger as well. We have seen trade unions not only broaden their areas of struggle on the shop floor, we have also seen them contribute to community struggles. (Ramaphosa, 1986, p. 45)

Ramaphosa's and other leaders' speeches set the tone for what was to follow in subsequent years. In speaking for themselves, the new labor movement made it clear that the binaries that had been so central to the discourse of public sociology and labor studies were now without meaning. The growing assertiveness of the labor movement was also marked by the internal development of organizational capacities previously provided by academics, and services that had been provided by labor support organizations to the nascent labor movement. These organizations had first emerged in the 1970s in a context where the unions had limited resources. University-based intellectuals, university graduates, and some church organizations stepped in and provided resources, infrastructure, and personnel to provide services such as research, media, legal services, and occupational health and safety training to the new unions. The *South African Labour Bulletin*, the Industrial Aid Society (providing general education and training in organizing), and the Institute for Industrial Education (also providing education and training) were among the earliest of these organizations. Others such as the Cape

Town Trade Union Library, the Technical Assistance Group (support in health and safety), and the Labour Research Service were established in the 1980s. Virtually all these organizations operated outside the formal structures of trade unions, were dependent on donor funding (mainly foreign), and provided their services free of charge to the emerging Black unions. But from the late 1980s, a growing number of unions established their own education, legal, media, and research departments and approached funders to channel financial assistance directly to unions rather than through labor support organizations.

Speaking at the University of Natal in March 1986, Jay Naidoo, then general secretary of COSATU, addressed the subject of the relationship between intellectuals and the federation.

On this platform I would like to address a few words to the intellectuals amongst us. We extend our hand to you. We ask you to put your learning skills and education at the service of the workers' movement. . . . But we believe that the direction of the workers' movement will develop organically out of the struggle of workers on the factory floor and in the townships where they live. Accordingly the role of intellectuals will be purely a supportive one of assisting the greater generation of working class leadership. As COSATU we believe that we have generated a working class leadership that is competent enough to debate its position and to direct the movement itself. (Naidoo, 1986, p. 37)

The labor movement's discovery of its own voice had far-reaching ramifications for labor studies and public sociology. First, unions began to develop their intellectual capacity internally, thus reducing their dependence on university-based intellectuals and those in labor support organizations. Such was the confidence displayed by the unions that by the early 1990s COSATU was posing questions about the relevance of the research produced by academics for the labor movement (Erwin, 1992). Second, many labor-supporting organizations found themselves increasingly without a role to play, especially as the funding on which they relied was being channeled directly to unions. Although some of the activists in these bodies found specialist jobs within unions, many moved out of labor studies and activism entirely, a trend that accelerated further after COSATU's second national congress in 1987. Finally, many university-based intellectuals, who had been active in labor studies as practitioners of public sociology, either searched for new niches for intellectual engagement or moved on into areas such as policy research and consultancy outside the universities.

At this point I need to point out that from the late 1980s some in labor studies did come to acknowledge the errors of viewing labor struggles

through a binary lens of class struggle versus nationalism. Theoretically, this recognition was captured by the concept of “social movement unionism,” which celebrated the virtues of alliances between unions and community organizations. However, the literature glosses over the fact that the concept was forced on labor studies by the dynamics of concrete struggles and by a labor movement that was finding its own voice. This highlights the dimension of power that always governs relations between labor studies and its subjects and between public sociology and its publics so that the more powerful party always sets the terms and pace of the interaction.

The Retreat of Labor Studies and Public Sociology, 1994-2005

The irony of the South African case is that the collapse of apartheid and the inauguration of democracy resulted in the weakening of labor studies and public sociology. As I have suggested above, in part this was because workers and other formerly excluded social groups could now speak for themselves. The granting of formal citizenship and organizational rights also meant that workers and unionists had access to other avenues and resources to exercise their rights and enhance their collective power. As the country entered the postapartheid era there was another important development, which was to fundamentally alter the relationship between public sociology, labor studies, and the labor movement. The links that labor studies and public sociology had with the unions were based on individual contacts and personal networks. Often, these were mediated by a thin but influential layer of White union officials, and by even fewer Black leaders, based inside the unions and in labor support organizations (Buhlungu, 2006b). With the departure of these officials and activists at the dawn of democracy, the few researchers and academics that retained an interest in labor studies gradually lost contact with the unions.

At this point I need to add that the above refers to unions, principally those affiliated to COSATU, which had links of one kind or another with intellectuals. In the case of unions affiliated to the Africanist and Black consciousness oriented federation, the National Council of Trade Unions, and the formerly White unions in the Federation of Unions of South Africa, these contacts never existed in any serious way. In the postapartheid period, contact between intellectuals and these unions has diminished even further, with the result that most accounts of South African labor studies omit these unions and federations.

In the meantime, the new union leadership that emerged with the democratic transition began to look elsewhere for ideas, inspiration, and support. In addition to the internal intellectual capacities that they had begun to develop, they made new contacts in technikons and other local and international academic institutions, none of which had any record of involvement in public sociology and labor studies (Buhlungu, 2001). Even more significantly, the new leadership looked to the structures of the alliance between COSATU, the African National Congress, and the South African Communist Party for guidance and direction.

Thus, the close cooperation and high levels of trust that had previously characterized the relationship between academics, researchers, and unions were replaced by a high level of distrust displayed by union leaders toward intellectuals. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the proceedings or processes of COSATU's September Commission (1997), which the federation established in early 1996 to investigate and recommend on appropriate organizational renewal strategies. The only university people who participated in the commission by way of providing research material or making presentations were Ian Macun and Sakhela Buhlungu of the Sociology of Work Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand (research) and Richard Hyman from Warwick University in the United Kingdom (discussion or presentation). Other researchers from outside the unions included Vincent Maphai of the Human Sciences Research Council (discussion or presentation) and Owen Crankshaw of the Johannesburg-based Centre for Policy Studies (research). None of the generations of academics and researchers who had been part of the early stages of labor studies and public sociology were invited to present their ideas.

On the flipside of the coin many traditional intellectuals who had supported the labor movement in its early years and who had been at the cutting edge of labor studies and public sociology retreated into the academy, entered the world of policy and consultancy, or took off into business and politics. Those who remained in the academy largely took up what Burawoy calls "professional" sociology, which required them to maintain a narrow disciplinary focus in a context where they were coming under increasing pressure to produce unengaged research to meet the requirements for professional advancement and promotion in the academy.

Thus, the location of public sociology at the intersection between intellectual engagement, on the one hand, and political commitment and activism, on the other, gradually came to an end. With a few notable exceptions, most academics and labor studies researchers ceased to regard their scholarship as part of a political commitment or activism. The effect of this has

been to widen the distance between labor studies and the very movement it seeks to understand. In addition, the bulk of labor studies research that has been carried out in recent years tends to focus more on workplace restructuring and broader labor market trends under globalization and how these affect the labor movement. Little research is being undertaken on the sociology of the labor movement and how it is responding to the contradictions thrown up by what Webster and Adler (1999) called the “double transition.”

Flowing from the above, I need to make an observation about two specific kinds of engagement between intellectuals and the unions, namely, commissioned research and the writing of union histories. Given the long history of association between some intellectuals and unions, one would imagine that most union requests for commissioned research would be directed to university-based academics and researchers. In the 1980s and early 1990s, labor support organizations handled large volumes of research and other support work commissioned by unions. These organizations did not charge for their services. As I have shown above, by the early 1990s most of these organizations had closed down and one would have thought the work would be channeled to academics and university researchers. Although there are notable cases of these bodies, such as the Sociology of Unit (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand, getting requests to conduct research for unions, the bulk of union requests are often sent elsewhere. In the early 1990s, COSATU established the National Labour and Economic Development Institute, which has done a substantial amount of research for the federation and its affiliates. But the legacy of the morality play by labor support organizations and intellectuals remains strong as many unions are still reluctant to pay for the commissioned research that they used to receive for free.

Over the last 15 years, several unions have commissioned researchers to write their histories. The most notable are the Chemical Workers' Industrial Union (Rosenthal & CWIU, 1994), the National Health Education and Allied Workers' Union (Molete, 1997), the South African Railways and Harbours Workers' Union (Kiloh & Sibeko, 2000), the National Union of Mineworkers (Allen, 2003), and the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers' Union (Forrest, 2005). At one level, the processes of researching and writing the books are an admirable example of democratic and collective involvement in the telling of the union's history. However, it is clear that that in each of these cases the researchers had to restrict themselves to concerns that were important to the union. The result is that critical examination of union practice, strategic choices, and decisions is either weak or nonexistent. The two books that stand out as exceptions to this are the NUM and SARHWU histories. The SARHWU history in particular broaches extremely

sensitive subjects including racial tensions within the union and violence by union members against scabs during the 1987 railways strike and at a time when union members were being shot by the police.

Labor Studies and Public Sociology Today

The retreat of public sociology and the decline of labor studies continued through the 1990s into the first decade of the new century. In addition to the explanations offered above, there are other reasons for this retreat and decline. First, for many, labor has lost its glamour and intellectual attraction, and the focus has shifted to the state and business. The high turnover of union leadership makes it extremely hard to follow events in the unions or to build sustained contacts and relationships. In contrast, the centrality of the state and business in the current transition as the providers of jobs, investment, social services, policies, and so on, means that many scholars now focus their energies on following trends set by them. For some, labor only becomes relevant insofar as it engages with or seeks to influence the state and business. The result of this is that little research is being undertaken on labor either as a movement or as individual organizations, or how they perform their representative functions in advancing the interests of their members.

Second, sociology and other social science disciplines have had a serious difficulty producing a generation of engaged public intellectuals in general and labor studies scholars in particular. Although the total number of social science graduates has increased tremendously over the years, the number of those who take labor studies and public sociology seriously has become negligible. At present, the production of engaged postgraduates in labor studies takes place in no more than 5 of the country's 23 universities. This problem is exacerbated by the shortage of funding for research projects that focus on labor-related topics. As an increasing number of older and more established scholars in the field reach retirement age the problem is likely to become more acute, and the decline may take place at a much faster pace.

Third, the field of labor studies has not been particularly successful in attracting and producing black scholars and public sociologists. As a result, labor studies have been conducted by a predominantly White group of scholars and researchers studying an overwhelmingly Black labor movement. Although this is not necessarily a problem, South Africa's continuing racial divide renders the research process extremely complex—a complexity that is most likely to affect younger White researchers who do not have much insight into the social world of Black workers.

Even in cases where some Black graduate students have come through and specialized in labor studies, the majority of them soon move out of the area and ultimately out of the academy and research. A major disincentive for them is often the unwelcoming institutional culture in the universities with strong labor studies, labor programs, and research institutes. Of course, there is a variety of other issues that make labor studies unattractive to young Black scholars, not least the appeal of politics over academic life.

Fourth, in a context where public sociology is no longer a morality play, relations between movements and intellectuals tend to be fraught because the former had become accustomed to unquestioning support from the latter or if there was criticism it was rather anodyne and comradely. When criticism and engagement moves beyond this, most union leaders take offense and often respond defensively, in the process vilifying researchers and intellectuals and questioning their bona fides. Let me cite a couple of instances to illustrate the point. In 1994, I wrote an article pointing to what I called “the big brain drain” of leaders and officials from COSATU and its affiliates (Buhlungu, 1994). So incensed were COSATU leaders by the article that when a colleague and I went to interview COSATU’s national office bearers for an article in the next edition of the *South African Labour Bulletin* (Buhlungu & Von Holdt, 1994), they demanded an apology before they would proceed with the interview. They objected to what they saw as an insinuation in my article that all the best brains and leaders had left, leaving behind only lightweights who were not up to the task of taking the federation into the future. They also accused the *Bulletin* of allowing itself to be used as an anti-COSATU platform. Since then I have written several publications that commended, probed, and criticized the labor movement and each one has infuriated some union activists and leaders and made my relations with them rather frosty. Many other colleagues have faced similar anger from the unions, particularly COSATU.

The potential for tensions is exacerbated by the extremely instrumental view that unions have about intellectuals in general. For many in the unions, intellectual input is desirable, but only if it confirms the received wisdom held within the movement. A related phenomenon is the use of gatekeepers within unions to “screen” intellectuals so that harmless ones can be allowed access to conduct research on unions while “problematic” ones are denied such access. The gatekeeping can also be used to ensure that uncomfortable ideas are not allowed into the public domain.

Finally, the decline of labor studies is manifested in the decline in intellectual output. Of course, I should preface this remark by stating that the labor studies intellectual community in the country has always been small, and it was never spectacularly prolific in terms of publications. But there

was a time when there was a steady output in the form of books and academic and popular journal articles. In recent years, particularly after 2000, output has declined significantly. In terms of books, I can think of 10 that have come out in the last 9 years, excluding the genre of trade union histories I discussed above. This in itself is not too bad until we start asking questions about the authors and their institutional location. All these books were produced in one city, Johannesburg, and nine of them were published by scholars in one university (two of them jointly with international scholars). Indeed, seven of the books were produced by scholars in one research center! In alphabetical order, the books are by Adler (2000, 2001), Adler and Webster (2000), Alexander (2000), Bramble and Barchiesi (2003), Buhlungu (2006b), Hyslop (2004), Von Holdt (2003), Webster, Lambert, and Bezuidenhout (2008), and Webster and Von Holdt (2005).

A further worrying trend is the absence of younger scholars contributing to labor studies. Although there were young scholars involved in some of the edited volumes in the list cited above, many of them have since moved into other areas or out of scholarship altogether.

Conclusion

In concluding this discussion, I need to point out that my concern here was not about public sociology in general, but about public sociology in the area of labor studies. Still, labor studies are probably the exemplar of public sociology in South Africa. The existence of a well-organized and increasingly assertive labor movement makes public sociology in this area a fascinating subject for sociological analysis. The foregoing discussion is a first attempt to draw out the main themes and chart a path for further exploration. As one tries to track the trajectory of public sociology in the field of labor studies, one stumbles on familiar themes about South African society—race, gender, class, the colonial legacy, and so forth. The lesson I take from that is that the practice of public sociology is never divorced from its social context.

In reflecting on the subject, I have also become increasingly aware of the fact that public sociologists often send out different messages to different audiences or publics. For example, they may be sending out a message of condemnation to the state and business, one of sympathy and solidarity to subordinate classes, and one of critique and polemic to other intellectuals. The result is often that public sociologists and their publics influence one another to the extent that where a consensus finally emerges it is a hybrid product of the dialogue among public sociologists and their interlocutors.

Over the period that concerns this article, the context of public sociology has changed dramatically. Whereas in the past the audiences of public sociology were local or national, the globalization of human affairs has entailed the globalization of these audiences or publics. Indeed, the introduction of electronic means of information management and communication means that debates seldom occur merely at the local or national level. They are now global. The birth of the “new social movements” in South Africa provides the clearest example of this. Although the movements themselves are fragile and numerically insignificant, they have animated debates among activists and intellectual publics across the world. When considering the fate of public sociology and labor studies we can no longer ignore this global dimension.

References

- Adler, G. (2000). *Engaging the state and business: The labour movement and co-determination in contemporary South Africa*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Adler, G. (2001). *Working time: Towards a 40-hour week in South Africa*. Johannesburg, South Africa: NALEDI.
- Adler, G., & Webster, E. (Eds.). (2000). *Trade unions and democratization in South Africa, 1985-1997*. London: Macmillan.
- Alexander, P. (2000). *Workers, war and the origins of apartheid: Labour and politics in South Africa, 1939-48*. Ohio University Press: Athens, Ohio.
- Allen, V. L. (2003). *The history of black mineworkers in South Africa: Vol. III: The rise and struggles of the National Union of Mineworkers, 1982-1994*. Keighley, UK: Moor Press.
- Ally, S. (2005). Oppositional intellectualism as reflection, not rejection of power: Wits sociology, 1975-1989. *Transformation*, 59, 66-97.
- Ally, S., Moon, K., & Stewart, P. (2003). The state-sponsored and centralized institutionalization of an academic discipline: Sociology in South Africa, 1920-1970. *Society in Transition*, 34, 70-103.
- Bramble, T., & Barchiesi, F. (2003). *Rethinking the labour movement in the “New South Africa.”* Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Buhlungu, S. (1994). The big brain drain: Union officials in the 1990s. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 18, 25-32.
- Buhlungu, S. (2001). *Democracy and modernisation in the making of the South African trade union movement: The dilemma of leadership, 1973-2000*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Buhlungu, S. (2006a). Rebels without a cause of their own? The contradictory location of white officials in black unions in South Africa, 1973-1994. *Current Sociology*, 54, 427-451.
- Buhlungu, S. (Ed.). (2006b). *Trade unions and democracy: COSATU Workers' political attitudes in South Africa*. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Buhlungu, S., & von Holdt, K. (1994). Facing the future: COSATU defines its role. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 18, 48-56.
- Burawoy, M. (2004). Public sociology: South African dilemmas in a global context. *Society in Transition*, 35, 11-26.

- Erwin, A. (1992). The research dilemma: To lead or to follow. *Transformation*, 18, 4-11.
- Forrest, K. (2005). *Asijiki: A history of the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers' Union (SACCAWU)*. Johannesburg, South Africa: STE.
- Friedman, S. (1987). *Building tomorrow today: African workers in trade unions, 1970-1984*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Ravan.
- Hyslop, J. (2004). *The notorious syndicalist: J T Bain: A Scottish rebel in colonial South Africa*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Jacana.
- Jubber, K. (1983). Sociology and its social context: The case of the rise of Marxist sociology in South Africa. *Social Dynamics*, 9, 50-63.
- Kiloh, M., & Sibeko, A. (2000). *A fighting union: An oral history of the South African Railway and Harbour Workers' Union, 1936-1998*. Randburg, South Africa: Ravan.
- Maree, J. (1982). Democracy and oligarchy in trade unions: The independent trade unions in the Transvaal and the Western Province General Workers Union in the 1970s. *Social Dynamics*, 8, 41-52.
- Maree, J. (Ed.). (1987). *The independent trade unions, 1974-1984: Ten years of the South African Labour Bulletin*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Ravan.
- Molete, M. (1997). *NEHAWU—The unfinished story: The history of the National Health Education and Allied Workers' Union, 1987-1997*. Johannesburg: NEHAWU.
- Naidoo, J. (1986). The significance of COSATU. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 11, 33-39.
- Ramaphosa, C. (1986). Opening speech to the inaugural congress of COSATU, 29 November 1985. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 11, 44-46.
- Rosenthal, T., & CWIU. (1994). *Struggle for workers' rights: A history of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union*. Durban, South Africa: Chemical Workers Industrial Union.
- September Commission. (1997). *September Commission report*. Johannesburg, South Africa: COSATU.
- Von Holdt, K. (1987). The political significance of COSATU: A response to Plaut. *Transformation*, 5, 94-103.
- Von Holdt, K. (2003). *Transition from below: Forging trade unionism and workplace change in South Africa*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu Natal Press.
- Webster, E. (Ed.). (1978). *Essays in Southern African labour history*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Ravan.
- Webster, E. (1982). The state, crisis and the university: The social scientist's dilemma. *Perspectives in Education*, 6, 1-14.
- Webster, E., & Adler, E. (1999). Towards a class compromise in South Africa's double transition: Bargained liberalization and the consolidation of democracy. *Politics and Society*, 27, 347-385.
- Webster, E., Lambert, R., & Bezuidenhout, A. (2008). *Grounding globalization: Labour in the age of insecurity*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Webster, E., & Von Holdt, K. (2005). *Beyond the apartheid workplace: Studies in transition*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu Natal Press.

Sakhela Buhlungu is a professor of sociology at the University of Johannesburg. In the 1980s and early 1990s, he worked as a full-time union official in a union affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Until recently he taught sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand, where he was also a research associate and director of the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP). He has published widely on the sociology of the labor movement in South Africa.