

ADDRESS

Reclaiming the Promise of the Sociological Imagination in Africa

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(A revised version of an address presented at the re-launching of the *African Journal of Sociology* at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, 7th February, 2003.)

Introduction

I have carefully chosen the theme of this address as 'Reclaiming the Promise of the Sociological Imagination in Africa' because I believe this is one area where as sociologists in Africa we have played an insufficiently relevant and transformational role. While Sociology Departments (often incorporating Anthropology and Demography) around the continent have had worthy scholars like Ben Magubane, Dayo Akeredolu-Ale, Abdallah Bujra, Neville Alexander, Kwesi Prah, Archie Mafeje, Akin Akinwowo, Francis Okediji, Peter Ekeh, and several other distinguished and engaged pioneers, the trend in more recent times as in other social science disciplines has been a proliferation of writing and materials wanting in imagination, vision or intellectual boldness. It is this recent trend of a sterile array of sociological production that demands that as sociologists, we need to challenge ourselves and to demand that we transcend our current overwhelming immersion in producing consultancy and agency-driven papers and materials or those that mainly address the concerns of our peer review journals or academic appraisal panels. While one concedes that these are critical for academic mobility, in many cases, they do not necessarily add in any substantial way to a knowledge that interprets or explains our social conditions to ourselves as Africans or contributes to transforming them.

The important message of this address is that it is however not too late to reclaim our relevance as sociologists and to map out the terrain of our enterprise in relation to the challenges we face in a country like Kenya and in Africa as a whole.

The urgency of this task can not be understated as we enter a new millennium in Africa today and confront all the threats, challenges and opportunities that the 21st Century poses for us in relation to issues of global power and movements, new technologies and knowledge, alternative forms of social organisation and consciousness, the affirmation of and resistance to novel and irrelevant identities and politics, and the emergent waves and directions in the global struggles for rights and democracy, peace and social justice.

Yet we enter this new era as a people with an intense sense of individual and collective crisis and dislocation, almost in a state of Durkheimian anomie, with the world held under the twin grips of both state and non-state terror and violence and with enemies of social and individual emancipation regrouping everywhere. All of these are further complicated by an Africa where disease and ignorance have not been conquered or reduced as witnessed by the growth of the HIV/AIDS scourge, the persistence of hunger and famine, and the prevalence of mass poverty, war and gender violence that are reported daily in our mass media.

In response, our political and social leaders continue to stumble from one problem to another in a seeming state of political intoxication mixed with frenzied attempts at dealing with their own collective and individual insecurities, while ordinary Africans either continue to live with an optimism and resilience built on an incredible faith or get by through a combination of individual and collective bewilderment and/or narcotised locomotion.

The time therefore is ripe to challenge ourselves to rise to the occasion and use our discipline both as an interpretative and transformational medium and vehicle. The question for us then is why is it that as sociologists we have failed more than we have succeeded as relevant and authentic interpreters of African society and social relations. Why have we yielded the ground to those who practice 'academic tourism' as my friend, the historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza of Pennsylvania State University, has termed it in his book *Manufacturing African Studies*.

In dealing with these questions, let us begin with our discipline, sociology, recognising all its historical, institutional and normative baggage and move on to explore how the appropriation, localisation and grounding of the discipline and its intellectual armory can actually lead us to transformational and emancipatory agendas through robust and engaged efforts at interpreting and explaining ourselves. Talking about the sociological imagination takes us to the originator of the notion, the American radical sociologist, C. Wright Mills.

C. Wright Mills, writing in 1959, began his book, *The Sociological Imagination*, as follows:

Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they can not overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct... Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide changes. (Mills, 1959:3)

Indeed this statement still rings true almost half a century later and thousands of kilometers away in Nairobi, Kenya from C. Wright Mills's middle and working class America of the 1950s. Yet in that statement that attempts to characterise the modern human condition we can see C. Wright Mills struggling to carve out a mission for the discipline of Sociology in a world in which the claims to the discipline's scientific status were – through the demand for and assertion of scientific objectivity – rooted in conventional Western Positivist neutrality.

But in the same opening pages of the book, C. Wright Mills equally asserted the universality of the modern human condition within the specificities defined by different historical contexts by asserting that: 'The history that now affects everyman is world history. Within this scene and this period, in the course of a single generation, one-sixth of mankind is transformed from all that is feudal and backward into all that is modern, advanced and fearful. Political colonies are freed; new and less visible forms of imperialism installed. Revolutions occur; men feel the intimate grip of new kinds of authority. Totalitarian societies arise, and are smashed to bits – or succeed fabulously'. (Mills, 1959:4)

From where we sit today, all these propositions sound so familiar, so contemporary, almost like the summary of the evening news on our local radio. And as if to elevate his writing to prophetic proportions that transcends his own period, C. Wright Mills went on further to declare that: 'The very shaping of history now outpaces the ability of men to orient themselves in accordance with values. And which values? Even when they do not panic, men often sense that older ways of feelings and thinking have collapsed and that newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral stasis. Is it any wonder that ordinary men feel they cannot cope with the larger worlds with which they are so suddenly confronted? That they can not understand the meaning of their epochs for their own lives? Is it any wonder that they come to be possessed by a sense of the trap?' (Mills, pp.4-5).

Today at the beginning of the 21st Century, humankind remains confronted by the overwhelming sense of anomie, alienation and bewilderment that C. Wright Mills talked about almost 50 years ago. We face economic, political, military and cultural forces and dynamics that exclude and dominate the majority of persons (or incorporate them in a disadvantaged and unequal manner) both without their active consent and in many cases without their knowledge or ability to consciously shape the individual or collective directions that their lives often take. We also see these often in the terrible conditions of mass poverty, conflicts and wars, and ecological and other disasters that characterise the lives of very many ordinary Africans today. Yet amidst all this chaos, change and movement, human beings, as Viktor Frankl has told us, possess a drive towards the search for meaning, for an explanation and interpretation that is somehow reasonable and makes sense of the experiences that people go through. Different forms of knowledge provide or point to their own answers. Religions and different faith systems, particularly through their theologies and metaphysics, offer explanations, guidance and directions determined by belief and faith, while different schools of science offer their differing secular viewpoints.

As C. Wright Mills pointed out, Sociology as a discipline also offers its own analyses, explanations and interpretations through the specific lens of what he has called the sociological imagination. This is a radical and humanistic interpretation of the human person and society and the nature and interplay of

history, social forces, relations and structures in the expression and shaping of the human condition. It is this sociological imagination or rather its promise that I propose that those of us who practise sociology in Africa reconsider and reclaim as part of our larger project of interpreting and providing meaning for our societies and contemporary social condition. This is because a serious look at the practice and discipline of sociology in Africa today will show a situation of near abdication of the responsibility of attempting to give meaning or provide our own interpretation of our realities. More often than not sociologists are reduced to mimic men, institutional apologists, bean counters of processes and occurrences. We often demonstrate little or no imagination, neglecting the extensive wealth of imagery, processes and often changing structures and actions that characterise the dynamic and often turbulent social arenas and laboratories that constitute where we make our lives and livelihoods. What then is this sociological imagination whose promise I am urging us to reconsider and reclaim and how is it relevant to our conditions as Africans today?

The Sociological Imagination and Africa

Without getting into the endless debate as to whose sociology and whose imagination, questions that take us into the validity and relevance of western sociology for Africa, let us begin this part of this reflection by recognising sociology's role as a product of Western modernity and of course the complex and plural role that this modernity has played in shaping our contemporary condition through the various economic, cultural, social and ideological forces of empire creation, colonisation, slavery and current global society and economy. That modernity in all its malignant and benign expression was not an all dominant and total hegemonic force that obliterated other histories, traditions and memories. It had to interact, shape and be shaped by the diverse cultures and civilisations it interacted with, sat in, appropriate and was appropriated by. It is neither a pure, innocent nor singular modernity and its strident claims and will to dominance and empire have only reinforced the existence and emergence of our own 'modernities' in relation to it and side by side with it (Pred and Watts, 1992, Pieterse and Parekh, 1995, Chatterjee, 1998). The recognition of our own modernity alongside Western modernity is a good place to begin to conceptualise and accept a sociology that is a vehicle, platform or tool of understanding and interpreting the human social conditions consisting of building blocks, foundations and elements that all go into making the building but which can be as different as mud, wattle, clay, cement, timber, bamboo, marble, steel and stones as building materials. Yet they all contribute to making a contemporary structure that can equally possess engineering resilience, ecological relevance, architectural elegance and artistic beauty. The point here is that just as it is possible to have houses across cultures with comparable aesthetics and functions, so it is possible to possess and recognise sociology as a practice wherever it may be located.

A second preliminary point here is that the sociological imagination is not necessarily what sociologists do. Anybody familiar with contemporary sociology knows that we do many things, many of which lack creativity and imagination. Of course, this is not to deny the existence of significant contributions and explanations of our social realities from sociology but in the contemporary practice in Africa today these are not many. This challenge to the sociologist's relevance is of course not restricted to the sociological enterprise in Africa, we find evidence of the periodic need to defend, promote and/or renew the discipline also in the West. C. Wright Mills's book was one such effort and more recent attempts have included Peter Berger, Alvin Gouldner and Anthony Giddens (1987, 1996). Giddens (1987) in his 1986 inaugural lecture at Cambridge University has provided some key elements of 'what sociologists do' beginning with a broad recognition that 'Sociology is concerned with the comparative study of social institutions, giving particular emphasis to those forms of society brought in to being by the advent of modern industrialism' (Giddens, 1987:1). I must add that this refers to both coloniser societies and colonised societies.

Writing from the African context, Onigu Otite sees sociology as 'the study of human interactions, and the organization of social institutions. It thus deals with social processes and social relationships particularly in their institutional contexts'. (Otite, 1994:1) Of course, within sociology itself the divisions are many and intense about how to and why do we do what sociologists do.

More significantly were the sectarian affiliations and identities based on ideology and theoretical positions that used to plague the sociological enterprise of the middle and late 20th Century. All of these internal dissensions and the larger lay and scientific publics' lack of understanding of how different the sociological enterprise is from conventional wisdom, common sense and folk literature have helped to raise questions about the discipline's relevance. This is not even to speak of the association of the discipline with radical thinking and criticism and militant students and activists or with conservative pro-establishment functionalist explanations and position.

The discipline of sociology is therefore not only ridden with tremendous ambivalence in terms of identity and consciousness but also an intense sense of vocational and professional insecurity both within and without the academy. This has led to the assertion by sociologists that the discipline is approaching a crisis (Alvin Gouldner), is under strain (Giddens, 1987:1), and is decomposing (Horowitz,) and the recognition of the need to defend it (Giddens, 1996:1-7). In the conclusion to his spirited 'In Defence of Sociology', Giddens (1996:7) stated: 'Sociology should rehone its cutting edge, as neo-liberalism disappears into the distance along with orthodox socialism. Some questions to which we need answers have a perennial quality, while others are dramatically new. Tackling both of these as in previous times, calls for a healthy dose of what C. Wright Mills famously called the sociological imagination'. It is to this thing

called sociological imagination and its usefulness and relevance for our conditions as sociologists operating in Africa that I now turn.

C. Wright Mills defined the sociological imagination as enabling 'its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their position'. (Mills, 1959; 5) My understanding of Mills's use of the sociological imagination is that it is an approach, a perspective, a way of looking at social facts and reality, and above all a 'quality of mind'. It helps analysis, explanations and interpretations to begin from the position of the individual and locate her/him in the period and social milieu that such a person finds him/herself and how these three elements – the individual, history and social structure – interact and shape both personal and social outcomes.

In many ways, Mills, long ago like Max Weber, avoided the distracting dichotomy between structure and agency, micro and macro, and synchrony and diachrony. Thus, when the sociological imagination is deployed, analyses and interpretation move across all these divides, and attempt to express both human and social complexity and more simple direct relationships. For Mills, the sociological imagination is also a promise and an approach that 'enables us to grasp the history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (Mills, 6). According to Mills, it is the distinctive factor that provides the much more profound illumination and depth to the works of all great social theorists and analysts ranging from the founding fathers such as Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Josef Schumpeter and Max Weber. In Africa we find this very quality of mind reflected in the works of social scientists such as Claude Ake, Archie Mafeje, Ben Magubane and Mahmood Mamdani. Indeed, C. Wright Mills has posed this quality of mind as something found also in works of social analysis carried out by other social scientists and historians. The sociological imagination thus provides the handle for posing significant questions of social analysis such as:

- (1) 'What is the structure of the particular society as a whole? What are its essential components and how are they related to one another? How does it differ from other varieties of social order? Without it, what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change?
- (2) Where does the society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What are its characteristic ways of history making?
- (3) What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail?' (Mills: 6-9)

With these and other questions that the sociological imagination enables, comes '... the capacity to shift from one perspective to another – from the

political to the psychological; from an examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from theological school to the military establishment; from consideration of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two.’ (Mills, 1959:7)

I have quoted extensively from C. Wright Mills to underscore the contemporary relevance and appropriateness of what we attempt to do when we do sociology well. It is also to point out that sociology cannot be reduced to works of fragmented, disjointed and often abstracted empiricism or the stringing together of vacuous notions and concepts that are devoid of historical anchor and yet attempt to explain all aspects of our contemporary African condition. Several such attempts have reduced serious theoretical and empirical problems to sensational labels such as ‘failed states’, ‘predatory politics’, ‘the politics of the belly’, ‘economies of affection’ or other similar uni-dimensional explanations. C. Wright Mills’s work teaches the importance of the demands of complexity, depth, holistic and historical analyses and the overlapping effect and interaction of structure and agency in the understanding of contemporary African societies. Indeed we see the sociological imagination in the works of a wide range of contemporary scholarship such as in the works of Edward Said, Archie Mafeje, Mahmood Mamdani, Claude Ake and Peter Ekeh.

Of course, all these scholars cannot be said to be sociologists in the professional sense of the word, a situation recognised by Mills when he ascribed the sociological imagination as a social science ‘quality of mind’. Perhaps an important point for many of us who operate under the umbrella of sociologist today is that we scarcely do sociology anymore; we claim to do development, gender studies, identity politics, migration studies and several other new sub-disciplinary specialisations. We increasingly are lacking in the fundamentals of a solid disciplinary home base capable of providing us with the theoretical, epistemological and methodological rigours necessary for tackling the difficult questions of social analyses and skirt the realm of ‘troubles’ and ‘issues’ as identified by Mills and in the process litter the world with materials that possess neither quality nor depth. We lose ourselves in the fragmentation of disciplines operating with splintered lenses and in our confusion turn our splintered and fragmented visions of social realities into complete explanations and interpretations. Furthermore, we lack any substantive or clear relationship with other disciplines such as philosophy, jurisprudence, biology, mathematics, linguistics, anthropology, economics, history and psychology. In many cases, we do not know them, read them or care about the knowledge and insights that they produce that can enrich or transform our own engagement with our social realities. Mudimbe, Houtondji, Appiah, Mafeje, Mamdani, Ekeh, Zeleza and many more such distinguished thinkers of African origin and diverse interpreters of our conditions mean little or nothing to many people in

the common rooms and departments of the universities across the continent. Thus we are scarcely provoked, stimulated or inspired. How then do we reclaim the promises of sociological imagination in the context of our practices and vocation as sociologists in today's Africa? How do we frame the challenges and context of sociology in Africa today?

Framing the challenge and the context of Contemporary Africa today

A major fact of contemporary sociology is that a lot of changes have occurred in the discipline since the times of C. Wright Mills. Sociology has undergone tremendous changes in its substantive issues, methodology and theories. It has reframed its language, conceptual frameworks, and its methodological slant since Mills took on the dominant paradigm of Parsonian structural functionalism. The discipline has re-engaged Western and other modernity and as a result of its reflexive nature, sociology as it confronts modernity, interprets it, is itself transformed and through its interpretations transforms both our knowledge of and the nature of modernity. In the process, knowledge has proclaimed the era of several 'Posts' – post-industrial, post-modern, post-development, post-colonial. One can not be sure that the final word is in on the 'posts' characterisation and how much it applies to the wide variety of social conditions and experiences that are found in our very diverse and uneven world today. But the 'post' characterisation has been useful for re-affirming the transcendental nature of our practice and our human condition. While it might not have answered our questions, it has shown that in living and studying we often go beyond and surpass what we study and who we are and thereby offers us the recognition of the unending dynamic nature of historical existence and knowledge.

In spite of the assertion of post-modernity, post-development and post-coloniality, Africa remains with certain key characteristics and elements, namely the pervasiveness of poverty, the instability of political order and regimes, and the weakness of democratic political institutions and economies. There is also the limited nature of public access to social services, the relative backwardness of its physical infrastructures, technological and scientific enterprises and production, and the openness of its polities and societies to a higher degree of external influence and control while resource flows and benefits from foreign sources remain minimal. All of these raise important questions about the extent to which one can claim that the 'colony' or development in Africa has been transcended. Indeed, the so-called new forces of globalisation have not significantly made African lives better. (Aina, 2004)

Of course, the sociology of development, or rural development, or development studies are all very popular areas of study in the different Sociology Departments all over the continent and they and their scholars and students provide abundant substantive evidence and controversies around the issues identified above.

The important thing to remember is Africa's crisis of poverty, democratisation and the problems of peace and social justice are not unique to Africa. Africa is not exceptional with regard to the presence of crisis or the failure of the improvement of the human condition, but in terms of scale and persistence, there is the need to do a lot more to deal with these issues than has been done so far, and this is where African sociologists and African intellectuals must rise to the challenge. To do this, Africans must interpret and explain Africa. We must engage and identify our problems. We must find our solutions and own them. In other words, we must reclaim our voices and our minds by providing our own narratives. Africa must be its own interpreter through generating its own knowledge, discourses, stories, myths and narratives. Western social science's interpretation of the world was its own. It produced its own interpretations, narratives and mythologies. These narratives and knowledge, although they contained similarities of experiences and lessons for us, were particular and specific discourses that were universalised because of the dominant nature of Western modernity. The rest of the world found aspects of these constructions of realities acceptable and used them, and in many other cases, as Claude Ake pointed out in 'Social Science as Imperialism', had them imposed on us.

Today, almost half a century after so-called end of colonisation, our stories and the interpretations of Africa continue to be delivered and affirmed through the lenses and prisms of predominantly non-Africans. Through these discourses, they offer analyses and solutions which often we do not share, accept or own. In many cases, Africans are not completely sure of the meaning or the dimensions of the vested interests lodged in these discourses. How then can Africans transform themselves when all we do is receive knowledge, practices and institutions? This is the very reason why we need to reclaim the promise of the sociological imagination as a tool to liberate our knowledge and our interpretation from the tyranny of received practices, institutions and knowledge. I see the need for this intellectual emancipation as important in our future as relevant sociologists.

Let us examine two of these tyrannies:

The Tyranny of Received Knowledge

As a discipline, sociology carries a great deal of historical baggage based on its origins and the key concerns and intellectual projects of its founders. But the discourses are not monolithic. Sociology traces its roots as a discipline from its engagement with issues around the Western Enlightenment and modernity. The discipline sought to constitute the basis of Western interpretation of the process of capitalist industrialisation and the making of Western bourgeois society. Embedded within the discipline's dominant epistemologies were the tensions between the different variants of Western rationality and conceptions of civilisation and social and historical change. In most cases the analyses were

completely embedded in western thought, beliefs, values and ideas leading often to ethnocentric, teleological and almost unilineal conception of the world and human development. Even the core concepts of Western sociology, in spite of efforts to universalise them, proceeded in many cases with definitions based on elements of Western modernity. Examples are such supposedly simple concepts such as society, civil society, social values and social institutions.

An elementary reading of the formulations of the founding fathers of Sociology such as Auguste Comte, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tonnies, Emile Durkheim and even more recently Talcott Parsons, will show this bias. Those social systems that were not located within mainstream Western modernity were studied not as part of sociology but rather as part of anthropology or ethnography. They were primitive, non-industrial or traditional systems. Most sociologists were socialised into these worlds, values, thoughts and imagination, and were trapped by the very limitations of its incompleteness and inadequacy at interpreting the multiplicity of historical and contemporary humanity. These became not only dominant knowledge in Western sociology but were transferred and received by generations of sociologists outside the Western academy. Of course, there were critical traditions in Western sociology that rejected this bondage but it was not till recently with the proliferation of heresies in sociological discourses and the emergence of the post-modern and anti-meta narrative discourses that greater diversity and plurality have been accepted as legitimate parts of interpreting human social experiences. This has given new life to the understanding and study of indigenous cultures and non-Western social systems as they make and remake themselves in their encounters with Western modernity and define their own modernity. The methodological acceptance of the plurality and diversity of human experiences and their co-equal authenticity has re-valued and trans-valued differences in such a way that there is no longer a surrender to weighting and hierarchy that locates certain human societies or experiences as essentially superior to others. Taken to its logical conclusion, this approach presupposes the psychic and social unity of humankind as a concrete analytical starting point.

Thus, as sociologists, without going into the details of different studies and analyses, we can liberate ourselves from the tyranny of received knowledge embodied in the position of a monolithic epistemology, and consequently one dominant rationality, human civilisation and development trajectory. This remains very much an issue in contemporary sociology and in concerns with the study of globalisation, poverty, ethnicity and development – indeed with most aspects of sociological studies concerned with non-Western social systems. Sociology in Africa will only begin to contribute to the larger tasks of African development and social transformation when African sociologists interpret and re-engage the narratives, grammar and idioms of the African contexts and conditions on their own terms. Sociologists in Africa must

confront modernity as it unfolds in Africa and the struggles, tensions and opportunities that emerge from this. Sociology in Africa must interpret African societies and processes through and with African lenses. This process of course cannot be monolithic and uncontested but it must be reclaimed, encouraged and supported.

The Tyranny of Received Practices and Institutions

A second area that requires our attention is the tyranny of received practices and institutions. The history and politics that surround this tyranny are closely related to the way the structures and practices that reproduce the domination of specific knowledge systems were created and reproduced. Both Ake in 'Social Science As Imperialism' and Edward Said in 'Orientalism' have shown us how this was done. As a result of the structures of power that built dominant knowledge, African societies and contexts have also received strategic institutions, establishments and practices that supported unequal and uneven relationships, exchange and power situations. The institutions and practices that supported and reproduced the domination of Africa and are today used in Africa are not innocent or neutral institutions and practices. Because they have not been subjected to sufficiently critical scrutiny and interrogation, and therefore re-invented and appropriated towards African ends and interests, these have been unable to provide the necessary instruments for transformation. There is obviously the question of both what is African and what constitutes African interests. These are not new and are the subjects of debates by scholars such as Mudimbe, Mamdani and Appiah as they deal with issues of identity, nativism and citizenship.

But the issue here is that most African countries and societies today operate with institutions, practices, identities and consciousness derived from their colonial encounters and received from their colonial rulers. How much have these been appropriated, adapted and transformed to the benefits of the citizens and peoples of Africa is a question that most of us cannot answer in the positive. What is the state today of the institution of justice? What are the key developments in politics and the economy? What changes have occurred in the family, marriage and kinship? What has happened to education and religion? How have all these affected and been affected by peoples? In many cases, the received institutions and practices have been perverted and stunted to the extent that they brutalise and oppress ordinary Africans as much as under conditions of non-African rule. Sociology in Africa has a task to demystify and unveil these institutions and practices, to explain their limitations and the conditions for their reproduction and to show the limits of repression no matter under what system and the possibilities of emancipation. So far the literary and the creative arts have done more of this type of work. Sociology by its very makeup and its concerns with the human social condition has an equal contribution to make in demystifying and examining politics, power and status, social class, bureau-

cracy, the military, the family, violence, work and labour, sexuality and religion in Africa today. All of these have institutions, practices and values. Sociology is equipped to engage the sacred and profane, pain and pleasure, hate and love, peace and war, the ordinary and the exceptional, the private and the public, squalour and splendour, not as polarities but in their intricate relationships as they express themselves in and determine and are determined by the lives of people. Sociology is actually about engaging the routine, ordinary and dramatic social constructions of lives and realities in their sacred and profane forms. It is a terrain where we can interrogate dispassionately and with commitment the underlying dynamics, drives and relations that define and propel what we consider to be given, routine and ordinary, and those forces that are dramatic, disruptive and unusual.

How do we as sociologists in Africa deploy all the capabilities and capacities at our disposal to make sense of these institutions and practices not only to understand and interpret them but change them in order to have a better world, no matter how we conceive it? How do we as sociologist interpret and unpack even our conceptions of a better world and of our role and place in it? The answers to these questions reside in the extent to which we reclaim the promises of the sociological imagination.

As my contribution to the re-launching of the *African Journal of Sociology* of the University of Nairobi, I want to leave us all with the following questions: Why do we research and publish? Why is it important that we have journals of sociology? Is it only to provide us a medium of our academic expression, erudition and mobility? Or is it so that we can as well as African sociologists be interpreters of our own situations and conditions?

To help with our thoughts, a quotation from Edward Said (1996:23), also a great admirer of C. Wright Mills, in the 'Representations of the Intellectual', provides some guidance:

At bottom, the intellectual, in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus builder but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do... This is not a matter of being a critic of government policy, but rather of thinking of the intellectual vocation as maintaining a state of constant alertness, of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along.

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