

FOR A SOCIOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

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To even refer to a sociology of transformation today flies against the worldwide dominant cultural mood. This *fin de siècle* phase is proving to be no less introspective, pessimistic and conservative than the last one. There is a morbid selfconsciousness in the air, with the palpable failure, or at least crisis, of both the communist and capitalist ideals of progress. No more are we likely to hear the cry of Victor Hugo in 1855 that: 'Progress is the footsteps of God himself'. There is, instead, a widespread recognition that we are faced with a global crisis of ideologies of the future. This goes far beyond a crisis in the social sciences, or a crisis of political ideologies, to embrace the whole contemporary *Zeitgeist*, cultural climate or social mood. As at the turn of the last century, many now question the whole basis of contemporary civilisation, its values, its ethics and its lack of vision. There is a sense of loss and disorientation, matched by a critique of what has passed as modernisation. The yearning for community, for home, for identity turns often to religious, mythical or other avenues for satisfaction. The re-found cultural values of nostalgia and melancholy also find direct echoes in that previous end of the century, when a crisis of the new capitalist system led many to question it.

Today, however, we do not face a nascent capitalism, but a 'late' capitalism or at least a mature capitalism if we do not want to appear too unrealistic. We have, indeed, reached the historic end of the communist experiment which began in 1917 against all odds, against socialist advice, and, 'against (Marx's) capital' as Gramsci put it (1977). Yet this does not exhaust the possibilities of progressive alternatives to capitalism which has failed miserably to answer the needs of the majority of the people, not least in Africa. We may agree, therefore, that this end of century, which is not an 'end to history' (Fukuyama, 1989), or the 'end of ideologies' (Bell, 1975) as some capitalist propagandists prematurely proclaimed, does present us with a critical moment of interpretative crisis. As I shall argue, we cannot just reject as Parisian fads the fundamental questioning of the modernist project and retreat behind some indigenous 'truth' of our own. It is too easy in countries marked by colonialism to oscillate between an enthusiastic reception of all ideas new and shiny coming from the so-called centres of learning, and an aggressive retreat into traditionalism, and belief in the

efficacy of home-grown indigenous recipes, even if they fly against all the available evidence. In the post-apartheid era, it befits us to take the post-colonial stance, where we know our history, but are not shackled by it.

Today, in the social sciences all, or at least most, categories are carefully preceded by the word 'post' - be it structuralism, marxism, feminism or modernism (Lash, 1991; Turner, 1990). This befits the end of century mood described above, and the deep scepticism surrounding the notion that history entails progress. As Marx once famously said 'all that is solid melts into air', a theme taken up by Berman (1988), as all we once thought was firm now seems to lose its anchors and sails off into a sea of relativism and even nihilism. The almost apocalyptic ring of the word 'post' preceding every term, signals an uncertain global situation and a crisis of perspectives. For some, the post-modernist wave is but the cultural logic of a late capitalism past its time (Jameson, 1984). It can, indeed, be seen as a luxury of a dominant order which, secure in its own position, now wishes to deny to women and the post-colonial people their attempt to affirm a missing subjectivity through a casual swipe of the hand which declares the 'death of the subject'. It is certainly most tempting to simply view post-modernism (and all its associated little postisms) as but the latest effort to assert Euro-American cultural hegemony, as a new brand of universalism to replace the long since discredited modernisation theory, but with an equivalent normative project where certain cultures are deemed 'backward' but are incorporated into the cultural zoos of advanced capitalism to provide some much needed colour.

Tempting though this might be, we would be taking an easy way out if we did this and would be rejecting the lessons of Franz Fanon (1986), Leopold Senghor (1970), and others whose liberation discourse always took the best from the European Enlightenment project. The post-modern movement bids us reject the broad interpretative schemes, or metanarratives, of Marx, Freud and others which seek to provide us with 'the truth' of how everything under the sun is inter-connected. Instead of a 'totalising' account of how things work and are necessarily the way they are, we are directed towards a 'deconstruction' of narratives and the radical contingency of structures and events. Instead of a false coherence we are encouraged to study fragmentation, diversity, discontinuity, fluidity and complexity. There is most certainly a conservative strand in the post-modernist movement of born again free-marketeers and true inheritors to the dark side of Nietzsche. But there is also that positive moment, that radical challenge to the fundamentally misconceived dichotomies of Enlightenment thought, such as those between subject and object, or between rational and irrational. It is not for nothing that two of the most progressive contemporary

discourses, those of feminism and that of post-colonial studies, look to post-modernism to find a pluralist, non-hierarchical approach and a radical politics which rejects the quasi-religious aspects of traditional socialisms (see, respectively, Nicholson (ed), 1990; Ashcroft et al, 1989).

In South Africa, meanwhile, there is still a lingering 'unfashionable' commitment to the possibility of social transformation. We have moved from the 1970s and early-1980s emphasis on revolutionary critique to one on reconstruction as befits the new political dispensation. Yet the very nature and meaning of the term 'transformation' itself is quite unclear as Mala Singh (1992) has pointed out. My feeling is that the idea of transformation emerged as a response to the inadequacy of the binary opposition reform/revolution in the post-1990 conjuncture (for a more grounded exposition of this interpretation, see Saul, 1991). It is at once a goal and a process which is ongoing. It does, of course mean many different things to different people, some usages being more innocent than others. At the moment it is tempting to abandon the term altogether given its current (mis)use, and its almost complete devaluation and stripping of meaning. It seems, sometimes, that transformation and democracy refer simply to the outcome that the user desires. Or, as Lewis Carroll put it in *Alice Through The Looking Glass* - 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean'. This Alice in Wonderland situation is reminiscent of the Latin American military dictatorships call for 'peace' (of the graveyards) and the Goebbels school of 'information', where the proud boast was that the bigger the lie, the more convincing it is. But, in truth, we cannot drop a term for these reasons as all words are a contested terrain for meaning - witness the debates on the true meaning of socialism, feminism, democracy or development.

We all start from different subject positions in understanding a term such as 'transformation'. Its meaning is constructed on a discursive terrain where contradictory articulations play themselves out in a fluid and conflictual process. My own preference is not to use the term 'transformation' as a covert way of talking about socialism in polite social circles so as not to be laughed out of court. South African society can be said to be in 'transformation' because as with the global system, the old is dying while the new has not yet been born, as Gramsci would put it. It is a process which is unfolding and whose outcome is uncertain. It is neither (merely) reformism nor (really) revolution. It defines a terrain of struggle and it articulates a strategy for struggle. It calls for democratising all spheres of social life and an empowerment of those hitherto disempowered. There is, finally, a more specific meaning we could explore, springing from Gramsci's linguistically but not otherwise, insofar as I know, related concept of 'transformismo'. Gramsci's *transformismo* referred to a process whereby the

leading class in society absorbed, translated and articulated the demands of some of the dominated sectors the better to defuse them. In Gramsci's analysis the formation of a new ruling class through transformism 'involved the gradual but continuous absorption ... of the active elements ... from antagonistic groups' in a process whereby 'the absorption of the enemy's *elites* means their decapitation' (1986). Turned on its head the idea of transformism could be a useful supplement for a strategy of transformation led by the national/popular sectors.

To understand the present transformation process in South Africa we need to return briefly to the transition period. We witnessed in the first place a replay of the *uhuru* narrative, complete with new flag and anthem, as the liberation movement came to 'seize the political kingdom'. But was South Africa a simple carbon copy of the African anti-colonial story and myth? Notwithstanding certain similarities we can understand why, in the corridors of power, they preferred in 1990 to examine closely the lessons of the Latin American 'decompression' of military rule and an 'orderly' transition to democracy. A major influence in South Africa was O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986) work on Latin America; my own interpretation (1989) stressed more the role of social movements in the process. The 'Leipzig option' was never really an option in South Africa and the Brazilian military management of transition is a more relevant comparison. This applies to the opposition movement as much as to the regime incidentally (see the useful comparative study by Seidman, 1994). But, if we must beware of binary opposition - *uhuru* versus decompression - we should consider the option of a transformation process 'of a special type'. The protracted negotiations at CODESA, prior to it and beyond it, were a genuine negotiation process with a move beyond a simple zero-sum conception of politics where one person's gain is automatically another person's loss. In the South Africa of 1994, with a positive conception of power, all could benefit, at least potentially, from democracy.

If the Latin American transitions to democracy are anything to go by, South Africa has probably another year or two to go before serious disenchantment sets in. This is inevitable when results do not match expectations, and what is the use saying that these should be kept 'realistic' (by whose standards?). The Latin American countries where disenchantment (*desencanto*) has been deepest is where the economic transformation has failed (see Munck, 1983). Where it has been most successful is where the new political dispensation has been able to generate widespread popular support for shared democratic norms and the overriding principle of governability. In South Africa I believe Mala Singh has correctly identified the problem of 'the enemy within' (although I don't like this phrase!):

opportunism, greed, careerism, sectarianism, apathy, an absent or weakening work ethic, inadequately confronted racism, sexism and homophobia, etc, among the ranks of those who seek radical change will all impact, on the quality and even the possibility of transformation (1992:56).

This diagnosis is based on the experience of transformation at the University of Durban-Westville where early post-1990 hopes for progressive change have faded away. Instead we now witness overt racism, strong-arm tactics, widespread fear, and the absence of any vision of transformation. If these ugly characteristics can rear their heads at one of the country's leading historically black universities with a solid record of struggle we can imagine what a problem they are/will be in the country at large.

The transformation process in South Africa occurs in what we can only call a 'hybrid society', a term our post-modernist theorists would be fond of (Bhabha, 1988). Without (re)entering the somewhat byzantine debates on 'colonialism of special type' and the 'modes of production' controversy we can say that much of South Africa lives in a pre-modern place and time. On the other hand, a vibrant urban labour movement is a key actor in the modern sector/place/time of today's South Africa. And the much noted recent 'McDonaldisation' (see Ritzer, 1983) of South Africa is ample testimony that we are fully part of the global flows now dominated by post-modernist concerns. This uneven spatial and temporal development which we can call hybridity is, of course, combined in the one South Africa with all its multidimensional and complex social problems. Some would have us reduce these social problems to individual afflictions unrelated to social structure, with citizenship being determined at the level of the market place. Instead, I would argue that the ills of our hybrid society can only be attacked through a radical and empowering democratic project. This would recognise the diversity and difference of race, gender, age and region and seek to unify through a 'democratic equivalent' which would act as a highest *common* factor for our diverse interests.

That this hybrid society is in need of transformation is hardly in doubt. South Africa has 16 million of its population with incomes below the official minimum subsistence level, it has a homeless backlog of between 1.5 and 3 million units, and half a million rural households are now landless. It is a society where 300 000 leave school each year without functional literacy or numeracy, and one third of children are underweight due to malnutrition. A survey of African households shows less than 50 percent have an inside running water tap, and less than 40 percent have their own electricity supply or refuse receptacle. When per capita health expenditures on whites is six times that for blacks it is not surprising that

the latter live approximately ten years less on average. Now, it was once sufficient for a radical sociologist to trot out these statistics and s/he would think that was the job done. False consciousness would fall away from people's eyes and radical change would sweep away all inequity. A sociology in transformation needs rather to engage with these stark and brutal inequities in a way which will lead to effective, inevitably piecemeal, change in a positive direction. Here I must say that South Africa's progressive economists are leading the way in a novel, dedicated and sustained effort to create and drive its crucial Reconstruction and Development Programme.

How sociology might intervene and indeed contribute to the transformation process in South Africa is not obvious. I would argue that a sociology for transformation must also itself be in transformation. The discipline appears divided between a committed approach to labour issues in one camp and a technocratic or 'professional' view on the other hand. What appears to have signally failed to grip the sociological imagination here, as elsewhere, are the full implications of the feminist challenge. In its origins, its concerns, its methods and its politics, sociology is a male discipline. The categories of social analysis simply cannot conceptualise the experience of women insofar as she is seen as object of analysis and never subject or actor. Sociological categories from Max Weber to Parsons are conceived on the basis of men's experience and the reality of women is simply left outside the door (see for example, Barrett and Phillips, 1992). A good example is social stratification analysis which classifies people according to formal paid employment and thus makes much of women's work literally invisible. And we cannot just 'add women', shake, and make things better. Sociological theory, is essentially based on the notion of the rational, hence male, actor who is the subject of social action. Women in this highly gendered worldview cannot aspire to the realm of social life, nor constitute knowledge or create reality. Male dominated language and male definitions of reality still set the dominant tone in sociology in much of 'radical' sociology as much as in the 'mainstream'.

Today there is a blossoming of feminist research which is having considerable impact on sociology. Yuval-Davis and Anthias have, for example, helped us see to what extent its control of women is central to national and ethnic processes (1993). Women are seen as 'mothers of the nation', the reproducers of the boundaries of national or ethnic groups and thus the privileged signifiers of national difference. Some critics go so far as to see national, colonial and imperial discourses as allegories of gender contests. Helene Cixous (1981) pursues this line of thought with the equation 'femininity=blackness'. In a disputed, but nevertheless suggestive, analysis she renders apartheid South Africa as metaphor

for the oppression of women. In my own field, the sociology of development, we find writers like Kate Young (1994) and Caroline Moser (1993) bringing women's experience in the developmental process to the fore. Given the widely observed (even by the World Bank!) phenomenon of the 'feminisation of poverty', we cannot still pretend that development impacts on women and men in the same way. In South Africa, the fate of women in the development process will be a key pointer to the success or otherwise of the development process. The 'gendering' of sociology is a serious and difficult process and we must bear in mind Gayatri Spivak's warning that 'There is no virtue in global laundry lists with "women" as a pious item' (1994:104).

Sociology in South Africa needs also to purge itself, once and for all, of its lingering economism. This has been a product, to my mind, of the sustained and necessary but now somewhat exclusivist focus on labour. We need to take seriously the emphasis Amílcar Cabral, for example, placed on culture when he argued for 'a significant leap forward of the culture of the people who are liberating themselves' (1994:65). In the very moment of victory, he argued, the liberation struggle will have failed to achieve its objectives if we do not see the development of a popular culture. Resistance has a crucial cultural component and so does reconstruction. The West in a way 'constructed' the Orient or Africa in and through culture. Now, what Marx called 'the weapons of criticism' are being turned against the West as the intellectuals and peoples of the Third World (re)construct their own counter-hegemonic cultures. The Empire strikes back! This need not be a simple type of cultural nationalism - as Cabral ultimately pointed towards - which would simply reverse the terms of colonialism and keep us trapped in the vice of counter-identification. Against all essentialisms (be it, class, ethnic or gender based) and the desire to return to mythical lost origins we need to recognise the heterogeneity, complexity and contradictory nature of cultural identity, as seen, for example, in the Latin American 'magical realist' novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1970).

When we speak of culture we need today to speak of language and discourse, which have created a true epistemological revolution in the social sciences. Derrida argues that there has been a rupture in the human sciences, a moment when language invaded the universal problematic and everything became discourse. If we take, for example, the category of women's oppression we see to what extent it is constituted in and through language. Derrida's method (although he would not call it that) of 'deconstruction' is, to my mind, a radical practical and political one, going far beyond a clever linguistic intervention to undermine false binary oppositions. Deconstruction displaces the complacency of the historical given and must, therefore, find a role in a sociology of

transformation. As for Foucault, I see him continuing the long socialist struggle against oppression if by other means. Foucault shows how discourse creates subjects as well as objects through his focus on language and his articulation of a theory of discourse. He, furthermore, shows the inextricable link between knowledge and power in all discourses. Much sociological research today - and beyond in a whole range of disciplines - builds on Foucault's claim that power and knowledge are fused in historical practice (see Game and Johnson, 1993). Finally, Foucault's conception of power as diffused throughout society rather than concentrated in say, the state, provides the basis for a transformative political practice far removed from the anarchism he is sometimes accused of.

If we turn now towards a politics of reconstruction of the future, we should examine the new (and not so new) social movements, particularly in South Africa where they played such an important role in the transition to democracy. We are talking about an ideal type here, but the 'new' social movements are usually taken to include the environmental, women's, peace, and human rights movements, as well as, in some conceptions, a diversity of regional, local or community associations (for an introduction, see Foweraker, 1995). They are seen to represent a qualitatively different form of citizen politics and, in embryo, a new societal paradigm. These movements stress their autonomy from party politics and prioritise civil society over the state. In social movement politics, power itself is redefined, no longer seen as something out there ready to be seized but a diffuse and plural quality woven into the very fabric of society. These social movements have arguably helped to create new political space where new identities have been developed, new demands have been articulated and the dividing line between the public and private domains has lost much of its meaning. While the notion that 'the personal is political' derives from the women's movement it has achieved a wider currency among the new social movements. The very notion of social power is, hereby, redefined, the limits of state politics exposed and a challenge laid down to the atomisation and alienation characteristic of contemporary capitalism.

In Latin America the new social movements - which would here include the theology of liberation - played a vital role in undermining and ultimately overthrowing the military dictatorships of the 1970s. Nowhere was this more true than in Argentina which witnessed the most barbaric and widespread repression with the notorious 'disappearance' of thousands of perceived opponents of the regime. The mothers of those 'disappeared' began to mount silent protest marches outside the government buildings with their only symbol a white scarf on their heads. This movement, known as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo reinstalled an ethical dimension into the politics of Argentina, an absolute

demand for the living appearance of their sons and daughters which was not negotiable. As Jean Franco writes:

The activities of the women of the Plaza de Mayo are symptomatic of many grassroots movements in Latin America, from the *Comunidades de base* in Brazil to the popular song movements in Chile and Argentina. These are movements in which the so-called silent sectors of the population are forging politics in ways that no longer subordinate popular culture and women to the traditional view of culture determined by metropolitan discourse (1994:368).

When the silent find their voice they tend to go on using it, embarrassing alike the old regime and the new constitutional regimes which do not appreciate this 'surplus' of democracy.

Finally, a sociology of transformation for the twenty-first century must, of necessity, be global in its approach and its vision, leaving behind the blinkered focus on the nation-state. It is, of course, a truism to note the global interconnectedness of the world in the present era. Whether it is people or goods, technology or entertainment, finance or information, the globe has shrunk considerably since the last *fin de siècle*. The internationalisation of production and the global communications industry in particular, have produced an ever accelerating globalisation. The tensions of this new mobile world has, to some extent, produced the critical analysis of the post-modernist movement. This is not surprising given that the new global economy is fundamentally a cultural economy, where the imagination (*imaginaire*) is a crucial component. The international TV viewer can now appreciate on-the-spot reporting of an imperialist invasion as it happens (Somalia) and admire the pin-point accuracy of modern weaponry not in a *Star Wars* movie but 'in real life' as it were (Iraq). It would seem that the international expansion of the media has not provided the cosy 'global village' we spoke of in the 1960s, but rather a schizophrenic, rootless and profoundly alienating process which calls for a more systematic response than the feeble present attempts to create an alternative international communications network on the margins.

It is significant to note that the new social movements of peace, women and ecology are far more internationalist in their approach than their labour, not to mention national liberation counterparts. These movements which are part of global society as well as being its critics, naturally gravitate towards the slogan of 'Think globally, act locally'. This is undoubtedly correct insofar as the inevitable counterpart of globalisation of the world order is fragmentation at the national level. As Giddens points out 'Local transformation is as much part of globalisation as the lateral extension of social connections across time and

space' (1990:63). What happens in an industrial suburb of Durban is intimately connected with what happens in the money market of Tokyo and the textile sector in Bombay for example. In this new situation, progressive strategies for transformation at the level of the nation state have their inevitable constraints and limits. This does not mean that we stand on the beach singing the 'Internationale' rather like a cargo cult of the Polynesians (an allusion to Worsley, 1968). Instead, we need to explore the mechanisms whereby we can move towards a global mixed economy, an internationalisation of the concept of the welfare state and an international radical democracy where Third World countries can participate equitably in the new global decision-making process.

As an afterword we might wish to consider how we can move beyond deconstruction of cherished myths and conservative structures to a positive reconstruction which can give us some direction. Ironically, perhaps, some inspiration might be gained from chaos theory, now so influential in the natural sciences. If I understand Ilya Prigogine (1985) correctly, he is saying that most of reality is not, as we once thought, orderly, stable and equilibrial but, rather, it is characterised by change, disorder and process. But how do we get 'order out of chaos' as the title of his best-selling book puts it? Well, within systems there are always fluctuations and sometimes these, as a result of positive feedback, create a revolutionary bifurcation moment. The system may disintegrate into chaos or it may, conversely, leap to a higher level of 'order', more complex and differentiated, which requires more energy to sustain it. That order and organisation can arise spontaneously as it were out of disorder and chaos through a process of self-organisation is, indeed, a revolutionary idea and one of obvious relevance to the present situation in South Africa and of the social sciences in particular.

In the new 'post-modern' science, nature is treated as organic, its own evolution as discontinuous and the boundaries between disciplines as less relevant. It no longer seeks to describe the world around it through a single, centralised and unifying narrative. A social version of 'chaos' theory would emphasise not simple and stable systems but, rather, their complexity and dynamics. All the standard sociological interrogations of a society such as South Africa would be asked in a different manner. In this way we might go beyond the traditional issues of the human sciences such as causality, contingency and prediction. As Appadurai, a cultural anthropologist, puts it, we should, in a world of disjunctive global flows, be asking our questions 'in a way that relies on images of flow and uncertainty, hence "chaos", rather than on older images of order, stability and systemacity' (1994:33).

In a volatile world, where it does appear that 'all that is solid melts into air', a genuine sociology of transformation or transformative sociology has an important and positive role to play. With South Africa becoming a huge laboratory of transformation there is a need for a sociology which is relevant and focused on the key issues of the day. Unlike the situation in more sedimented societies the possibilities for transformation in South Africa are open. Sociology was born out of the crisis of the old order in Europe and the challenges posed by the French and the Industrial revolutions. A new sociology of transformation can be born out of the crisis of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the challenges posed by the need for democratic development. This will, undoubtedly, be a collective endeavour. It will necessitate a broad, non-dogmatic, vision of social change and an ability to surmount old conflicts and entrenched positions.

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