

## **Presidential Address**

### **Tradition, ambition and imagination: Challenges and choices for post-apartheid sociology**

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*Tradition, ambition and imagination are core concepts in the identity of the sociologist. This paper focuses on these three aspects in evaluating the choices and challenges facing post-apartheid sociology. The achievement of the sociological ambition and the expression of the sociological imagination are considered in terms of Michael Burawoy's (2004) distinction between professional, critical, policy and public sociology. Through this analysis the constraints and challenges facing South African sociology are exposed. It is concluded that South African sociology can best be bolstered through an active engagement with national issues and publics within a global context. In this way we can harness the sociological tradition, ambition and imagination in the creation of a better life for all in South Africa.*

We are celebrating ten years of democracy in South Africa. At a sociological congress devoted to this aim, I find it appropriate to take stock of the achievements of South African sociology during the past ten years, and to consider future challenges and choices. This discussion commenced with my presidential address of 2003 (Uys, 2004), where I focused on the importance of maintaining and strengthening sociology as a discipline in a context of attempts to devalue sociology. These attempts at devaluation focus on dissolving sociology into an amorphous "social science" with the purported goal of promoting the supposedly higher value of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work. I made the point that "social science" would reduce sociology to only one of the faces of post-apartheid sociology, the one of vocational education and commodification of research, or what Michael Burawoy (2004) calls policy sociology. Let me immediately state that I am in favour of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work and am involved in it myself. However, multidisciplinary work can only flourish and grow if founded in the strong disciplinary base of each of the disciplines involved.

After I had presented my address last year, a number of people asked me whether I was really as pessimistic about South African sociology as my address seemed to indicate. I was quite surprised by this question. If I had been pessimistic about sociology I would have absconded to greener pastures long ago. Being positive about the future of South African sociology does not mean, however, that you bury your head in the sand; you should rather face up to the challenges, limitations and struggles in order to ensure the realisation of such a future.

Tradition, ambition and imagination are core concepts in the identity of the sociologist.

I would like to focus on these three aspects in evaluating the choices and challenges facing post-apartheid sociology. The most common questions that any South African sociologist has to deal with on open days at the university are: 'What is sociology' or 'what do you do' or 'is it like social work'? Chris Shilling and Philip Mellor (2001:1) argue that sociology has, from its early beginnings, been defined by the way in which it conceptualises social life. These conceptualisations have focused on understanding the patterns in social behaviour. There was an underlying assumption that 'there exists an ordered social fabric surpassing the impulses, horizons and actions of isolated individuals'. The establishment and growth of the patterns of the social fabric, however, can not be separated from moral issues; they define moral issues as the circumstances that facilitate the development of a feeling of responsibility towards others as well as acting in the interests of others. This is balanced by the individual ability to promote their interests in 'specific social contexts'. For them the essence of sociology is the study of the 'relationship between social life and moral life'. Sociology is aimed at understanding the 'social and moral dimensions of the human condition' through a focus on the social contexts within which 'human experience and destiny' is formed. The sociological ambition is then focused on an attempt to understand and explain the 'complex and changing relationships between *social life* and *moral life*' (Shilling & Mellor, 2001:1).

Why would sociology be interested in moral issues and not delegate them to philosophy and theology? First, in their concern with studying the cultural and historical complexities of social life, sociologists are continually confronted by the impact of people's interpretations and the attribution of meanings in the form of moral frameworks on the social fabric. We are all familiar with Thomas and Zaniecki's dictum that things that are defined as real have very real consequences. Second, the origins of sociology lie in an age characterised by social disorder and disintegration (Shilling & Mellor, 2001:3). The sociological tradition as embodied in the sociological classics focuses primarily on understanding the changes that took place in what is called 'the long 19<sup>th</sup> century'. It provides explanations in terms of Karl Marx's transformation from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production, Emile Durkheim's transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity and Max Weber's transformation from traditional or emotional to rational social action, to name but a few of the most prominent figures in the sociological classics (Ritzer, 2000:6-7).

The focus of the sociological ambition on comprehending the social contexts 'in which individuals confront moral choices' is also expressed in C. Wright Mills's (1973:14-15) conception of the sociological imagination. He distinguishes between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'. He explains that personal troubles are directly related to the individual, his or her immediate relations with others and private values that the individual perceive as being threatened. Personal problems fall within the immediate context of the individual. They are experienced by the individual and are open to being acted upon by the individual.

The sociological imagination enables people to understand their personal troubles as public issues. Public issues go beyond the local contexts and personal experiences of the individual. Many of these contexts and experiences combine or overlap and in this process give rise to the development of the larger social structure of society. Where personal trou-

bles are related to cherished personal values that are threatened, public issues refer to public values held by large groups of people that are perceived as being threatened. Sociologists use their sociological imagination to create an understanding of the personal troubles of individuals within the wider context of the social forces that influence them. Personal troubles are therefore understood as public issues.

How do we achieve the sociological ambition and how do we express the sociological imagination? Consider Michael Burawoy's (2004) distinction between four disciplinary fields in sociology. These distinctions are related to the kind of audience served by the particular type of sociology. The audience can be academic or extra-academic, while the type of knowledge that is produced, can be instrumental or reflexive. Instrumental knowledge focuses on providing the means to an end, while reflexive knowledge concentrates on debating the ends or values for which we strive. Professional and critical sociology serve an academic audience, but the former produces instrumental knowledge, while the latter stimulates reflexive knowledge. Policy and public sociology are geared towards an extra-academic audience, with policy sociology focusing on instrumental knowledge and public sociology on reflexive knowledge. This distinction is reflected in Table 1.

**Table 1** The Disciplinary Field of Sociology

<b>Audience / Knowledge</b>	<b>Academic</b>	<b>Extra-Academic</b>
Instrumental	PROFESSIONAL	POLICY
Reflexive	CRITICAL	PUBLIC

(From Burawoy 2004: 18)

Burawoy (2004) qualifies this scheme as ideal-typical in nature. Particular sociologists could find themselves in more than one camp at the same time. Sociologists can also move between camps during different phases of their careers. He furthermore stresses the interdependent nature of the four sociologies when he argues: 'We might say that the four sociologies form an organic division of labor which produces a vibrant discipline when they are in continual interaction, when each type has a relational autonomy with respect to the others. The flourishing of each is the condition for the flourishing of all' (Burawoy, 2004:18). Unfortunately the four sociologies are also simultaneously in a contradictory relationship, mainly as a result of the types of knowledge they produce, the ways in which their existence is justified and the ways in which they are held accountable.

What are the implications of the distinction between four types of sociology for the sociological ambition and imagination of post-apartheid sociology? Let us first turn to the position of professional sociology.

South African sociologists have long debated the merits and drawbacks of professionalising sociology along the lines of psychology and industrial psychology. 'Professionalised' sociologists would be able to register as professional sociologists and open practices. This extreme form of professionalisation does not seem to have many takers among South African sociologists. However, some developments have taken place with regard to the formation of an association for group practitioners. The University of Port Elizabeth and

the University of the Northwest provide training for facilitators and group practitioners.

The institutional structure within which sociology is being practiced seems to favour the creation of the professional sociologist. University departments and especially university managers are impressed by the trappings of professional sociology: acquiring research funding, publishing articles in so-called international journals (that are often just the national journal of a different country), getting rated by the National Research Foundation (NRF), etc.

But there is also a downside: the straitjacket of fitting our research focus into the pre-determined NRF focus areas in order to access research funding. The pressure to publish in 'international' journals, leads to a lack of support for local journals, especially among the highflyers of professional sociology. With the increasing 'globalisation of South African sociology' international networks are being advantaged to the detriment of the national association. This is clearly demonstrated by the absence of many senior South African sociologists at SASA's annual congresses.

I cannot stress the importance of maintaining a strong professional sociology enough. Professional sociology provides the breeding-ground for the other three types by creating the context in which teaching, theory, knowledge and research can flourish. But this breeding ground becomes less fertile if the focus is on the individualistic rather than the collectivist side of the continuum – focusing exclusively on what is good for me rather than creating a balance between what is good for me and the promotion of the well-being of the South African sociological community as a whole.

The proponents of critical sociology find themselves in an increasingly more difficult position. With the waning of Marxism, the adoption of GEAR to replace the RDP and the Government's distinct lack of appreciation for critical noises, they often have to run for cover. In Burawoy's (2004:25) words: 'The postapartheid state sees itself as representing the general interest and it, therefore, sees sociology as an instrument in national reconstruction. It has little patience for public and critical sociologies that articulate the disparate interests to be found in society. The assault on sociology becomes part of a broader offensive against an active society'.

However, critical sociology is essential for the promotion and maintenance of a vibrant post-apartheid sociological community. Burawoy (2004:17) highlights the role of critical sociology as the conscience of professional sociology, through exposure of its underlying assumptions and values and identification of alternative ground rules. 'Critical sociology discloses the connection between sociology and the world it studies, demystifying claims to pure science, demonstrating the futility of a completely self-referential system of knowledge.'

Both professional and critical sociologies are first and foremost academic sociologies. The following is needed to strengthen them: a strong professional association, opportunities for publication in journals, regular congresses where opportunity should be provided for the discussion of problems, solutions, successes and failures.

While professional and critical sociology are considered respectable occupations within the South African sociological communities, policy sociology finds itself in a more ambivalent position. This is largely due to the perception amongst some that policy sociol-

ogy is selling itself to the highest bidder and does not uphold the important connection between a social and a moral life when they practice their sociology. Policy sociology is seen as primarily a money-making tool rather than as something that advances the knowledge base of the discipline. Policy research is often seen as quick and dirty while academic research is considered substantive and of high quality.

Martin Bulmer (1990:118-119) advocates a three-fold distinction between kinds of research, between 'basic discipline-bound research, strategic research, and tactical research'. He defines it as follows: 'Basic research is oriented to theoretical problems of a disciplinary kind, tactical research to discrete technical problems of a severely practical kind'. Strategic research falls between the two as it encompasses the use of general theories in the process of drawing conclusions with practical implications. Policy sociology has an important contribution to make by promoting strategic rather than tactical research. Only then would the policy sociologist in Burawoy's (2004) words be applying 'expert knowledge to specific social problems'. Some of the research done on HIV/AIDS, the work produced by the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand and the research conducted by Fred Hendricks on land and rural development are examples of policy sociology that comply with the latter requirement.

Policy sociology is to a large extent the public face of sociology in corporate South Africa. At the moment it is not a very prominent face. We have a duty to our students to ensure that this public face is enhanced without sacrificing our parallel duty to academic sociology. Through the involvement of larger numbers of established sociologists in policy sociology we can ensure that the solutions found to particular problems also contribute to the body of sociological knowledge.

Policy sociology's room for movement is constrained when it comes to defining the important problems to be researched. Alvin Gouldner (quoted in Bulmer 1990:127) argues that in policy sociology the main responsibility of the researcher lies with explicating what alternative policies are available rather than insisting that some options are better than others.

It is not the sociologist's task to *recommend* alternative policies and to insist that some administrative options are 'better' than others. But if he (sic) is not a proper catalyst of social change, neither ought a sociologist to serve as a justifier of received patterns, legitimating them with *post factum* omniscience as a product of 'inevitability'.

Fortunately the other types of sociology do not labour under similar constraints. Policy sociology has a conscience, and that is public sociology, which questions 'the givenness of ends and the appropriateness of means' (Burawoy, 2004:17). Public sociology is the public face of sociology in civil society. It is aimed at stimulating open public debate about societal problems, whether by means of the media or through a more grassroots involvement in voluntary organisations, trade unions or social movements. It is the public expression of the sociological imagination.

Burawoy (2004:25) locates the strength of South African sociology as lying in its long history of engagement with public issues. Peter Alexander (2004:4) considers South African sociology the forerunner in 'challenging the dominant, liberal understanding of the relationship between capitalism and apartheid'. He adds that South African sociologists

had 'a considerable impact, both on international debates and the development of political programmes' in the seventies. Although these debates were acrimonious at times, says Alexander, it enabled sociology to position itself firmly amongst 'radical opponents of apartheid, especially students'. This position petered out with the onset of the transition to apartheid in the early nineties. Apart from the general malaise that characterised sociology during this phase, it also lost key individuals who moved into government positions or university management (Alexander, 2004:8).

Burawoy (2004:23) similarly identifies a weakening of public sociology:

Whether the result of the upward mobility of leaders or of the neoliberal offensive, South Africa has witnessed the demobilization of civics and trade unions, rendering sociology increasingly rudderless. Less affected by the assault on academia and situated between the university and civil society, NGOs have often assumed the mantle of public sociology. It has been left to oppositional intellectuals, some of them ex-sociologists such as Ashwin Desai and Trevor Ngwane, to galvanize poor people's movements, building alliances such as the Anti-Privatization Forum.

An important challenge to post-apartheid sociology therefore lies in the reinvigoration of public sociology. In this regard Eddie Webster (2004:31-34) provides some important lessons flowing from his long experience as a public sociologist. These are that we should:

1. recognise that 'society has its own organic intellectuals and, in intervening, [public sociologists] will either reinforce or subvert existing power relations within society';
2. acknowledge the importance of conserving and promoting a strong professional sociology based in a university environment with the all-important academic freedom and autonomy of the researcher held intact;
3. support the influence of the public sociologist in defining societal interests and clarifying societal directions; and
4. accept that public sociology cannot avoid the 'politics of knowledge production and that knowledge production is predominantly organised around disciplines'.

In taking up the challenge to revitalise the four sociologies, South African sociology and in particular SASA, need to take account of the constraints identified by Burawoy (2004:24). A particular constraint is the danger of widening the divide between the historically white and the historically black universities. The comparative advantage of the former lies in professional and policy sociology while the latter's strength is with critical and public sociology. This could result in the historically white universities controlling the market for research funding, a market that is becoming ever smaller, and the historically black universities putting all their energies into vocational education. The end result of this process would be the following:

The best talent is drawn off into privileged sectors, and from there into government agencies and corporations. In effect the South African system of higher education recapitulates the hugely stratified system of the United States but it does so in a resource poor context (Burawoy, 2004:24).

This situation is complicated further by the 'restructuring of the higher education landscape' that is presently underway. A new distinction is being created, that of the privileged institutions, which are only marginally affected by the government's whims and the disad-

vantaged institutions that have to bear the brunt of transformation, financially as well as intellectually.

How do we revitalise the four sociologies? By negotiating successfully within the triangle of co-ordination identified by Burton Clark (in Arts & Becker, 1990:242) of state authority, market and academic oligarchy. Each of these corners of the triangle has strategies associated with them. In Strategy A the dominant actors would be SASA, the NRF and groups of sociologists who operate on a basis of 'voluntary cooperation and quality control'. Here professional sociology reigns supreme and the strategy is closest to what they call 'academic oligarchy'. Strategy B is more closely aligned with state authority and reflects a situation where government agencies have central control. Strategy C relates to the situation where the 'clients' of sociology are in control as is reflected by the name 'consumer sovereignty and disciplinary autonomy'. The market is dominant and policy sociology is in the ascendance.

Wil Arts and Henk Becker (1990:246) argue that the utilisation of these strategies is dependant on an analysis of the political and economic climate within a particular country. They explain it as follows: 'In a country with a favourable economic development, and a liberal political climate, strategy A might be optimal. A harsh economic development and a centralised governmental system may lead to strategy B, with ultimately strategy C as an escape'. I am of the opinion that we should try to maintain a balance between these strategies in order to give free reign to the development and strengthening of all four types of sociologies.

A balance between these strategies would imply the realisation of the importance of focusing our research energies on important public issues in South African society, such as HIV/AIDS, poverty and inequality and democracy (I would like to add crime to the list) without withholding opportunities from researchers to concentrate on less immediate societal problems.

We should do that in a context where we reach out to our colleagues in other African countries as well as other countries in the south through expansion of our research networks and advancing comparative research. In the run up to the 2006 ISA congress in Durban we are ideally placed to achieve this. This will not be an altruistic enterprise. As Alexander (2004) puts it: 'What I am advocating here is a strategy that can allow us to improve our ability to address South African problems, whilst also developing a challenge to northern social theory. For this it is necessary to root ourselves in a critical appreciation of local experience'.

A word of warning is perhaps appropriate here. I have become aware of a tendency towards a South African exceptionalism, to use Mahmoud Mamdani's (1996:27) expression, gaining momentum amongst the South African sociological community. This is an exceptionalism that argues that only South Africans can legitimately act as keynote speakers at SASA congresses when dealing with matters such as the challenges facing South Africa ten years into democracy or the issues related to the revitalisation of South African sociology. I concur with Michael Burawoy (2004:25) that the most effective way of engaging with the 'negative forces of globalization' is not by promoting 'a particularistic sociology that buries its head in local sands'. South African sociology can best be bolstered

through an active engagement with national issues and publics within a global context. In this way we can harness the sociological tradition, ambition and imagination in the creation of a better life for all in South Africa.

In conclusion, lest I be accused of pessimism again, I would like to confirm my firm belief in the following four assumptions as expressed by Arts and Becker (1990:247).

1. Sociology will continue as a specific academic discipline in South Africa.
2. The 'different traditions in sociology will stay with us for a long time and may be for ever'.
3. Sociology can 'co-operate with other disciplines without losing its own identity'.
4. 'There will be a demand for sociological contributions to the solution of social problems in future years'.

It is up to us to ensure that these assumptions remain valid for South African sociology in the future.

I would like to express my sincere regret that I have been prevented from presenting this address in person. I wish you an exciting and stimulating congress.

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