

Negation and Affirmation: a critique of sociology in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper critically evaluates the epistemological basis of the academic discipline of sociology in South Africa. In particular, it contextualises, and therefore subjects to critical scrutiny, the assumptions made (and not made) by South African sociologists in their writings about the discipline of sociology in South Africa. Secondly, it seeks to make an epistemic intervention on the current debates on epistemological decolonisation of the social sciences in the South African academy. The issues raised in the paper no doubt go beyond the South African academy and speak to issues raised by sociologists in other parts of the African continent and in the Third World generally.

Keywords: academic dependency, endogeneity, sociology, South Africa

Introduction

Sociology, quite like philosophy, is said to be characterised by critical self-awareness. That is to say, sociologists do not only write about societies, which are the objects of their enquiry; they tend also to write about the discipline self-consciously as sociologists. In this regard, South African sociologists are no exception. One often encounters articles dealing with the 'state of the discipline' of sociology in South Africa (Burawoy 2004, 2009; Cock 2006; Dubbeld 2009; Hendricks 2006; Jubber 1983; Mapadimeng 2012; Sitas 1997; Uys 2004; Webster 1985, 1991, 2004). Such writings, however, tend to focus on how sociology in South Africa should face up to its immediate socio-political environment rather than the epistemological issues which constitute it. The recent focus on the notion of 'public sociology', inspired by Burawoy, is a case in point. This practice, as pointed out by Oloyede (2006), tends to confuse sociologists with activists. The present paper will move away from such discussions and focus, instead, on epistemological issues. This paper comprises three main parts. The first part of the paper contextualises discussions on epistemological decolonisation. The second part, which dovetails with the first, provides a brief survey of sociology in South Africa. It subjects to critical scrutiny

the assumptions made (and not made) by South African sociologists – at least those who have written about sociology in South Africa. While the use of (secondary) sources in this paper is comprehensive, the length limit means that the paper cannot be exhaustive. The third section of this paper briefly discusses measures which may be taken to reverse some of the problems under critical scrutiny.

II

Tracing the roots of ‘academic dependency’, Syed Farid Alatas (2003: 600) states that: ‘To the extent that the control and management of the colonised required the cultivation and application of various disciplines such as history, linguistics, geography, economics, sociology and anthropology in the colonies, we may refer to the academe as imperialistic.’ For his part, Zeleza (1997: ii) argues that the literature on Africa, in the Northern academy, has always been ‘self-referential, few scholars paid attention to the writings of African scholars or to what African scholars had to say’. Instead, discussions tended to centre on ill-equipped theoretical fads that gained currency in the western academy. So ubiquitous was this practice that ‘each generation [of western scholars] produced its Livingstones who rediscovered Africa through the prevailing epistemological fad. Thus, Africa always appeared as nothing more than a testing site for theories manufactured in the Western academies’ (Zeleza 1997: ii). Such fads range from modernisation theories, dependency theory, neo-Marxism, post-coloniality, post-modernism and so on. Indeed, ‘there seemed to be a reputational lottery for those who could coin the most demeaning defamations of Africa and its peoples’ (Zeleza 1997: ii). There are also, in fashion, concepts, such as, ‘kleptocracy’, ‘patrimonial states’, ‘primordial states’, ‘predatory states’, ‘failed states’ and so on. This labelling, Zeleza argues, was the final straw between African scholars and their western counterparts. African scholars were called upon to ‘negate’ these existential and epistemological ‘negations’. That is not to suggest, however, that there are no African scholars who engage in such labelling.

Writings on Africa are replete with Africa’s ‘otherness’ or what Mafeje calls ‘negations’ (when referring to the social sciences generally) or ‘alterity’ (when talking about anthropology in particular). Africa is almost always presented as a ‘representation of the West’s negative image, a discourse that, simultaneously, valorises and affirms Western superiority and absolves its existential and epistemological violence against Africa’ (Zeleza 1997: iii). Let us, at this point, bring the story closer to home, South Africa. It has been suggested that the social sciences in South Africa thrive on essentially racist paradigms: that the black majority are either spoken of or spoken for (Sitas 1998:13). For Mafeje (1971, 1976, 1996), the epistemological basis for the social sciences has always been ‘imperialistic’. Sociologists and anthropologists tended to produce writings which were ‘doubtful, mistaken and pernicious’ (Magubane 1973). Such writings are

accepted as working truths, their methodological and theoretical flaws notwithstanding (Magubane 1973, 2007). For Magubane, these writings constitute little more than a defence of economic and political interests of the white minority. However to speak about the social sciences in general is too big a task. Hence we shall limit ourselves to the academic discipline of sociology in South Africa. Following Alatas (2003), when we speak of the West, we refer in particular to the UK, the US and France, insofar as they have a global reach in terms of their research output in the social sciences.

It has been pointed out by various authors that the writings of black sociologists hardly feature in the reading material in many departments of sociology in South Africa (Adesina 2005, 2006a; Jubber 2006). Alatas (2012a) argues that standard sociology textbooks, when referring to thinkers of the 19th century, make no reference to sociologists outside of Europe. In fact, the history of sociology is equated with the history of western modernity; no reference is made to Ibn Khaldun to give but one example. Alatas refers to this erasure as the 'New Orientalism' (Alatas 2012a). In doing so, he departs from Edward Said's notion of Orientalism in that he transcends the Orient/Occident dichotomy and highlights, instead, the fact that academics have gone beyond the pejorative ways of writing about the Orient. Instead, the trend has taken the form of marginalising writings and writers from areas other than the West. The Third World, Alatas (2012a) argues, is simply not seen as a source of ideas/theory – but that of data gathering.

The upshot of this marginalisation is 'Hidden Eurocentrism' (Alatas 2012b) which consists in (i) the desire to apply, universally, categories which come from particular locales (e.g. the UK or the US) to the rest of the world; and (ii) the internalisation, on the part of Third World scholars, of ideas which are superimposed on them by an academic orthodoxy – something which leads to lack of 'self-understanding'. The critical issue, therefore, is for Third World sociologists to put scholarship outside of the West on a par with western scholarship – through research and teaching. This is what Alatas (2012a) calls a 'sociological fusion' e.g. just as we borrow and domesticate art, cuisine, music etc. we can do the same with ideas. This is clearly no invitation to parochialism. It is, Alatas argues, one of the ways of transcending 'academic dependency' or the intellectual 'division of labour' between the North and the Third World.

Chief among the sociologists who champion transformation of sociology (and the social sciences generally) in South Africa are, respectively, Adesina (2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008a, 2008b, 2010), Mamdani (1992, 1993, 1998a, 1998b, 2008), Lebakeng (2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2010), Seepe (1998, 2004), Thaver (2002), and Hendricks (2006). They argue that the process of knowledge-making in South Africa ought to take Africa as its reference point or that it should be rooted in its 'ontological narratives' (Adesina, 2006b: 2). It is said that presently, sociology in South Africa is characterised by a two-fold problem: 'negations' and 'extraversion' (Adesina, 2005, 2006a, 2008a, 2010). At the level of epistemology South African sociologists take the West as

their main point of reference. Thaver (2002) points out that this practice does little to inspire the contemporary generation to study sociology.

Much of this extraversion can be traced to what Adesina (2006a) calls 'status anxiety' – the unjustified worry on the part of South African sociologists about what the countries of the North will say about them. Yet, as Adesina reminds us, it is primarily because the so-called 'founding fathers of sociology' (Durkheim, Marx and Weber) were rooted in their locales that their works have universal appeal. This rootedness in one's locale is fundamental to 'endogeneity' (Adesina 2006a; Hountondji 1997). Hountondji (1997: 18) describes 'as endogenous such knowledge as is experienced by society as an integral part of its heritage.' This remark is important in the current fight for epistemological decolonisation.

Be that as it may, the call for epistemological decolonisation (and therefore higher education curriculum) is not always met with enthusiasm in the South African academy. Take, for example, Morrow's (2009: 37) claim that 'sometimes when people advocate "curriculum transformation" – especially in the social sciences – they have in mind simply changing the content of the curriculum'. Unfortunately, Morrow provides no reference as to who these 'people' are. Nor does he substantiate his assertions. Out of courtesy, it would be helpful to point out in what ways proponents of transformation fail to face up to his epistemic challenge. He goes on to tell us that 'epistemic values are those values that shape and guide inquiry, which has as its regulative goal to discover the truth about some matter...' (Morrow 2009: 37). There is no gainsaying this remark. However Morrow ought at least to obey his own rule. In dismissing and lumping together unnamed authors, labelling them 'people', he is not engaged in good scholarship. Related to Morrow's assertion is Sitas' (2006: 357) claim that efforts to 'indigenise' will fail if they do 'not take as its founding rules part of any canon'. He argues that sociologists in South Africa are offered no 'creative breathing space' by 'indigenisation'. He dismisses as 'simplistic critiques' attempts at 'deconstructing' and 'negating' that which constitutes ones "alterity" (Sitas 2006: 357). He argues that Southern sociologists must shy away from the culture of 'imitation'. Yet it would seem that grounding on a 'canon' sociological writings in South Africa is itself a 'culture of imitation'. Adesina's (2005b: 257) question is apposite in this regard: 'Is Sociology the specific ideas of a dead "sociologist" or a distinct approach to the study of society?' While it has been stated earlier that proponents of epistemological decolonisation and curriculum transformation are hardly taken to task, Sitas has attempted to do so. It is for this reason that one will examine at some length his intervention on this issue.

Among the statements Sitas (2006: 360) make may be mentioned: 'critique and deconstruction [on the part of Third World sociologists] provide no sociological answers to the phenomena outside the sociologist's window'. Implicit in this statement is the assumption that sociologists need necessarily to be politically engaged to do justice to their discipline. Yet we know, following Oloyede (2006: 247), that 'sociologists do

not have to be political activists for the discipline to be elevated to a glorious height. What would seem critical is the importance of all perspectives in the discipline in the understanding of the life-world'. Sitas tells us that in critiquing Eurocentrism and imperialism Third World sociologists engage in a form of reductionism because they ignore dissenting and critical voices in the West. That is not an entirely accurate assessment for the simple reason that: (i) Third World sociologists have as their polemical target those voices in the West which are imperialistic, not all of western scholarship; and (ii) at times Third World scholars rely on Northern scholarship even as they criticise it e.g. the so-called political economists such as Samir Amin, Dani Nabudere, Issa Shivji, Yash Tandon etc. rely heavily on Marxism even when they critique Eurocentrism and imperialism. One may point out that Sitas contradicts himself when he says in labelling western scholarship 'Eurocentric', Third World sociologists reduce 'in one grand counter-gesture many insights, points of dissent and critical engagement of a complex intellectual heritage' (Sitas 2006: 360). This is necessarily so because he (Sitas 2006:357) had already accepted that Third World sociologists rely on Foucault and Derrida, two French scholars who are part of the 'complex intellectual heritage' – and most people readily accept that the two were critical dissenting voices within the West.

One may point out, too, that Sitas' idea of a 'canon' is partial to Marxism – referring as he does to Marx as 'the grand old man' (Sitas 2006: 375 fn 3). Yet he criticises the writings of Third World scholars for being replete with 'borrowings'. One recognises that Sitas does not explicitly posit Marxism as the only canon, for he does speak of 'any canon'. It is nevertheless clear from his work that he conceives of sociology as an insurrectional discipline (Sitas 1997a, 1998, 2004, 2006). But there is, unfortunately, nothing insurrectional in the works of Durkheim and Weber who are conventionally known as part of the 'canon' of the discipline. Further, scholarship which adopts insurrectional language but which is nevertheless not rooted in its locale can be said to be just as problematic – for more on this issue, see Mafeje's paper 'On the Articulation of Modes of Production' (1981), a critique of Harold Wolpe's thoughts on the nature of capitalist relations and labour-reproduction in 20th century South Africa.

Further, Sitas is less than charitable when he says: 'Unfortunately, the emphasis on discourses (and texts), their [African sociologists] constructions and inventions encouraged by postcolonial theorists, despite their critical and emancipatory promise, prove to be frustrating. By prefiguring processes of signification and discursive power, they leave the "steering media" of money and power and more importantly the institutional matrices that constrain social life and indeed their own claims, untouched (Sitas 2006: 362).' The works of Foucault and Said, respectively, were not limited to 'discourse' and the 'text'. Said has written, sometimes at great personal risk, about the situation in Palestine and Israel so much so that he had to deal with death threats and burning of his office in 1985 (Said 1999: 107). We may also mention the influence of Foucault's writings on gay and lesbian movements. In the South African context: Mafeje and Magubane not only

wrote works of socio-political and economic relevance but were members, respectively, of the Non-European Unity Movement and the African National Congress (ANC). That these two sociologists spent over 30 years in exile because of their writings (and political engagement) is a case in point. We may for good measure also mention the likes of Ruth First, Absolom Vilakazi, Harold Wolpe etc. as some of those social scientists who brought to bear their political thoughts on their scholarship.

Sitas (2006: 364) goes on to argue that African scholarship is characterised by 'contrasting essentialisms of Afrocentric intellectual thought pioneered by African-Americans like Asante'. This statement is not altogether justified. It is a casual reading of African scholarship something which Asante has repeatedly written about. He (Sitas 2006: 369) says the 'reclamations journey' i.e. 'negation and affirmation', endogeneity, Africanisation etc. 'leads to intellectual cul-de-sac'. 'The only way out', he counsels, is the 'quietism of borrowing from antinomical and critical concepts from discourses incubated in the centre [i.e. the North]' (368). Sociologically, one might argue that this proposal courts the charge of intellectual imperialism perceptively identified and critiqued by Syed Hussein Alatas (2000). This refers to the willingness, on the part of Third World scholars, to be dominated, at the ideational level, by western systems of thought without the West necessarily playing any active role in such intellectual dominance.

One agrees with Sitas (2006: 369), however, when he says that much of what has been written by South African sociologists consist mainly in 'borrowings' i.e. applying uncritically western theories to African conditions. The same point was made Hendricks (2006: 88). Yet it is difficult to understand why Sitas sees this as a problem when he himself prescribes that the 'peripheral sociologist' should borrow from the 'cannon'. Sitas (2006: 374) concludes his paper with several recommendations. He says 'South African sociology' has 'some major tasks'. One might wish to question the idiom of a 'South African sociology'. This is necessarily because precisely what constitutes South African sociology as an object of inquiry, is not a given. Thus such a claim cannot be made *a priori*. Additionally, given that he concedes that there is a lot of 'borrowing' on the part of South African sociologists, in what sense can one talk of a *South African sociology*? Tina Uys, former president of SASA, also made the same mistake. In her 2003 SASA presidential address, audaciously entitled 'In Defence of South African Sociology' (2004), she goes on to defend *their* 'contribution' to the discipline. Yet, in her defence she relies heavily on Goran Therborn's 'three spaces of identity' (Uys 2004). There is nothing wrong with borrowing, but there seems to be a discrepancy between defending a brand called 'South African sociology' while essentially regurgitating sociological theories from elsewhere. Let us suspend this line of enquiry and return to Sitas' recommendations.

Firstly, he says sociology in South African 'can become a platform for a broader African cosmopolitan project, which, for the first time will not be a study of, or the discovery of the "other", but a project of *self*-discovery' (Sitas 2006: 374). This is precisely what Mafeje and Magubane have been doing and saying since they began their careers in

the 1960s (see Mafeje 1991, 1996, 2001a; Magubane 1971, 1973, [1968]2000). Strictly, Sitas is less than generous in this regard, with no acknowledgement or awareness of the task Mafeje and Magubane set for themselves. This is so because, far from highlighting originality in his ideas, he demonstrates the concerted erasure and assiduous avoidance of African (black) scholarship in the South African academy. Such erasure and avoidance was identified by Mamdani: 'The notion of South African exceptionalism is a current so strong in South African studies that it can be said to have taken on the character of a prejudice' (Mamdani 1996: 27). It is easier for South Africans to compare themselves with people from the US and the UK than to make comparisons with people within the continent. This, to some extent, can be traced back to South Africa's isolation, due to apartheid, from the rest of the continent until 1994. Thus, the preference for Euro-American material, on the part of South African sociologists, only serves to confirm the 'prejudices instilled through Bantu education – that Africa lies north of the Limpopo [river], and that this Africa has no intelligentsia with writings worth reading...' (Mamdani 1998b: 72).

Secondly, Sitas argues, South Africa 'offers an exceptional social laboratory for the entire planet' (2006: 374). Interestingly, this recommendation seeks global recognition without making any reference to what local sociologists should do to address their current state of their discipline. It is silent on how Africans should generate theories and paradigms of their own so as to enhance African scholarship. The question is not just doing research locally. Such research abounds. The issue is to theorise about local conditions as opposed to waiting for the West to do so. It is not unfair to say this recommendation perpetuates the already existing division of labour in global scholarship, where Africa is a place to extract data for westerners to theorise. Thirdly, he says 'the country [South Africa] harbours the institutional capacity to explore whether indigenous and endogenous know-hows within a "pluriverse" of languages can explicate inequality, interconnectedness, organisation and social evolution' (Sitas 2006: 374). Again, the efforts Mafeje (1991, 1992), Magubane (1979, 1996) and others made have been primarily to explicate inequality among other things.

To be fair, the paper under criticism here is not representative of Sitas' *oeuvre*. Nor is it a definitive statement on his work. It is discussed here for its relevance on the issues under review in the present paper. Readers may be aware of Sitas' book, *Voices That Reason* (2004), which carries a highly pertinent and thought-provoking message on the issues we discuss. 'The book asks us to consider the possibility of a sociology "with" people. A sociology that is emphatic to people's cultural formations, one that risks failure in its counsel for social action and one that is *pace* postmodernism apodictic in its claims' (Sitas 2004: x). In addition, '[a]s an experimental text it must be used with the playfulness it invites and the disagreements it warrants...' (Sitas 2004: x). The foregoing disclaimer works quite badly for the important 'theoretical parables' which Sitas discusses in the book. This is so because in subsequent pages of the book Sitas states, quite correctly, that:

We do have much to contribute to one another and, of course, to the rest of the world: if we could only harness what is almost there, full of potential and promise. We cannot remain data collectors, immune deficiency samples, genetic codes, case studies, junior partners for others, elsewhere forever. We need to take hold of the trove of traditions and wit... that characterise our work, our failed social experiments, our distinctive voicing. (Sitas 2004: 8)

This is an important message which coincides with that of many other African scholars. It should be noted, however, as we did earlier on, that while Sitas attempts something of an Africa-centred theoretical approach, he sees his work as primarily insurrectional. Pursuing engaged scholarship and attempting grounded theory are not, of course, mutually exclusive. In his own words, Sitas argues:

In a previous piece titled "The waning of sociology in the South Africa of the 1990s", I positioned my work within an intellectual formation that, despite boundaries, engaged with the social movements around us. Inside that formation subscribed to some important biases: socio-political traditions that have been militant, community-sensitive, rooted in the country's labour movement and the grassroots cultural movements that were spawned during the intense period of resistance after 1976. Within that broad area of affinity I was particularly attracted to networks in KwaZulu-Natal that had some allegiance to the non-violent and communitarian traditions that have run in the province from Ghandi's ashrams to the present struggles. (Sitas 2004: 9)

As stated earlier, the focus, on the part of South African sociologists, on political issues at the expense of the theoretical confuses sociologists with activists. It is useful also to look at Sitas' inaugural lecture, 'Neither Gold Nor Bile', delivered at the then University of Natal in 1995, and later published in the *African Sociological Review* in 1997. While the book is empirically-grounded and makes an attempt at grappling with some South African ontological narratives, the absences of writings by African social scientists dealing with similar issues is glaring. In many ways, one might argue that the book does precisely what Sitas warns against, *viz.* exporting data and importing theory. The prevalence of Euro-American scholars, with whom Sitas engages, both approvingly and disapprovingly, is surely not likely to be missed. A cursory look at the reference list confirms this point. To show just how Sitas avoids engaging with African scholars, he argues thus:

Honest analyses of the collapse of visions, dreams, narratives and meta-narratives have been the preserve of novelists from Armah, Ngugi, Achebe to Okri, Hove and Mahfouz, rather than the preserve of social science... (p18) To date no sociologist has had the courage to undertake research on the quality of vision embodied in the texts such as Armah's *The beautiful ones are not yet born*, with its fearless airing of post-colonial corruption... (Sitas 2004: 114)

This is sufficient to make one cringe with embarrassment. A significant number of African social scientists hold positions in American and European universities largely because of their 'fearless airing' of the issues which Sitas claims they have not raised. From Mkandawire to Mazrui to Zeleza and others, some African scholars cannot remain in their countries of birth because of their 'fearless airing' of 'corruption' and many other issues. The issues raised by the said novelists have been the subject of empirical investigation and vigorous debate among CODESRIA-affiliated scholars.

It is important to note that in calling for endogeneity or an endogenous approach to knowledge-making, African sociologists are not calling for a return to a *status quo ante*. Endogeneity, put simply, says knowledge is first local before it becomes universal. It takes into account the influence of other knowledge systems but says, in the Mafejean fashion: we ask 'to be taken on our own terms' (Mafeje 1991: iii). While not exclusivist, or seeking to 'draw invidious distinctions between human beings', it nevertheless takes its locale very seriously. It consists in recognising that social science is ideographic not nomothetic (Adesina 2008b; Mafeje 1991). It does not, it should be noted, 'seek to substitute one erasure for another' (Adesina 2006b: 144) in a battle of essentialisms. For as Zeleza (2004: 26) puts it: 'The issue has never been a question of engaging the world, for as African scholars we have always been engaged. Indeed, we cannot avoid being engaged even if we wanted to. My issue is about the nature and import of that engagement.' Endogeneity is at its core is an affirmation of one's locale.

III

To see the Eurocentric and 'extraverted' (Adesina, 2005, 2006a, 2010; Hountondji, 1997; Mafeje, 1992, 2000a) nature of the writings within and about Africa, it is necessary to examine briefly the discipline of sociology in South Africa. By 'extraverted' or 'extraversion' we mean the 'knowledge production process, where data is exported and theory imported. [Where] scholarship [becomes] little more than proselytising and regurgitating [of] received discourses – left or bourgeois – no matter how poorly they explain our lived experiences' (Adesina, 2006b: 138). Sociology in South African universities is said to have been characterised by five different and competing paradigms, viz. functionalism, Marxism, phenomenology, pluralism and 'Calvinism' (Webster 1985, 1991). Whether it was in the service of the apartheid regime or of the 'social movements', sociology is said also to have always been in the public domain (Burawoy 2004, Hendricks 2006, Webster 1985, 1991). What is clear from the literature on the nature of sociology in South Africa is that its practitioners have yielded no *sui generis* theoretical insights. Or, their writings have never led to any 'epistemic rapture' – to borrow Adesina's concept (2010). This is confirmed by Hendricks (2006: 88-89) when he says:

Virtually all the sociological theories, all the major concepts come from outside the continent while we are firmly rooted here and our major intellectual and political preoccupations are located in our national and continental homes... Developing an African sociological discourse through the promotion of an African sociological community is an extremely difficult exercise against this background and in the current environment African sociologists have applied metropolitan ideas and concepts without subjecting them to critical scrutiny and they have not, in the main, developed concepts appropriate to the study of African societies. Attempts to indigenise sociology in Africa have been inchoate, unsystematic and anecdotal. It is not surprising that these have thus far not accomplished much popular acceptance by African sociologists.

With regard to teaching material, Jubber (2006: 339) comments thus: 'As an external examiner in sociology departments in South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Kenya and Tanzania, I have found that most courses rely heavily on curricula derived from USA and British sources, often based on those from departments in which the lecturers had studied. The indigenous and the local appears, if it appears at all, as a kind of afterthought, the last section of the curriculum...' For a useful, though descriptive rather than analytic, historical review of research and publishing of sociology in South Africa consult Jubber's paper entitled 'Sociology in South Africa' (2007). Writing from a different, though not dissimilar context, Alatas (2003, 2012a) talks about the intellectual 'division of labour' between the West and the Third World, wherein Third World scholars conduct empirical studies with little (and usually imported) theoretical grounding while western scholars produce works of both theoretical and empirical significance.

Some of the pitfalls highlighted above cannot be said about the writings, respectively, of Mafeje and Magubane two sociologists who spent the better part of their lives in exile. It is true that they borrowed a great deal from Marxism, but their writings were, notwithstanding their absence in the country, rooted in the place they knew best – the country of their birth (South Africa) and the African continent at large. Their sophisticated deployment (at times repudiation, in the case of Mafeje) of Marxian concepts, rooted (ontologically) as it was in Africa, produced works of 'epistemological rapture'. Conversely, their white counterparts were never able to produce such works insofar as their writings were never really rooted, epistemologically and existentially, in Africa – they had been strongly influenced by Euro-American writings (see Jubber 1983, 2006, 2007; Webster 1985, 1991). As a counterbalance, Mafeje's (1971, 1981, 1991, 1996, 2001a) and Magubane's ([1968]2000, 1971, 1973, 1979, 1996) writings are instructive in this regard.

The key issue which sociologists in South Africa fail to do is to take their objects of enquiry on their own terms, a fact which leads some of them unduly to superimpose their preconceived schemata on local data (Mafeje 1981, 1991). In doing so, they perpetuate what Mafeje (1976, 1998, 2000a, 2001b) refers to as 'negations'. Three

examples will suffice. First: In South Africa, one often reads sociology articles in which authors talk, with reference to black South African families, about 'extended families' or 'households' (Rabe 2008; Russell 2003a, 2003b; Ziehl 2001, 2002, 2003). Now given that western families usually take the form of 'nuclear families', Eurocentric sociologists in South Africa often narrate, because they cannot conceive of any other family structure outside of the one just mentioned, of an 'extended family' or a 'household'. Yet *usapho* (a family) among amaXhosa, for example, is not limited to one's immediate biological relatives i.e. parents and siblings – nor, for that matter, is it limited to living in the same house/home. It also includes 'uncles', aunts, grandparents and even people who are not even related by blood but through *isiduko* ('clan name'). Thus a man and a woman who share the same *isiduko* can never get married because they are considered siblings. Also, in many South African languages, the concept of a 'cousin' or an 'uncle' on one's paternal side of the family simply does not exist. For example, my father's younger brother is not 'uncle' but *utat'omncinci* or *ubab'omncane* – literally 'younger father'. Similarly, his children are not 'cousins' but my siblings – *abanta'kwethu*. Thus, 'uncles' and 'cousins' – to use familiar terminology – do not belong to an 'extended family' or 'household' but are members of the family *tout court*. This may not always be easily intelligible to some, but it makes a lot of sense when one immerses herself in the ontological narratives of her objects of enquiry.

Second: Let us take the widely used, but manifestly misunderstood, concept of 'muti' – and it is usually used in pejorative terms – as a second example. *uMuthi*, simply put, means medicine. Yet by some unsociological logic – in South African public discourse and, by extension, in the academy – the term is used to mean or is associated with 'witchcraft', so that when one uses *umuthi* s/he is, *ipso facto*, practicing witchcraft.¹ Yet, properly understood, even a cough syrup or an aspirin from a 'western' doctor or pharmacist is itself *umuthi* (insofar as it is medication). We do not here wish to get into a discussion about how the concept came to be equated with witchcraft (in South African public discourse and academia) largely because that is not very puzzling – colonialism/racism had a lot to do with that, very much like the idea of a 'witchdoctor'. Colonialists used the latter term when referring to African herbalists and 'traditional doctors'.

We cite the example of *umuthi* to highlight the kind of erasures prevailing, even post-1994, in South African media and in the social sciences. Note, too, the different ways in which we spell the word – the Anglicised, and therefore pejorative, spelling reads 'muti' when the word really is *umuthi*. Related to this is the problematic idea of 'muti killings/murders' that we often read about in the newspapers and anthropology and sociology journals. Cruel murderers kill innocent people, remove their body parts, and then 'analysts' and journalists refer to such murders as 'muti killings/murders' – not brutal murders as Northerners would most likely call them. The assumption is made, of

¹ I do not deny that even black people have come to adopt this negative usage of the term. But my view is that 'witchcraft', properly understood, is *ukuthakatha* not *umuthi*.

course, that such practices have a lot to do with black people's ways of living. The very fact that such killings are associated with *umuthi* is a case in point. The conflation of *umuthi* with brutal murders gives offence, since most accounts of 'muti killings/murders' rely on tabloids and hearsay. For an academic account (in our view questionable) of 'muti killings/murders' see Vincent's paper 'New Magic for New Times' (2008a). Vincent is, of course, not alone in these kinds of negations (see Bishop 2012; Labuschagne 2004; Steyn 2005; Turrell 2001).

Vincent, relying on Jean and John Comaroff's (1999) notion of 'occult economies', continues to propagate 'negations' by associating *umuthi* with witchcraft. While she (Vincent 2008a: 43) acknowledges that *umuthi* is medicine, she is unable to transcend 'the epistemology of alterity' upon which her chosen theoretical scheme is founded as she continues to lump together medicine with the alleged use of body parts. If it is indeed the case that people who claim to be 'traditional healers' use body parts, then we are no longer talking about medicine, we are talking about *ubuthakathi* or witchcraft (should there be such). That these purported traditional healers never carry out these murders themselves, but simply delegate or hire people for this 'specialist purpose' (Vincent 2008a: 43), should itself raise questions about their authenticity as 'healers'. A minor but related point is that Vincent (2008a: 43) states that '*muti* is derived from *umuthi* meaning tree'. That is not entirely accurate. Her definition of *umuthi* is derived from isiXhosa. Yet even in isiXhosa a tree is not *umuthi* but *umthi* – *thi* is prefixed with *um* not *umu*. In the same language, medicine is not *umuthi* but *ieyeza*. *Umuthi*, which refers to medicine, is isiZulu not isiXhosa and a tree, in the former, is *isiblabla* not *umuthi*. This may appear trivial or pedantic but it is necessary in highlighting the casual and grossly inaccurate manner in which some white academics write about their black counterparts in South Africa. Even when they evince a genuine interest in knowing and writing about black people, they fall short of paying careful attention to detail so as authentically to represent their objects of enquiry.

Part of the reason why some white scholars, and some of their black counterparts, continue with these inaccurate assumptions is that they conflate herbal medicine with spirituality or mysticism. There is no reason to suppose that the two are mutually embedded or mutually reinforcing. Indeed these are two different things. It is an error of thought or a logical fallacy to suppose that they are one and the same, a 'category mistake' as Gilbert Ryle would have it. Strange as it may sound to some ears, one need not be *isangoma* or a 'traditional healer' to have knowledge of herbal medicine. The end result of the negations is self-hatred (which manifests itself in various ways) on the part of black people. For example some people would make fun of an acquaintance that uses *umuthi* – thereby implying that there is something wrong with such a practice.

Here is a third example: Standard writings about the cultural practice of *ulwaluko* variously refer to it as 'traditional circumcision', 'initiation' or 'rite of passage' (see Kepe 2010; Peltzer & Kanta 2009; Vincent 2008b, 2008c, 2008d among others). The problem

with these categories is that this practice becomes nothing more than a medical procedure which is marked by a public ceremonial event – for circumcision is a medical procedure, the removal of the foreskin, and initiation is a ceremonial event which marks membership of a group. Quite apart from these standard categories, this practice is, properly understood, a social and educational process – an articulation of a people's way of living. AmaXhosa refer to this practice as *ulwaluko*. Neither circumcision nor initiation comes close to capturing what is meant by this concept. *Ulwaluko*, far from being a ceremonial event which marks membership of a group, and a medical procedure, is an educational process which marks a transition from childhood to adulthood. The purpose of *ulwaluko* is to build strong character traits, independence, teach responsibility etc. Similarly, it is not uncommon to find in the literature on *ulwaluko* reference to those who have returned from *esuthwini* – 'initiation school' – as 'recently initiated men' or 'newly initiated men' (see Bottoman 2006; Vincent 2008b, 2008c, 2008d). Again, this category falls short of capturing what it means to partake in *ulwaluko*. Here, too, it is wise to adopt the isiXhosa concept of *amakrwala* rather than 'recently initiated men'. This is so because talk of recently initiated men suggests an end product of an event. Yet being *ikrwala* (singular for *amakrwala*) suggests a continuation, not an end, of the education process. Further, while the literature abounds with talk of 'traditional nurses' and 'traditional surgeons', amaXhosa speak, respectively, of *amakhankatha* and *iingcibi*. While these writers may get away with talk of traditional surgeons, they are not justified in talking about traditional nurses. This is necessarily so because the people they refer to as nurses, play, above everything else, the role of educators. Further, instead of speaking about 'initiates' when referring to boys *esuthwini*, amaXhosa speak of *abakhwetha* or *umkhwetha* (singular). This is so because far from being an initiate, *umkhwetha* is akin to a pupil or a student. Against this background, it becomes clear that *ulwaluko* is not a mere 'medical procedure' but an educational/sociological process. These are only three examples, more may be enumerated.

The abovementioned negations are not merely acts of omission or failure adequately to analyse how black people live (as suggested by Webster (1985, 1991)), they are, more importantly, the problem of the 'ontological disconnect' (Adesina 2011, Private Communication) between white and black people in South Africa; particularly the failure on the part of white sociologists to root themselves locally not only epistemologically but culturally and existentially. For example, Webster (1985, 1991, 2004) writes about how white sociologists were heavily influenced by theoretical trends in the UK and American universities. He (Webster 1985: 45) writes that, 'South Africans studying abroad were to play an important role in introducing these [Marxian] ideas, particularly through Southern African Studies, into the university curriculum when a growing number returned to university posts in South Africa.' He says that this rise in Marxian ideas in the South African sociological scene coincided with the rise of Black Consciousness (BC) in the 1970s. Adding that Marxism gave them (white sociologists) a 'coherent

alternative'. In the context of apartheid, it is difficult to understand why left-leaning white sociologists sought a coherent alternative from outside of South Africa instead of joining forces with their black counterparts. Writing about the history of sociology in South Africa, Jubber (2007: 536) observes:

In South Africa, during the most oppressive years of Apartheid, research and writing in this field was hazardous due to the enactment of legislation that curtailed the freedom of speech and publication and hence a fair amount of sociology dealing with politics was published by people in exile (e.g. Magubane, 2000). While seditious or insurrectional political sociology was proscribed and policed, less threatening publications were tolerated. One field in which sociologists were particularly productive was in counting the human and economic costs of Apartheid, and in proposing alternatives to it, or at least ways in which it could be humanized. The least politically threatening kinds of political sociology were the studies inspired by American studies of voting behaviour.

The last sentence in the foregoing quote is surely telling. In his 2005 Presidential Address of the South African Sociological Congress, Adesina (2006a: 256) stated, plausibly in our view, that:

The first line of research is premised on taking ourselves seriously. I have noticed how eagerly we adopt every new concept and author that reaches our shores from the global North - the rapid uptake on the idea of "Public Sociology" being the most recent case. Yet we hardly give ourselves, our scholarship, and local resources the same degree of scholarly attention.

It is interesting to note that, while in the 1970s and 1980s Webster saw in Marxism a coherent alternative to Black Consciousness, he has today found one in Burawoy's notion of 'Public Sociology' (see Webster 2004). The problem with Webster's embrace of this idea is not simply that it denies endogenous alternatives, but that it prescribes to South African sociologists what they have been doing along. Webster is fully aware of this fact but does not see it as a problem. Indeed he says: 'While it may be self-evident to South African sociology, by naming some of its activities "public sociology" Burawoy was giving these activities legitimacy' (Webster 2004: 27). It is not clear whether legitimacy (as opposed to self-determination) is really what is at stake here. For 'if what we say and do has relevance for our humanity, its international relevance is guaranteed' (*Mao Zedong quoted in Mafeje 2000a: 67*).

So just as presenting Marxism as an alternative to liberalism (which was brilliantly critiqued by BC members) was itself a preservation of whiteness and an avowed refusal to be of Africa, presenting public sociology as an alternative is itself a denial of Africa as a source of knowledge. Marxist sociology in South Africa had no critique of the nexus between race and class (Magubane 1979). It only saw apartheid in class and less so in

racial terms – it equated black workers' struggle with that of their white counterparts, thereby assuming, problematically, that they were both only fighting against capitalism. In doing so, the question of whiteness (a category of supremacy) was left unaddressed. Ashwin Desai (2010: 123) observes: 'It was almost as if since their [Marxist sociologists] emphasis was class, race did not exist and therefore did not have to account for its under-representation.' Mafeje observes:

Southern African Whites, as a general category, not isolated individuals, are not willing or prepared to relinquish their hegemony established since the conquest of the sub-region. This includes white intellectuals of all persuasions. The difference between the right and the left amongst them is how their vested interests are rationalised. While right-wing intellectuals make no bones about their belief in the inherent inferiority of the Africans, liberals and left-wing advocates recognise only the incompetence of the Africans and reserve the right to guide them until they attain the required standards... This is so self-evident that such do-gooders do not have to account for themselves. (Mafeje 1997c: 1)

It is not surprising, then, that even in the post-1994 period, Andile Mngxitama, a newspaper columnist, would accuse white South African sociologists, who only do class analysis at the expense of race, of 'hiding white privilege' (Mngxitama 2009 in Akpan 2010: 117-8).

For Biko ([1978]2004), as with Mngxitama, the point was/is ultimately to render whiteness – liberal or not – irrelevant. This message was never taken seriously by Marxian sociologists, yet one suspects that had they done so, a real 'alternative' would have been found. This is so because in adopting Marxism, or Burawoy's public sociology, (white) South African sociologists were, epistemologically speaking, no less extraverted (or academically dependent) in their writings than their functionalist, pluralist and 'Calvinist' counterparts. Mafeje (2000a: 67) makes a similar point when he says: 'Southern African white settlers... are unable to deal with their Africanity for they have persistently played "European" to the extent that they unconsciously granted that they were aliens whereas blacks were "natives".'

IV

One of the measures which may be taken to reverse some of the problems we have discussed is not simply to generate insights from empirical studies but also to engage other African scholars on how they attempted to theorise on these issues. One such scholar whose works remains pertinent is Archie Mafeje. Briefly, Mafeje's (1981, 1991, 1996 2001a) approach is simply that epistemological assumptions should not be allowed to dictate what people make of the conditions in which they live. Most of the time researchers get caught up, when conducting research, in their theoretical

schemata rather than try to build theory from the ground up. But it may be objected to this view: that there is a sense in which this approach invariably becomes a 'theoretical framework' or an 'epistemological assumption' in itself. In that the researcher is, by adopting it, guided by the view that he should not superimpose himself. That, so it seems, is *ipso facto* a 'framework' *in itself*. In the preface to his book, *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations*, Mafeje (1991: 1) says: 'Although I do academic work and believe in academic standards, I do not believe in erudition (which is another way of inhibiting the deprived and disadvantaged from writing what they know and think)...' More important are the words in parentheses, for they speak eloquently not only to the theme of the book but really to his approach to research – which, he tells us, is not predicated on any epistemology.

The idea of taking objects of analysis on their own terms lies at the heart of Mafeje's scholarship. He referred to this approach as 'authentic interlocution' or 'authentic theoretical representation' in social scientific writings (1981, 1991, 1996, 2000a, 2001a, 2001b). His method is explicitly 'discursive' (Mafeje 1991: iii). Magubane (2007: 3) adopted the same method when conducting archival research on racism: 'I allow my chosen authors and their texts to speak for themselves in the same way anthropologists, through their field notes, allow their subjects to speak.' In adopting this approach, Mafeje, as with Magubane, is not refusing to be analytically universal. But rather, this is an attempt to study societies or 'social formations' from 'inside outwards' so as the better to 'relate them to their wider social environment' (Mafeje 1991: iii).

Several of Mafeje's critics (see Moore 1998; Nabudere 2008; Sharp 1998) object that this approach is no different from positivistic or 'value-free' approaches of old colonial anthropologists. They take issue in particular with the following:

As I conceive it, ethnography is the end product of social texts authored by the people themselves. All I do is to study the texts so that I can decode them, make their meaning apparent or understandable to me as an interlocutor or the "other". What I convey to my fellow-social scientists is studied and systematised interpretations of existing but hidden knowledge. In my view, this was a definite break with the European epistemology of subject/object... It was simply a recognition of the other not as a partner in knowledge-making, but as a knowledge-maker in her/his own right (Mafeje 1996: 35).

Mafeje never spotted the double-standard in what he was saying. Indeed this was (as analytic philosophers would have it) a *tu quoque* fallacy i.e. mounting a critique against your opponent while you are guilty of the same offence. For, as his critics correctly observe, this was predicated on positivistic notions of a 'neutral' researcher. So while Mafeje's approach was brilliant, it was not at all new. Still, his position is not the weaker for it. Critics of Marxism cannot hope to overthrow 'dialectical materialism' by merely pointing out that the idea of 'dialectics' is derived from Hegel. They would have to

do more than that. At any rate, one is inclined to think that the critical issue with sociology in South Africa remains that of the 'ontological disconnect' between West-centric researchers and their objects of enquiry or, indeed, local researchers who refuse, existentially and epistemologically, to be *of* this continent.

It is interesting to note, however, parallels between some black writers in South Africa, the rest of the African continent and the Third World generally. For example Adesina recommends, in an attempt to extirpate extraversion, that we '[make] ourselves the objects of critical scholarly engagement' (2006: 257). Elsewhere, he (Adesina 2008a: 148) advises the new generation of African scholars to (i) have 'deep familiarity with the literature and subject'; (ii) 'an artisanal approach to field data and writing'; (iii) 'immense theoretical rigour'; and (iv) 'an unapologetic and relentless commitment to Africa'. Mafeje (1994: 210), for his part, argues that 'as African history unfolds, we must prepare ourselves for new intellectual tasks and not a mere repetition of what has been conceived elsewhere... It is incumbent upon transcendent African intellectuals to develop new concepts and organisational forms for dealing more effectively with the emerging African reality.' For Hountondji (1997: 36), 'in order to de-marginalise Africa and the Third World, scholars in these areas ought to make a conscious effort towards a critical but resolute reappropriation of [their] own practical and cognitive heritage, a negation of the marginality of [their] endogenous knowledge and know-how...' This is not dissimilar to Alatas' recommendations for a reversal of academic dependency. Assuming that mechanisms have been put in place, Alatas argues that to reverse the problem of academic dependency Third World sociologists ought first to conduct serious research on the said problem. This could take the form of teaching, publication and organising and sharing knowledge at international conferences.

Second, this can be achieved through writing textbooks which, in addition to featuring the usual 'founding fathers of sociology' i.e. Marx, Weber and Durkheim, feature marginalised thinkers from the Third World e.g. Ibn Khaldun, Jose Rizal, W.E.B. Du Bois etc. We include Du Bois on this list of Third World sociologists insofar as he was self-referentially African – at least in the latter part of his life. Thirdly, collaboration among Third World scholars would be of great assistance. In the African context, one might mention the pan-African social science network, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) based in Dakar, Senegal. For Mafeje (1992: 27), 'to achieve the so-called indigenisation of the arts and sciences in Africa, African researchers and intellectuals must find a base within their societies and the region in general – something which some African organisations are seriously attempting.'

V

It is clear from the foregoing sections that the major problem with the sociology in South Africa is that it is characterised by West-centred theories and conceptual frameworks. To the extent that these theories explain South Africa, so it is argued, they only succeed in presenting it from the perspective of western scholars. The problem is that of 'academic dependence' on western categories (paradigms and theories). This problem, it has been argued, has two interrelated features. These are what Mafeje terms, respectively, 'negations' and, following Hountondji, 'extraverted discourses' or 'extraversion' for short. In addition, while western scholars engage in meta-theoretical and theoretical research, African scholars tend to engage in empirical research. This in turn entails global intellectual division of labour in the social sciences. African social scientists, so it is argued, export empirical data to the North and then simply import theories to the continent without due regard to whether such theories fit or not. Interestingly, western scholars tend to conduct studies both of their own countries and of other countries (academic imperialism?) while Third World scholars tend to limit their studies to their countries. Yet in spite of being confined to their locales, Third World scholars have no problem importing theories instead of generating their own.

The above notwithstanding, Mafeje's and Magubane's attempt, along with Adesina and others, is to build a case for a 'home-grown' approach to sociology in South Africa. Correctly, they do so in an attempt to do away with the practice of importing theories from the North and using them uncritically to analyse local data and conditions. The practice of academic dependency, it has been argued, has the unintended consequence of producing graduates who have no critical understanding of their own societies (Adesina 2005). Further, as Mamdani points out, it encourages the idea that Africa has no intellectuals or that it has produced no scholarly work worth reading. The call for endogenous knowledge is especially important in this regard insofar as curriculum and pedagogic issues are concerned. Sociology which is epistemologically grounded in Africa has the potential to inspire graduates to search for alternatives even on matters outside of the academy – especially in a country like South Africa, where the nation is still trying to find itself. Perhaps this is part of what Mafeje (2001c: 6) had in mind when he said: 'South Africa is not only a divided society but a society that is not aware of itself.'

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