Globalisation and New Identities: A View From the Middle

Edited by
Peter Alexander,
Marcelle C. Dawson and
Meera Ichharam

civic activists are beginning to stress local concerns. Thus, local branches often take positions and organise protests that are contrary to the provincial and national stance. Thus, despite the existence of a national body, local identities are re-emerging, largely due to organisational politics. Conversely, before the formation of SANCO in 1993, when the civics were local organisations, identification with the national struggle was strong, and efforts were made to cultivate a national identity. In accounting for the shift in identities from the national to the local level, Thusi argued in SANCO's favour, claiming that it is a progressive organisation that is responding to the challenges posed by the post-apartheid politics. He argued that it is at branch level where basic associational practices that define a civic take place.

CONCLUSION

SANCO's formation in 1993 was an important endeavour in the pursuit of coordinating the activities of civics in South Africa. Through a consolidation of efforts, it was felt that the civics would represent a more formidable force against the apartheid government and that their objectives could be reached more effectively. It was also envisaged that local and regional processes and actions would be brought in line with national goals. However, the failure of SANCO in playing its watchdog role and in finding a meaningful position in post-apartheid South Africa has placed the organisation at a crossroads, and has encouraged several local civics to redefine their identities. The inability of SANCO to gain momentum on local issues has led to it being sidelined and renders the organisation weak in playing a meaningful role in the post-apartheid period. As a consequence, there is evidence of a shift in identity within local civics that seems to contradict SANCO's political identity at the national level. Before the formation of SANCO in 1993 civics operated at the local level, with a strong national identity because of their involvement in the fight against the apartheid regime. Currently, civics are actively embracing local identities because of disillusionment and dissatisfaction with SANCO. Civics are also mobilising to meet basic needs at the local level, largely due to the ineffective provision of these at the national level. These local efforts are likely to intensify, since, due to globalisation, the poor are becoming marginalised even further. Despite the fact that the co-ordination of civics in the form of SANCO was aimed at providing local civics with a strong voice on national politics, most civics are no longer keen on being part of the national co-ordinating structure, and are more committed to pursuing goals as localised civic organisations.

Chapter Fourteen

Afterword: For a South African Sociology

Michael Burawoy

IF THERE'S A signature tune to South African sociology it is engagement. This refreshing collection of studies of everyday life, ten years after the fall of apartheid, continues this tradition with a flourish and a difference. Written by students under the energetic, encouraging and guiding eyes of Peter Alexander and his two collaborators, Marcelle Dawson and Meera Ichharam, these ethnographies refuse to make of South Africa a special case, a case apart from the rest of the world, but instead locate it within the rest of the world, adapting approaches to globalisation, such as those of Manuel Castells, Doreen Massey and Gillian Hart to their own purposes. The originality of their engagement with South Africa's social fabric becomes clear in historical perspective.

Precisely because it is engaged, South African sociology has always reflected the features of the society it seeks to grasp. When I was in South Africa in 1968, working as a journalist, I was hard pressed to find a sociology. When the rest of the world seemed to be in revolt – this was the year of the Prague Spring, of the Biafran War and of student revolt across the globe – South Africa was uncannily quiet. The Black Consciousness Movement was beginning to stir across the campuses of South Africa but it had not hit the headlines. Afrikanerdom had reached the apex of its repression, so confident both in its ideology and in its domination that the *verligte* faction began pressing to release capital from some of the rigidities of apartheid. Then, after decades of government subsidies and sponsorship, Afrikaner capital had come into its own, sharing with English capital an interest in the stability and flexible deployment of African labour. Representatives of this same capitalist class would later privately negotiate with the African National Congress in exile.

In the post-Rivonia years the South African police state killed, imprisoned or expelled oppositional forces. While some assembled in the military camps of Umkhonto we Sizwe in Tanzania, others set up sociological camp in England. Entering the expanding social science departments of British universities, the exiles were captivated by the resurgence of European Marxism, especially the French variety. It seemed tailored to their engagement at a distance with South African struggles, making a virtue out of a necessity. Althusser, Poulantzas and Balibar insisted that the Communist Party make a space for theoretical practice, turning against the 'immature' humanist Marx and embracing the scientific structuralism of the mature Marx. With South Africa far away this band of white male sociologists, led by Harold Wolpe, Colin Bundy and Martin Legassick, and including such young figures as Mike Morris, David Kaplan, Rob Davies and Dan O'Meara, appropriated French Marxism to understand the specificity of the South African articulation of modes of production, the composition of its ruling class, and specific relative autonomy of its state. Fixated on the structures of capitalism, they asked and answered how South Africa had lasted so long, appeared so impregnable, precisely when, ironically, its final unravelling began in the 1970s. Only Jack and Ray Simons, old warrior communists of a different generation, also in exile, would pay attention to the history of struggles in their classic social history, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950*. But even they ended on a despairing and abstract note, that the pressure cooker of capitalism would eventually explode the irrationalities of a colonial superstructure, unleashing a South African socialism.

All along things were astir in South Africa, beginning in 1973 with the Durban strikes, moving forward to the Soweto uprising of 1976, unleashing an inflammatory confluence of labour and community struggles in the 1980s. Against these struggles French Marxism looked awkwardly flat footed, unable to come to terms with the struggles they had not foreseen. After 1968, and after the end of the academic boycott, I next came to South Africa in 1990 to attend the annual meeting of the new multi-racial – yes multi-racial – Association for Sociology in Southern Africa (ASSA). I was astonished by the vibrancy and engagement of its sociology, an oppositional sociology, linked to the expanding labour movement and civic organisations. South Africa was on fire! The South African Communist Party staged its coming out in a celebratory mass gathering in Alexandra township. While the Marxists had been arguing the world in England, an indigenous oppositional sociology, involving such figures as Eddie Webster, Ari Sitas, Jackie Cock, and a new generation that included Wilmot James and Blade Nzimande,

collaborated with a South African working class that was taking apartheid by storm. Out of this cauldron developed the theory of social movement unionism – two decades before the concept gained currency in American sociology – as well as sophisticated debates about the proper stance of intellectuals to the movement and the apartheid state.

The authors of *Globalisation and New Identities* are the post-apartheid inheritors of this august tradition. We can see the legacy in some of their articles but with a difference, they turn from the ebbing movements to their underlying lived experience which they then locate in a world context. Thus, Chris Bolsmann tackles the fate of Volkswagen workers, not in the restricted context of anti-apartheid struggles but in a globalised world of competition. German workers no longer see South African workers as allies bedevilled by apartheid but as a threat to their livelihood. Carina Van Rooyen examines the fate of female farm workers as the bottom rung in a highly competitive export economy of flowers. Post-apartheid deregulation has brought unemployment to many and downward spiralling conditions of wage labour to most. We may call it the informalisation of the South African economy, joining other countries of the global south, as Meera Ichharam shows in her comparative study of garment workers.

No study of South Africa would be complete without an ethnography of gold miners, and Marlize Rabe fills the gap. The world market in gold moulds employment practices that in turn shape the multiple forms of family structure and fatherhood. The abstract Marxist accounts of the reproduction of labour power are now enriched with an experiential diversity of family separation and unity. Family life is inevitably accompanied by the threat or reality of the AIDS pandemic. The spread of AIDS among mine workers is especially virulent, a fact not unrelated to the pressures of competition in a world market as well as the legacy of colonial despotism. Working from a hospital in Johannesburg, Sandra Roberts focuses on the struggles of individuals, communities and movements to counter the ubiquitous stigmatisation of people with AIDS – a crucial first step to containing the disease.

Globalisation can appear as a distant force that disrupts, distorts, destroys everyday life, but it can also be deployed as a set of connections that transcend national boundaries. That was tenuously the case with the Volkswagen and garment workers, and certainly true of religious groups such as the Muslims studied by Zahraa McDonald and the Jewish women studied by Nina Lewin and Maria Frahm-Arp. One cannot but notice that the transnational connections described in this book go east and west but not north to the rest of Africa. Taking the linkages in that

direction would reveal, as Darlene Miller has for Zambia, the everyday world of South African sub-imperialism, carried out in the name of African Renaissance. South Africa not only sustains invading waves of global forces it also sends them back out into the surrounding territories.

Globalisation also affects the images and identities we deploy to organise our lives and in this regard South African youth are most receptive to external cultural forms. Whether it be Maritha Marneweck's internet chatrooms or in Lucert Nkuna's shopping mall, where the children of the new multi-racial bourgeoisie assemble, identities are consumed and manufactured as though geographical boundaries hardly exist. Even Kurai Masenyama's study of national television finds national identity to be elusive and weak, subverted in multiple directions by global stimuli and local hybridity. In the realm of politics Marcelle Dawson's study of student activism finds a withdrawal from national issues to matters of bread-and-butter that affect the possibility of effective learning. Even the South African National Civic Organisation, studied by Ndanduleni Nthambeleni, comes under attack from its members for failing to be responsive to local needs. All these studies show how globalisation constitutes and is constituted by the spreading of localised interests and identities – quite a transformation from the intense national politicisation we associate with the anti-apartheid struggles.

What overall picture of South Africa emerges from this collection of ethnographies? It is one of proliferating identities, organisations, movements, forming a national mosaic with strong local flavours. Post-apartheid South Africa has opened itself up to a kaleidoscope of global forces resulting in social chaos – an image so different from the 1970s Marxist account of repressive state regulation of capitalism or the 1980s movement sociology targeting the overthrow of apartheid. Now the political project is lost in a cacophony of voices, shaped in unpredictable ways on the terrain forged between globalisation and localism. Gone is the South African exceptionalism, and instead we encounter a country buffeted by global storms – the perfect place from which to study globalisation. While the presence of the past can always be discerned, nonetheless the world described in these accounts is indeed distinctively postmodern in its detachment from history.

How much is this portrait of South Africa a reflection of its social order and how much a reflection of the students who chose the sites, and the interests they took to those sites? Of course, it is impossible to neatly separate the two as the authors are themselves shaped by the emerging post-apartheid world. Still, one cannot but note that whereas the 1970s Marxism was developed by a band of young white men in

exile and the 1980s movement and labour sociology was also dominated by whites and still largely male, by contrast among these twelve youthful researchers there is but one white male, half are non-white (three black African, two coloured and one Indian), and three-quarters are female. While still under-representing previously subjugated populations, this profile has surely affected the choice of topics, the lived experience examined, the techniques of research adopted. As important as the racial and gender demographics is the fact that these students and teachers, none of whom had a PhD in sociology at the time of writing, are deeply embedded in a world beyond the academy, many with heavy family responsibilities, holding down one or more jobs as they pursue their studies. They do not have the resources to distance themselves from the world around them. They are not insulated in the academy but part of the very social fabric they describe.

As resources flowing to universities decline, as independent research becomes even more difficult in the face of heavier teaching loads and inadequate wages, so we can expect embedded research of an ethnographic character to become ever more common. It will be taxing and exhausting but it will be engaged and critical. It will produce a committed social science that will turn private troubles into public issues, bringing social theory to bear on lived experience. The future of South African sociology, willy nilly, will depend on cultivating the ethnographic imagination, on the sort of dedication exhibited by this team of collaborators. With ethnography even a little state funding can go far.

We should not think of ethnography as a poor person's sociology, but a rich person's sociology – a person rich in needs and talents, a sociology bristling with imagination, giving voice to the interests and needs of diverse publics, empowering those publics by helping them locate their problems in relation to others, helping them identify the broader forces restricting their freedom. South Africa has an opportunity to pioneer such an engaged public sociology, and multiply resolute collaborations, such as this one and its companion, *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace,* put together by Eddie Webster and Karl von Holdt. Taxing and exhausting though they are, the fruits are clear. Such collective endeavours provide a remarkable education for the participants, but more broadly they can replace sterile text books with the immediacy of live research, more easily assimilated by inquiring students, setting examples for others to probe further. As a compendium of ethnographic research they draw on, but also add to, cosmopolitan bodies of social theory as a necessary vehicle for interpreting daily lives, and they thereby contribute to a world sociology.