

Sociology – A Lot of Critical Thinking and a Few Great Women

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[S]ociology's discursive formation has often demonstrated a relative lack of hierarchy, a somewhat unpoliced character, [and] an inability to resist intellectual invasions... (J. Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies*, 2000)

My Introduction to Sociology course at Rhodes University in the early months of 1978 will always be treasured. The lecturer was the Head of the Department, the late Professor Edward Higgins. To this day I, and I am sure many other former students, would insist that Professor Higgins repeated the same lecture in every class during the course, only altering the order of presentation and changing the emphases as he saw fit or felt. In fact, there seemed to be no logical order at all, as he darted from topic to topic with seeming wild abandon. But, as if under some uncontrollable compulsion, he constantly returned to two phrases that were to become forever etched on my mind and heart. These phrases were 'the sociological imagination', which I later realised he drew from the famous radical American sociologist C. Wright Mills; and 'debunking the conventional wisdom', that is, critically evaluating and undermining the dominant modes of thinking within a given human society. Professor Higgins was certainly no political radical – far from it – yet unintentionally he lit a fire in me that to this day remains alight.

As I continued at Rhodes doing majors in sociology and anthropology and then an Honours degree in sociology in 1981, it became increasingly clear to me that there was something inherently unique and special about sociology; this 'something' that I couldn't readily isolate and capture. But I certainly did not experience this 'something' elsewhere, for instance during my three years of anthropology. In fact, it was only last year after reading a recent work (quoted above) by the well-known sociologist John Urry that I started to come to grips with that 'something'. Urry argues that, relative to sociology, other social science disciplines are subject to 'more extensive forms of discursive normalisation, monitoring and policing'. The comparatively unmonitored character of sociology, and its broad and porous boundaries, makes learning this discipline and working as a sociologist an ongoing (almost unbridled) adventure of critical and passionate reasoning, at least potentially so. This formulation by Urry made my mind wander back to Professor Higgins and my initial taste of sociology, as the sociological imagination and the debunking motif give so much life and vigour to intellectual and discursive pursuits within sociology. Without doubt, sociology as a unique discipline played a big part in my devel-

opment as a critical thinker. Yet, as I argue below, this is not because of Rhodes University but despite Rhodes.

When I was initially invited to deliver a paper at the Critical Tradition Colloquium, I had mixed feelings. I had not returned to South Africa since my deportation in June 1987, after lecturing in the Sociology Department at Rhodes for three and half years. I had lost contact with all Rhodes colleagues and friends nearly fifteen years ago, and I had no profound desire to see them once again nor to set foot in the new South Africa. But, more importantly, I did not feel that I had anything meaningful to contribute to the Colloquium; or, perhaps more correctly, I was perplexed by the very notion of a 'critical tradition'. The term 'tradition' seemed too strong a term for what was probably an uneven and discontinuous and incoherent stream of critical thinking over a period of decades at Rhodes. The term is an historical representation that over-privileges qualities of consistency, direction and ordering in intellectual history. I certainly do not believe that critical reasoning at Rhodes was ever lived as a 'tradition'. I prefer the metaphor of a 'line' of critical thinking, and in particular a jagged and haphazard line written in pencil and not ink. I was also not particularly sure what 'critical' meant, as the term has rather ambiguous theoretical and political connotations. Whatever its connotation, though, the list of speakers planning to attend the Colloquium indicated, at least to me, that the term was being used in a nebulous and 'catch-all' manner. Lastly, I felt that by linking the Colloquium to the centenary celebrations, any history of critical thinking at Rhodes, including my personal history, would be 'captured' and made part of some glorified official Rhodes history. I was not particularly comfortable with this.

I do not believe that there was anything particularly inherent in Rhodes University as a tertiary educational institution under apartheid that generated spontaneously some kind of critical thinking. The space for critical thinking was not built into the structure of Rhodes as a social entity, somehow arising automatically irrespective of prevailing social and political conditions. Of course, it is not uncommon to assume or even assert that social and cultural forms are (unproblematic) natural and universal forms of existence. But the substantive reality of these forms is always socially and historically specific. Thus, like all 'space' in society, space for critical reasoning (including debunking and imagining) cannot be explained in terms of some theory of structural determination let alone determinism. It will also be shown below that a 'conditions are ripe' theory is unable to provide a full account of the space for critical pursuits. This space is socially constructed, constituted, contested, negotiated and managed. In other words, it entails a fair share of human agency and practice, as a comparison of two 'periods' at Rhodes University will show.

My first period at Rhodes (as a student) was during the immediate post-Soweto era. The Black Consciousness Movement and the trade union movement were active but the forms and levels of political mobilisation and

organisation were exceedingly limited. The most public display of protest against apartheid in Grahamstown – at least of the ones that I witnessed – was the solitary women of the Black Sash with their placards standing silently outside the church at the bottom of High Street. On campus it was just as dreary. White Rhodesians as a large minority of the student body seemed to dominate campus life, and there were only a few black students. Each year Rhodes students voted on whether to affiliate to the National Union of South African Students, and each year they voted ‘No’. There were few opportunities for progressive-minded students to work off-campus in any meaningful political fashion. The most we could hope for was to belong to the student society called Delta, which published and distributed on a very irregular basis the *Grahamstown Voice* or *Voice of Rini* intended for a black readership. As Delta we were also engaged, and very naively I must say, in self-help development projects in the nearby Thornhill resettlement area in the Ciskei. The conditions at Rhodes at that time were not particularly ripe or conducive for critical thinking.

After completing my Honours at Rhodes in 1981 I did a MA in Sociology under Frederick Johnstone in Canada in 1982 and 1983 before returning in February 1984 to lecture in sociology. I immediately noticed the far-reaching and dramatic changes that had taken place in on-campus and off-campus politics in South Africa during the time I was away. Community mobilisation and organisation around the banner of the United Democratic Front had arisen, and progressive student activists – mainly black students now – increasingly aligned themselves with the extra-parliamentary movement. The national stay-away and the consumer boycott became the weapons of mass choice, and these activities became prevalent even in Grahamstown. There was a heightened state of political activism on campus with mass meetings and demonstrations that often drew the wrath of an ambivalent university administration under Vice-Chancellor Henderson. Despite state repression, notably in the form of detentions, the political mood on campus was upbeat and euphoric during this, my second stay, at Rhodes. During the mid-1980s it was difficult not to be some kind of critical thinker.

Yet as a student in sociology at Rhodes during the earlier period I received a heavy and regular dose of Marxist theory. For instance, our third year course on Sociology of Development dealt not so much with Parsonian modernisation and growth theories but rather with the underdevelopment, unequal exchange and world-system analyses of radical theorists. As well, courses on South African society centred around the materialist and class analyses of Legassick, Wolpe and Johnstone rather than the liberal ‘convention wisdom’ about race and racial domination. Meanwhile, in the Anthropology Department, there was a disdain and outright antagonism for Marxism amongst the staff, notably the department head. They were less concerned with the contradictions of South African capitalism than with what they saw as the irreconcilable contradictions

of Marxist theory. The point is that there were certain lecturers at Rhodes during my earlier period, in the Sociology Department but also less so in political studies, journalism and history, that sought to be at the forefront of critical analysis under apartheid conditions. They tried to break new theoretical ground, to be at the cutting edge of analytical thinking in the form of Marxism.

Notions of 'structural determination' and 'ripe conditions' do not provide a sufficient basis for understanding the emergence of these critical thinkers. I would suggest, perhaps somewhat un-sociologically, that a theory of greatness is more appropriate, particularly a theory of great women. In particular I think of Jaclyn Cock and Marianne Roux, with their contrasting personalities: the former sombre and the latter nothing short of eccentric. These women stood tall in the face of adversity, intimidation, and literal attacks on their homes, including the dynamite attack on Jacklyn's small abode. I do not know the intellectual history of these women, nor do I know their histories and experiences at Rhodes and who influenced and encouraged them. What I do know is that they sought quite consciously and with great conviction to open up and shape a space for critical reflection at Rhodes, or at least to maintain and broaden the space bequeathed to them by other earlier critical thinkers.

The quotation by Urry at the beginning of this paper suggests that sociology is necessarily a liberating discipline, as if somehow all sociologists are critical thinkers. In fact, Urry goes on to discuss how sociology 'has always skirted close to the edge of the [intellectual] academy (some would say over the edge) because of its proximity to various social movements'. This may be true, but it is not the full story, as the history of conservative, mainstream American sociology during much of the last century demonstrates (if anything, C. Wright Mills was one of the exceptions that proved the rule). Certainly, social movements enliven progressive thinkers and spur them on, as the extra-parliamentary movement did during the waning days of apartheid. But I am sure that a study of the personal biographies of such sociologists as Cock and Roux would show us that even in the face of adversity and isolation, critical thinking is possible. During the perplexing trauma of post-Soweto South Africa, these and other lecturers ensured that the line of critical thinking at Rhodes, always tenuous and frayed, was never completely broken. Thus, when I eagerly returned to Rhodes in 1984 to lecture in the Sociology Department, I was handed not just the keys to my office. I was given something much less tangible but much more precious: what the Colloquium refers to as a critical 'tradition'. I hope that, during my brief tenure as a sociology lecturer, I made a contribution (no matter how small) to ensure the continuation of that 'tradition'.

Nearly twenty years later apartheid South Africa is long gone, and so am I. I no longer live in South Africa nor am I an academic. But I now wonder about my former colleagues at Rhodes and the new generation of social science academics. With the end of apartheid and the intensity of the struggle against it,

have the sociological imagination and the critical passion also gone? Today is the age of global neoliberalism with its sub-regional hegemonic power in the form of contemporary South Africa. Because of this, it is more crucial than ever that academics at Rhodes adopt an unwavering critical approach to society and history, and not be co-opted into the hegemonic discourses of ruling classes and parties. It is important for them to increasingly recognise the significance of the progressive social movements in the country, and to sharpen their analytical insights by staying in close proximity to these movements.

I do not know if critical thinkers, whether in sociology or other social science disciplines, still ply their trade at Rhodes in post-apartheid South Africa. Yet, if the critical ‘tradition’ is alive and well, and I hope that it is, this serves to bear witness and testimony to the efforts of the great women (and a few good men) of the apartheid era.