

Preface

This special issue of *Transformation* contains some of the presentations delivered at a colloquium held in Johannesburg on 27 and 28 June 2009 to mark the formal retirement of Professor Edward Webster after 33 years at the University of the Witwatersrand. The colloquium was organised by the Society, Work and Development Institute, which developed from the Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP) which he founded 25 years ago.

The colloquium brought together some of Professor Webster's South African and international colleagues, as well as former students, to reflect on his and SWOP's research agenda which under Eddie reflected a deep and extensive attempt to understand South African labour in a global context.

A total of 330 invitations were extended and close to 200 people attended the colloquium over the course of the two days. The scholar participants hailed from South Africa and from Canada, Australia, the United States of America, England, India and Zimbabwe. In addition, students, media practitioners, trade unionists and officials from such bodies as the Presidency and the Development Bank of Southern Africa, as well as members of the public, attended. It was by common consent a lively and intellectually stimulating event.

The theme of the gathering was 'Hard Labour: sociology and the transformation of working life' and began with a presentation by Professor Michael Burawoy. That address leads off this special edition by arguing that the work of Webster has gone beyond C Wright Mills' conception of a sociological imagination to include a political imagination, and that what is needed is a sociology for the Global South. The articles that follow demonstrate both of these arguments. They have been grouped around three over-arching themes: Public Sociology (Burawoy, Lambert, Maree, Metcalfe and Cock); Inequality (Seidman and Fakier); Racism and Popular Struggles (Von Holdt, Moodie, Phakathi, and Munck).

In the first – Public Sociology – Lambert describes how a group of sociologists, led by the late Rick Turner, stepped outside the classroom and started to engage with the struggles of working people in Durban and how this project eventually took a global turn through engagement in the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) and the new labour internationalism. Maree describes the emergence of an outlet

for this academic activism through the *South African Labour Bulletin* (SALB), while Metcalfe and Cock argue that SWOP's public sociology has gone beyond the ivory-tower approach of Mills to a direct engagement with the struggles within the university over what is taught, how and to whom.

In themes two and three, the articles grapple with the question posed by Burawoy on the need to develop a sociology of the Global South and in them two themes are identified, namely, those of inequality, and popular struggles and racism. Within the context of the inequality theme, Seidman shows how Brazil is beginning to reduce poverty through a left of centre government judiciously using progressive policy instruments – a social democracy emerging in the periphery? Fakier's focus on the central institution of apartheid exploitation – migrant labour – shows how the class character of female migrants reproduces inequality in the households, and social reproduction more generally.

The third theme describes and analyses the nature of resistance in the South. Von Holdt examines its collective but violent nature and how this violence persists in contemporary strikes, Moodie looks at how collective action takes on a social-movement character on the mines, Phakathi examines the racism inherent in the gold-mining labour process and how it shapes working life, while finally Munck points to some possible avenues for further research on globalisation, labour and development from a subaltern perspective.

This special edition ends with the keynote address by Eddie Webster entitled “‘There shall be work and security for all’: utopian thinking or a necessity for social cohesion and development’. This returns to the question of a sociology of the Global South because of the persistence of unemployment and insecurity and the need for more far-reaching policy interventions to deal with the disruption of society by the market fundamentalism and then looks at the possibilities of a Polanyian type counter movement in countries such as India and South Africa. This is how Webster is framing the next phase of his ‘intellectual journey’. It feeds into Burawoy's 2008 article in *Work and Occupations* where he speaks of Third-Wave Sociology: from Marx to Polanyi:

The rupture with industrial sociology and the inception of critical labor studies coincides with the rise of a new period of capitalism, marked by a wave of marketization that begins to assert itself with the recession of 1973-1974. The winds of global competition from Asia and Europe, followed by the assault from the state, stripped labor of its defences,

whether they be security against unemployment, access to favourable labor relations boards, or organizational strength. If Marxian ideas of exploitation carried the analysis of the early onslaught from industrial capital, it is Polanyian ideas of resistance that capture the character of the New Labor Movement. The focus is on the defenceless laborer and the inability to secure social reproduction as much as exploitation in the workplace. (Burawoy 2008:383-4)

Burawoy then footnotes Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout (2007) and refers to their ‘fascinating comparative analysis of insecurity in Australia, South Africa and South Korea’. He ends his contribution by citing their *Grounding Globalisation: labour in the age of insecurity* (2008) as an important example of the new global labour studies.

To appreciate the extent of Edward Webster’s scholarly contribution this special issue of *Transformation* should be read in conjunction with a compilation of 26 papers written by some of his former students in a publication edited by Sarah Mosoetsa titled, *Public Classrooms: essays in honour of Professor Edward Webster* which was presented to Webster at the colloquium. Copies are available from Shameen Govender, SWOP, PO Wits, 2050.

References

- Burawoy, M (2008) ‘The public turn: from labour process to labour movement’, *Work and Occupations* 35.
- Webster, E, R Lambert and A Bezuidenhout (2008) *Grounding Globalisation: labour in the age of insecurity*. London: Blackwell.

Jacklyn Cock

(convenor of the organising committee of Khayaat Fakier, Andries Bezuidenhout, Alan Fine, Anthea Metcalfe, and Sarah Mosoetsa)