

Address to the Banquet of the XIVth Annual Congress of the South African Sociological Association, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 30 June 2009

From earth to heaven: South African sociology in the international context

Michael Burawoy
burawoy@berkeley.edu

This has been a wonderful SASA meeting, with greater attendance than ever, with so many young and new faces, developing new perspectives for South Africa's second transition. A new generation of sociologists is taking over and SASA, one feels, has turned a corner. It reminds me of the first meeting of your association that I attended. It was 1990 in Stellenbosch. Blade Nzimande, then General Secretary of ASSA (Association of Sociologists of Southern Africa) invited me to address sociologists on the matter of the collapse of state socialism. I gave a rather optimistic address, "Painting Socialism," the way socialism sows the seeds of its own destruction, by generating demands from below for a democratic socialism. I may have been deluded about the survival of socialism in Hungary but in South Africa I'm delighted to say the imagination of socialism is still alive. From the panels I have attended I see the critical imagination is thriving in SASA, even in the adverse conditions of contemporary South Africa. But it is a critical imagination that is grounded in the realities of South Africa.

The sociology I encountered in Stellenbosch in 1990 inspired an alternative vision of what sociology could be, an engaged, innovative sociology, what I would later call a public sociology so much at odds with the professional sociology to which I am accustomed in the US. So inspired by what I saw in South Africa, I once penned a rather controversial article, titled "The South Africanization of US Sociology." Of course, since 1990, South Africa sociology has gone through many changes, and the public moment has received a battering from state regulation, from the domestication of civil society, from the deterioration of conditions in universities, and the rise of contract sociology. Yet I was inspired again last year at the Stellenbosch meeting of SASA, at the rejuvenation of sociology – the legacy of engagement was still alive, witnessed by the open forum on xenophobia, making it the theme of this conference and the subject of Simon Mapadimeng's address this year. Last year you also began a new tradition, recognizing early Presidents of your association. This year you are recognizing two great South African sociologists – Fatima Meer and Eddie Webster – presidents of your associations in 1973-75 and 1983-85. Both sustained a life-long engagement with society but never at the cost of their academic independence.

But I have been especially impressed by the global turn SASA is taking, the ties you are building with other countries of the South. I see that these ties are continuing to thicken. This year Satish Deshpande, one of the leading sociologists of India was your keynote speaker, and Peter Alexander, Jeremy Seekings, Eddie Webster, and Ari Sitas are all crisscrossing the world building ties with India and Brazil. It is this international dimension that

I want to focus on today.

Why is international sociology so important today? One answer to this question lies with learning about self through the detour of engaging with other, looking at oneself in the mirror of other. When Gay Seidman compares labor militancy in Brazil and South Africa or Michelle Williams compares communist parties in Kerala and South Africa or Mona Younis compares the history of the ANC with the history of the PLO, or Jeff Sallaz examines the global casino industry by comparing workplaces in Gauteng and Nevada, or Eddie Webster, Andries Bezuidenhout and Rob Lambert compare the responses to global restructuring in the white goods sector in Australia, South Korea and South Africa, through these comparisons they learn about the peculiarities and commonalities of different countries, but also by attending to differences they learn about likely and unlikely futures.

For example, with regard to your conference theme this year one might ask why you get xenophobic attacks in South Africa while a year earlier in the United States the undocumented, calculated to be some 13 million, organized peaceful demonstrations across the country, demanding citizenship, why immigrants turn out to be a major target for union organizing in US whereas that is not so in South Africa. Indeed, the struggles in California look like the struggles of the 1980s here, while the riots here look more like the race riots after World War I in the US – most famously those of East St Louis in 1917 and Chicago in 1919 – in which working class whites were threatened by what they saw as the invasion of cheap black labor migrating from the South. Why might there be such a convergence? Well one might argue that contemporary California is coming to look like apartheid South Africa with the massive use of undocumented migrants, while South Africa is coming to look like the racial formation of the United States, in the period of reconstruction after the abolition of slavery.

No doubt these transcontinental reversals might sound far-fetched, but my point is that comparative sociology raises a whole set of new questions, problematizes what is taken for granted, shakes up one's presuppositions, poses new ways of thinking about possibilities within limits, likely and unlikely trajectories so that we can be more effective in transforming society. It allows one to see what appears to be specific to South Africa may in fact be shared with other countries, but it also allows one to use differences to explain why things are the way they are and how they may change, rather than assuming them to be natural and eternal.

But that is not the significance of international sociology that I want to stress today. I want to think of international sociology not as comparative but as connective, linking sociologies from different countries. If one believes as I do that sociology takes the standpoint of society as against the state and the economy, then as the latter become globalized so must sociology. The defense of society, sociology's lifeblood, is a project of global dimensions. Last November we thought with the simultaneous crises of world capitalism and the election of Barack Obama, that perhaps neoliberalism, what I call third wave marketization, was coming to an end and the countermovement would be ascendant. But now we are less sure as we see in the US how the subordinate fractions of capital can be nationalized but the hegemonic fraction – finance capital – continues its sway over government

policy. Nationalize General Motors to save it from shutting down, but impose only thin regulation of finance capital. It's the reverse of the New Deal. Perhaps we are only entering a second stage of neoliberalism, a more subtle less ideological stage. States around the world are marching to the tune of marketization, with some exceptions in socialist experiments in Latin America on the one side and more authoritarian reactions in the Middle East, pace Egypt and Iran, on the other. Moreover, states are not simply instruments of finance capital but have projects of their own that are effectively containing resistance to marketization, not least the monitoring of universities which is having as profound an effect on sociology as marketization.

If sociology is not to shrivel up it must assume a more international character. I say "international" rather than "global," advisedly, because it has to be a sociology built from the bottom up, built on national traditions. It is not a universal sociology that descends from heaven. Instead we must build from earth to heaven, we must constitute a truly inter-national sociology from below. What are the obstacles to such a project? This was the theme of the recent ISA conference in Taipei at which 61 participants from 43 countries gave some 50 papers on the theme, "Facing an Unequal World: Challenges for Sociology." We succeeded in having equal representation from A, B and C economies. You had two representatives: Simon Mapadimeng and Tina Uys. The idea was to turn sociology on itself, to apply the critical armory of the sociology of inequality and domination to the world of sociology itself. The great theorists of inequality have been enthusiastic in their diagnosis of inequality in the world beyond sociology but are reluctant to talk about it within their own world. Even the great reflexive sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, author of *Homo Academicus*, leaps into the stratosphere with his "international of intellectuals," overlooking the glaring inequalities that make only certain people eligible for his global nobility.

Of course, there are exceptions. In his address on Sunday Satish Deshpande talked about the new legislation that extended the meaning of the discriminated against to include not just the so-called scheduled castes, but also "other backward castes," making up some 50% of the population, leading to policy of reservations within universities and other public institutions for corresponding numbers. This has forced academics to think about inequalities in new ways, a debate fired by those who continue to deny those inequalities or who turn from caste to class. Similarly in South Africa, sociology has taken strides to be reflexive about the triple transition that has affected universities and indeed the fields of sociology itself. And indeed the papers by Tina Uys and Simon Mapadimeng in Taipei addressed precisely this issue of deepening inequalities.

But how can we address these inequalities within but also between countries at the global level? This could have been an explosive meeting, but the Taiwanese made every effort to make everyone at home, to level as best as possible the conditions under which we participated. The costs for B and C countries were covered by the Taiwanese and the ISA, they were resolute in making sure everyone arrived and indeed of the 61 participants only one failed to appear – the Israeli representative who accidentally missed his plane. All sorts of other tactics were deployed to put everyone on an equal footing, at least for these three days, such as having a lottery for who sits with whom at meals, a bell that signaled

the compulsory end of paper delivery so that there was always time for discussion. In the end the Taiwanese managed to create an extraordinary convivial atmosphere.

But that did not mean we were not broaching big and delicate issues. The first and ever present issue is language. The official languages of the ISA are three: English, French and Spanish. In practice English is hegemonic. It is the language that ISA conducts its business, its meetings, its conferences, its journals. It creates resentment among Spanish and French speakers but the thought of shifting to one of these languages would create consternation and withdrawal from China, India and much of Africa, probably the Middle East, even the Scandinavian countries. While the US and UK may be the greatest beneficiaries, the Global South has the greatest interest in its perpetuation. One can, of course, try to have parallel streams in French and Spanish, one can try to give more time to presenters whose first language is not English, but these important adjustments are unlikely to change the situation fundamentally. But we should be thinking not only of inclusion but patterns of exclusion – all those sociologists around the world who are simply excluded on the basis of language. The representatives of Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East are those who have been fortunate to learn English - the upper caste, the national bourgeoisie, upper class. Language is very selective in excluding all sorts of subordinate layers of society, who are totally silent at such international conferences, or are spoken for by another class as Prishani Naidoo so instructively argued yesterday in the opening plenary from her experiences of the World Forum.

Yet that should not blind us to the very real inequalities in material existence, in conditions of work that existed among the delegates of the Taipei conference. On the one hand the delegate from Bangladesh had never been outside his country, had never given a paper to an international conference, while the participants from Europe and North America, like myself, might be spending more time outside their country than within it. I don't have to tell this audience about the differences in resources, in teaching obligations and conditions, in access to books, libraries, technology that exist within countries which is reproduced no less deeply between countries. To say there is a center and periphery within countries is not to deny that there is a center and periphery between countries – although there is a complicated relation between them.

And then there are of course geopolitical differences. In the ISA we are continually battling or more precisely trying to transcend geopolitical conflicts and dominations. But it is not easy. Take the Taiwanese situation. One of the reasons why the Taiwanese were so enthusiastic to hold this conference was precisely because of their precarious geopolitical situation with big brother China breathing down their neck. They live in terror of China. On the other hand since Taiwan is a member of the ISA mainland China, the PRC will have nothing to do with ISA at the collective level. I have spent quite a bit of time undertaking shuttle diplomacy between the two countries' sociologists without any success. Of course, individual mainlanders may be a member of the association but they cannot be a collective member as long as the Taiwanese are, unless the Taiwanese rename themselves Taipei City, relinquishing their symbolic claims to nationhood, which they will not do. As one of the leading sociologists of Taiwan said at the conference, "Taiwan is a small potato but it is a hot potato." In many ways Taiwan faces West and East, North and South and

was an ideal place to hold a conference devoted to inequalities within the world sociological community.

As soon as we interrogate inequalities in the circumstances we are led to questions of domination. We have to look at that first at the national level and the place of sociology within the nation. Here I think we can bunch countries together into regions that have experienced similar historic patterns. We may think of Africa as a region that faces the postcolonial legacy, which has devastated higher education and sociology in particular. Most African countries do not have a national association, their universities may not have sociology departments or they may be part of joint departments with anthropology, or social work or part of a general social science department. I don't think there's much dispute that South African sociology is the strongest sociology in the continent, although Nigeria probably has the largest number of sociologists. If colonialism is the shared legacy in Africa, then military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes are the shared past in Latin America. Latin America has the strongest and longest living regional association – ALAS – in the world, fostered by a common language. Although that should again not deny the incredible inequalities, in terms of resources and numbers. In terms of innovative research Brazil dwarfs the rest of the continent, which is a legacy of the peculiarities of its own dictatorship that did pour resources into the development of science. Similarly, one can bunch together the postsocialist countries who face similar problems due to the rapid collapse of state socialism. The Middle East is very diverse and at Taipei we had accounts from Egypt, Iran, Palestine, Israel, Kuwait and perhaps one might include Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia. On the one hand you have Israel whose representative saw its sociology as an appendix of the US, while the representative from Palestine writing about a number of areas in the Middle East spoke of the NGOization of knowledge and how NGOs were sucking out the best talent from the universities. Mona Abaza wrote a chilling paper on Egypt about the commodification and criminalization of sociology. Asia, too, was very diverse: India has a distinctive legacy of its own as do the Philippines and Indonesia, but here too as in Latin America, as in Africa, as in the Middle East the turn away from dictatorship has brought all sorts of new challenges and dilemmas to sociology, and in some cases, such as Indonesia, sociology may have gone into decline in the post-Suharto period of democratic reform. The problems you face here in South Africa with the democratic transition are not too dissimilar from the experiences in many other countries.

What are these problems that are shared universally – North and South, East and West – if unevenly that could be the basis of an international sociology? Sociology, whether in the university or outside, has had to face third wave marketization. Universities have been subject to restructuring, or corporatization or privatization the world over. The idea of the public university is under threat and, of course, economists have provided the ideology for its undoing, indeed their own undoing. But what came up time and again in Taipei is the role of the state in developing new monitoring schemes, rating schemes, the audit culture. Sometimes states develop their own agencies of monitoring and rating, and sometimes they got the academics to do it to themselves. But it is happening almost everywhere and spreading, not least in South Africa, undermining academic autonomy, and with it drawing universities into international competition, drawing academic disciplines away

from the publics to which they are accountable and creating ever deeper divisions within our scholarly communities as state agencies redistribute incentives in favor of departments or individuals who publish according to so-called international standards. What we find then is the rifle shifting from one shoulder to the other, from markets to states, but in many countries the rifle is on both shoulders. Sociology has got to develop an analysis and response to these patterns.

There is an elephant in the room and it is, of course, the domination, hegemony of Northern Sociology over Southern Sociology, in particular of the United States with its enormous command of resources, that sucks the best talent into its orbits and spits them out with doctorates, returning them to their home country, or sends them into international agencies, or uses them as representatives within the US of their national sociology. Along with material domination there goes a symbolic domination – the content of sociology is diffused through the world from the North, the particular is made universal. As the representative from Azerbaijan summed it up: “Western money is good, Western theory is bad.” In Taipei there was much discussion of one response – the indigenization of sociology as Akinsola Akiwowo called it rather famously in debates in *Current Sociology*, or as Farid Alatas calls it, “alternative sociologies” and he has gone far in revitalizing the sixteenth century sociologist Ibn Khaldun. Farid was in Taipei and so was Raewyn Connell author of *Southern Theory* a smorgesbord of Southern thinkers who represented alternatives to canonical northern theory, represented in the contemporary landscape by Bourdieu, Giddens and Coleman. There are lots of problems here, not least the very demarcation between Northern and Southern theory, but I want to emphasize the idealism of plucking thinkers out of the air and hoping that they can become the nucleus of an alternative sociology.

That is not how Southern sociology has developed in the past and nor will it be the way it will develop in the future. It will not develop from heaven to earth but from earth to heaven. That is how dependency theory in Latin America developed, how subaltern studies in India developed, and that is how South African sociology has developed. I have been always impressed how South African sociology emerged from struggles on the ground. I have long linked this grounded Southern sociology with what used to be called the Sociology of Work Program (SWOP) at Wits, but similar patterns can be found at many other universities in South Africa. South African sociology is quite distinctive in the way it has combined public engagement, principled intervention, and theoretical exploration. It has clearly shown the particularity of mainstream Northern sociology, it has particularized the universal, and I think the unfinished task, which has begun, involves working together with sociologists from other countries to move from the particular to the universal. Only Jesus Christ and Mohammed descended from heaven to earth, we are mere mortals and have to ascend from earth to heaven.