

Article

Oppositional intellectualism as reflection, not rejection, of power: Wits Sociology, 1975-1989

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Intellectuals and power: explaining South African sociologists' critique of apartheid

The history of sociology in South Africa and its relationship to apartheid is turbulent and complex. At first, intellectuals were intimately related to power, as sociologists were in direct conversation with the administrative and political interests of the recurring racially repressive regimes. Sociologists assisted in segregationism's 'native administration' and 'social planning', and then became key apartheid ideologues (Jubber 1983, Groenewald 1991). Hendrik F Verwoerd, South African prime minister and the widely-recognised architect of apartheid, was South Africa's first Professor of Sociology, concerned with proactively planning and organising social relations. Geoffrey Cronjé, the 'mind of apartheid' (Coetzee 1991) was also a prominent Professor of Sociology, who effectively provided 'the first comprehensive fundamental exposition of the apartheid idea' (Rhodie and Venter 1960:174). Sociologists were key members of the *Suid-Afrikaanse Bond vir RasseStudies*, and the Afrikaner *Broederbond*, which were some of the pivotal institutions in which the apartheid concept was developed, refined, and popularised (Ally, Mooney, and Stewart 2003). Sociologists were therefore at the centre of attempts to theorise and activate the racial, cultural, and economic ideas that birthed the project of apartheid.

By the 1970s, however, sociologists' relationship to the political and social order changed dramatically. Ideological intellectualism was overtaken and replaced by a dramatically different, oppositional Marxist sociology. Harold Wolpe (1972), Martin Legassick (1974), and other historians launched a revolutionary critique of apartheid through a thorough revisionist

history of South Africa (see also Johnstone 1976; Trapido 1971). They theorised and demonstrated racial discrimination in South Africa to be rooted in the structural requirements of its capitalist economy. An entire generation of South African scholars in history, political studies, anthropology, and sociology, embraced the Marxism introduced to them by these revisionist scholars, and began systematic critiques of apartheid, showing its genesis to be located in the class interests of Afrikaner and English capitalists, and consequently advocating a class revolution to restore justice to South African society.

This radical Marxist social science overtook the existing sociologies at English-medium universities, reconstructing the relationship between sociologists and the apartheid state. Forging direct and revolutionary links with the emerging social movements, sociologists became agents of revolutionary change. The vibrant and engaged ‘public sociology’ that resulted has garnered much valorising attention lately, inspiring Burawoy to a reflexive re-engagement with mainstream sociological practice in the United States (Burawoy 2004).

While Burawoy documents and celebrates this ‘public sociology’ of the 1980s, the genesis of the ‘critical sociology’ of the 1970s that laid the basis for it, is not analysed.¹ How did this oppositional intellectualism emerge out of a discipline whose historical role was to service the interests of the apartheid state; and what explains its content and spread? This paper argues that the general theoretical literature on intellectuals and power, and the specific literature that explores that relationship in South Africa both assume that oppositional intellectualism is the rejection of power, made possible by freedom from its constraints. By reconceptualising power, and re-examining the case of the shift to a Marxist oppositional sociology in the 1970s in South Africa, through an analysis of the Sociology Department at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), this paper argues that the radical intellectualism of the 1970s was a reflection of power, not the rejection of it.

Explaining oppositional intellectualism

In the long tradition of scholarship exploring the relationship between intellectuals and power, intellectuals are argued to either exist in a relationship of ‘ideological subservience’ or ‘moralistic resistance’ to state authority.

Some scholars have understood oppositional intellectualism as the natural role, function, and tendency of intellectuals. Intellectuals have been theorised

as engaged in a ‘disinterested love and search for truth and justice’ (Benda 1969:19), to be ‘disturbers of the peace’ (Havel 1985), those who ‘speak truth to power’ (Said 1994), those in the ‘humble and courageous service of truth’ (Silone 1960:261), etc. ‘Much of the analytic literature dealing with intellectuals’, conclude Lipset and Basu, has emphasised the ‘inherent antipathy between intellectuals and the powers throughout modern history’ (1976:112). This tradition understands oppositional intellectualism as ‘moralistic resistance’ – where antagonism to structures of power issues from some naturally normative orientation or moralistic impulse that is the de facto relationship between intellectuals and power.

But, an opposing tradition suggests that intellectuals, far from exercising their critical independence from the state, actually exist in a relationship of ‘ideological subservience’ to structures of authority. Marx pronounced that intellectuals are mainly allies or members of the ruling elite, while Weber too identified intellectuals as the group ‘predestined’ to ally with those who control the polity (Weber 1968). Mills continued this line of thought arguing that ‘there is a close connection between the prestige of culture and the prestige of power’ (Gerth and Mills 1946:448), and Shils has argued that there is always a mutual interdependence between the intellectuals and the powerful: ‘The powerful require the intellectual and the intellectual requires and constantly finds himself beguiled by the powerful’ (1972:22). In one of the more intriguing explanations of this seeming tendency for intellectuals to ally with the powerful, Bauman argues that there is

a mutually gratifying love affair between the professors and their employer, the state. They need each other: power without knowledge is headless, knowledge without power is toothless...Far from being natural enemies of power (a dominant, high-handed, intolerant power), the educated classes need power to perform their duty as defined by the nature of their competence and social function. (Bauman 1987:83-84, 91)

Karabel, therefore, importantly concludes that:

what needs to be explained is less why intellectuals reach accommodations with the status quo than what it is that causes some of them, at certain historical moments, to rebel. (1996:209; emphasis added)

This paper recognises the necessity of explaining oppositional intellectualism. But, not because ideological tutelage is the norm, and oppositional intellectualism the aberration to be explained. Rather, it is to

reject the flawed logic that underpins both approaches to intellectuals and power, which sees oppositional intellectualism as the rejection of power – as the ability of intellectuals to free themselves from the constraints that structures of power exercise to either force them (according to the ‘moralistic resistance’ strand) or keep them (according to Karabel and the ‘ideological subservience’ strand) allied to authority.

Without fail, the lack of an oppositional intellectualism during the early phases of apartheid is explained as a product of such power, and the constraints it imposed on critical thought. Webster argues that South African sociology did not produce a critique of the state under apartheid because ‘authoritarian regimes of whatever kind generally suppress or severely restrict the scope of sociological thought and research’ (Webster 1985:48). ‘The authoritarian nature of the society’ in the South African case, suggested Hare and Savage, leads to ‘restraints on freedom of social research in South Africa’ (1979:347). They suggest that ‘[c]umulatively, these restrictions make social research into “sensitive” areas of the society an art both hazardous and difficult’ (1979:347). Taylor highlights the ‘restraints on doing *critical* research’ (1988:11) more specifically. The brutality of the regime, and its absolute intolerance for any potential threat to its legitimacy, exposed oppositional intellectuals in particular, it is argued, to the wrath of the apartheid state (Savage 1981, Welsh 1981).

There was police surveillance, mail and telephone tampering, and confiscation of research materials (Savage 1981, Welsh 1981). There were bannings, detentions, arrests, and trials, and many academics were forced into exile (see Hirson 1979). The most egregious and devastating repression by the state was the government-sponsored assassinations of intellectuals they viewed as a threat: Richard Turner was mysteriously shot, David Webster was assassinated, and Ruth First was killed in Maputo. Black researchers, such as Fatima Meer and Herbert Vilakazi, amongst others, were harassed by the government for their criticisms of apartheid. Meer was banned, and Vilakazi deported, specifically for teaching Marxism at the University of Transkei. The apartheid state was therefore particularly intolerant of Marxism.

The failure of a critical sociology in the 1950s and 1960s is therefore attributed to state repression and constraints, and in its corollary, the development of an oppositional sociology, is attributed to the loosening of these and other constraints, as well as the removal of other, more broadly inhibitory forces that had prevented its emergence prior to the 1970s. In so

doing, this literature ends up reproducing the logic that oppositional intellectualism is made possible by freedom from structures of authority, and the rejection of power. Summarising the sentiment, Wolpe argued that radical opposition to a government and its policies issues from 'resistance to the state's attempts to limit fundamental and critical research' (1985:73).

For Adam, the waning cohesion of Afrikanerdom by the 1970s forced the state to focus exclusively on securing Afrikaner survival, making anything that threatened the 'traditional morale of the *Volk*...far more dangerous to a conformist group existence than political criticism' (Adam 1981:116-7). He argues that the 'repressive tolerance' towards English-speaking intellectuals that this gave rise to widened 'the scope of freedom for dissenting intellectuals compared to the past' (Adam 1981:116).

Jubber (1983), too, in the first direct attempt to explain the development of an oppositional Marxist sociology, argues that the Marxist 'Kuhnian revolution' can only be explained by the relaxation during the 1970s of constraints to an oppositional intellectualism. For Jubber, what was defining was the removal, at that time, of various factors that had 'conspired to keep Marxism out of the English language social sciences' throughout the preceding decades (1983:59). Various forces, he argued, 'served to suppress Marxist sociology in the English-speaking world', and when these were relaxed by the 1970s, space was created for intellectuals to pursue their assumed natural inclination to resist power (1983:60). Jubber concludes that:

[i]n the case of white English-speaking sociologists, it is their comfortable and protected context which frees their thought from a rigid determination by material factors. (1983:59)

In other words, white, English-speaking intellectuals who articulated an oppositional sociology did so because they somehow managed to escape a 'rigid determination' by power.

Webster is more willing to concede a social determination of ideas in his explanation of the rise of a 'critical sociology', arguing that a 'number of separate but dialectically related factors came together in the late 1960s and early 1970s to explain this shift' (1985:45). But, Webster still argues that '[t]he early apartheid state had all but removed Marxism from South African social science in the 1950s and 1960s' (1985:45), and the relaxation of the state by the 1970s explains the development of a 'critical sociology'.

Re-explaining oppositional intellectualism

Both the general literature on intellectuals and power, and the specific literature that seeks to explain the critical sociology of 1970s South Africa, share a specific theorisation of power that produces an unsatisfying explanation of oppositional intellectualism. The rise of an oppositional intellectualism in South African sociology is pervasively explained as a product of the freedom from state repression and constraints: that Marxism emerged in the 1970s out of the removal of constraints on intellectuals to pursue a critical sociology, and as an expression of their rejection of power. This explanation is undergirded by a theory of power, that once reconceptualised, allows for a greater appreciation of the extent to which the oppositional sociology at Wits was a reflection of power, rather than a rejection of it.

First, for the existing literature, power is exclusively imbued in the state and in its repressive capacities. The state is seen as the producer of knowledge in the first instance, either by directly sponsoring it as in the 'ideological subservience' strand, or inspiring a direct critique as in the 'moralistic resistance' strand. Any intellectualism opposed to the state is therefore, by necessity (in both instances), intellectualism disconnected from power and from repression. Second, and relatedly, in functionalist efforts to specify the mechanisms through which state power installs effects on the content of knowledge, existing explanations equate power with instrumental 'interests'. That is, intellectualism that reflects power is seen as that which functions as 'instruments of particular political and economic interests' (Erwin 1992:4). As a result, intellectualism that is defined by opposition to the state is immediately recognised as challenging instrumental interests and is therefore seen as the rejection of power, and in order to connect knowledge to power, it is essential to demonstrate its instrumentality for particular interests.

This paper deploys a more nuanced conception of power to re-examine the development of a critical sociology in 1970s South Africa. First, power is liberated from an exclusive association with the state and recognised as operative throughout the social space, amongst all actors who seek to make political claims, and redefine political practice. Intellectualism that defines itself in opposition to the state can therefore still be implicated in power, if it is involved in processes of political claims-making by other actors in the society at large. Second, functionalist requirements for the specification of the exact mechanisms through which such diffused power translates into the

content of ideas is abandoned in favour of a more processual understanding of the relationship between power and the ideas it constructs. Power is therefore understood as providing a conditioning for ideas that, while not instrumentally connected to specific political interests, implicates the development of those ideas in a context shaped by a more broadly circulating politics of the time. The resulting conception of power, disembedded from the state and from instrumentalism, applied to the history of the Department of Sociology at Wits University, suggests the ways in which the oppositional intellectualism of the time was not a product of a ‘freedom from social determination’, and power, but instead was deeply implicated in the emerging politics of race and class at the time.

Sociology at Wits

Wits Sociology is an important site for analysis since it was central to the Marxist revolution in the discipline in South Africa. The department had been dominated for the better part of a decade by a standard variant of the intellectual and political project of ‘liberalism’ that had found an institutional home at white English-medium universities, in opposition to the ideological intellectualism at Afrikaans universities. In 1975, however, an oppositional Marxist sociology suddenly took over teaching and research. Dunbar Moodie,² the Head of Department from 1975, recruited a generation of radical Marxist intellectuals and sought to establish an oppositional, critical sociology based on a hermeneutic, interpretive social science committed to demonstrating the inequities of apartheid (Moodie 1976). Using new theoretical and methodological resources, this oppositional intellectualism claimed to uncover the real basis for apartheid in the interests of capital, and thereby launched a thorough critique of the apartheid regime.

The liberalism that had dominated the department for the preceding decade, remained for a short time during the take-over, but it atrophied in significance and numbers before the decade was over. Within a few short years, Wits Sociology witnessed a radical overhaul of its theoretical and political orientation, as the department secured sufficient resources to expand the teaching staff, support academics’ research, and further develop the department’s infrastructure (Interview, October 20 1998). Student enrollments kept soaring (Wits Mark Summaries, 1970-1980), teaching and research expanded considerably (Wits Calendar, 1970-1980), and the department (together with Sociology at Natal) began to develop a reputation as being central to the Marxist revolution sweeping through the English-medium universities (Jubber 1983). Vigne argues that, for this ‘new, radical

generation...Marxism was the new religion and the Freedom Charter holy writ' (1997:227).

As the influence of this emerging 'critical sociology' spread widely beyond the academy, it became the basis for the expression of a 'public sociology' by the 1980s. The idea that apartheid was really a form of capitalist exploitation, defended in racial terms, led many Marxist intellectuals associated with the department to ally with, and struggle alongside, the emerging labour and social movements. This deep commitment to radical social change was the expression of what Burawoy (2004) calls 'liberation sociology'. The phrase is consistent with the explanations of this shift, reflecting a moralistic rejection of and freedom from power. But, the content of this class-based critique of apartheid was not disconnected from the characteristics of its producers – white, English-speaking intellectuals. To revise the dominant explanation for the rise of a Marxist oppositional intellectualism, it is necessary to recognise that what Marxism's class analysis offered this group of intellectuals was not just a powerful theoretical lens to explain apartheid, but a powerful political tool for white intellectuals to deal more comfortably with questions of race.

The race-class reconstruction

South African sociology during apartheid reflected the imprint of the state's racialised politics, as the discipline had at least three different institutional personas. Afrikaans-medium, English-medium, and historically Black universities each had distinct disciplinary histories. Marked by internal debates and divisions, the result was a rich history of different versions of sociological practice that were configured very differently in relation to the state, both between and within institutional contexts, as well as over time (see Webster et al 2000).

This institutional differentiation was to provide the necessary organisational framework for the dual transition in the discipline by the 1970s. First, the dominance of the ideological intellectualism practiced at Afrikaans-medium universities was displaced by a sociology at English-medium universities that had begun more firmly to voice itself. Second, within English-medium universities, the intellectual priority of Marxism was displacing the existing tradition of liberalism.

Liberalism, which argued that apartheid was caused by pathological racial attitudes that would be proven dysfunctional with the growth of capitalism and the extension of modernisation, dominated white English-medium sociology prior to the 1970s (O'Dowd 1974, Horwitz 1967).

Marxism refuted the liberal claim that industrial capitalism would erode the apartheid system in South Africa, by arguing that race was only an ideological justification for the class project of apartheid. ‘Marxism has thus penetrated the “appearance” of social reality in which race is thought to be the primary social cleavage and has shown that class is the fundamental social cleavage’, claims a commentator (Sekgobela 1994:47). The result was that race was theorised from the 1970s in a different way – the liberal understanding of race as attitudes was replaced by a structural understanding of race that firmly enmeshed it with the materialism of class. As a commentator argued, this led to a curious paradox:

In a country such as South Africa with its strong tensions between the various social groups, one would have expected sociology to have been directed largely to the study of race relations. (Pauw 1958:1095)

But, from the mid-1970s, class analysis dominated, and in ‘the crucial confrontation between Marxist and liberal social thought’, the analytic primacy of race was reformulated (Archibald mimeo, Wits Sociology, August 9, 1978).

This was not coincidental. An analysis of the types of discourses at Wits Sociology demonstrates that far from being the disinterested search for truth, the shift towards a Marxist oppositional intellectualism was as much about the politics of race. It re-configured the theorised relationship between race and class in a way that gave white English-speaking intellectuals a comfortable discourse with which to interrogate structures of power that were beginning to exclude them. The embrace of a Marxist sociology, actively critical of apartheid, can be shown, at the level of the department, to be a reflection of power.³

Explaining Marxist oppositional intellectualism at Wits Sociology, 1975-1989

The Marxist revolution revolved squarely around the intellectual and political reconfiguration of the race-class debate. That reconfiguration was implicated in the complex politics surrounding both race and class at the time.

The reformulation of race issued primarily from racial identity politics, as white English-speaking intellectuals articulated a Marxist oppositional intellectualism as a critique of liberalism, and as a response to the racial politics inspired by Black Consciousness. Both movements, liberalism and Black Consciousness, were critically organised around antagonistic

conceptions of 'race', making them each a target of the other's political and intellectual manifestos. Positioned crucially at the confluence between these contradictory discourses of race in the early 1970s, a generation of white English-speaking intellectuals was forced to carve out a space of intellectual and political relevance. On the political and intellectual battlefield of the white student movement and in the academy, a response was articulated that reformulated the analytic of race, favoring a class-mediated approach instead.

The acceptance of class was conditioned by the availability of an alternative non-racial discourse through the emerging labour movement. Once again a product of the politics of social movements, labour provided white English-speaking intellectuals a language for intellectual and political engagement as they developed a close relationship with labour, through confrontations between the black and white student movements. It was this combination of processes that solidified a critique of apartheid based on Marxism amongst this group of intellectuals. The content of the oppositional intellectualism they embraced was therefore not simply the product of a removal of constraint and a rejection of power. Instead, intellectuals resisted structures of authority as an expression of racial power struggles in the context of late apartheid.⁴

The triangle of racial politics and intellectualism: Liberalism, Black Consciousness, and Marxism

Liberalism has a long history that is recounted well by others (van den Berghe 1979, Rich 1993, Kane-Berman 1994, Wentzel 1995, Husemeyer 1997). As a political and intellectual movement, liberalism went through many mutations attendant to changes in the structure of the state, and consequently, the place white English-speaking intellectuals envisioned for themselves in relation to it. By the 1960s, however, liberal political economy was fairly developed and had articulated a critique of the state that revolved around the apparent irrationality of racial prejudice, and its incompatibility with the liberalising and democratising imperatives of the capitalist market. Within sociology, liberalism had defined itself in opposition to both Afrikaans sociology, and apartheid. It was dominated by concerns to establish and promote the racial and group integration they imagined would promote more harmonious relations between the races, and with it, the dismantling of apartheid. Hamish Dickie-Clark, and Henry Lever were liberalism's main representatives at Wits Sociology.

Lever, head of department at the time, in particular, became the spokesperson for liberalism's obsessions with a particular configuration of race as an analytic and political tool. Lever noted that 'South African sociologists have made very few concerted efforts to develop the study of race relations' and concluded that '[o]ne can only marvel at the workshyness of South African sociologists in the field of race relations' (1975:31). Despite Lever's lamentations, however, liberalism was crucially defined by a focus on race and inter-group relations and on the social-psychological dimensions of conflict in South Africa.

O'Dowd (1974) and Horwitz (1967) had theorised the relationship between racial attitudes and capitalist development quite extensively. Within social science, van den Berghe (1965) and Kuper (1974) had both engaged race, albeit the subjective, ideological articulations of apartheid, focusing on prejudice and nationalism. And, in sociology, a relatively comprehensive list of sociological writings up to 1975 revealed that the largest section was 'race and ethnic group relations' (*Bibliography of South African Sociology* 1978). But, the study of race was devoted to the 'comparative application of social distance scales, marginality perspectives, and other empirical studies of ethnocentrism and authoritarianism' (Adam 1981:121). It was the critique of *this* theoretical conceptualisation of race, and understanding of its role in apartheid and resistance politics, which inspired a defining set of politics in the 1970s.

It provided the first motivation for the development of an oppositional sociology that reformulated the relationship between race and class. This was precipitated in the late 1960s by the first of many crises that would destabilise liberalism. Marked by internal and external pressure in the 1960s, it was in 1968 that political liberalism 'received its death blow' (Robertson 1971:230). Internal state politics led to the *Prohibition of Improper Interference Act* which made interracial political activity illegal. The Liberal Party, which had been a key political space for liberalism was disbanded, while the activities of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), a critical institution in mobilising liberalism's intellectual resources, had to be refocused. This inspired a dramatic shift in South Africa's political and intellectual landscape, as Rich documents:

The early 1970s can in this regard be seen as a watershed period in which the ethnic cohesion of the English-speaking intellectual community, fostered as it had been throughout the post-war period by organizations like the SAIRR and the Liberal Party, began to fall apart.

New avenues for political and intellectual engagement began to emerge over the following years as the domestic political crisis continued to mount. (1993:118)

The attack on liberalism by the state created space for the articulation of a different politics by white English-speaking intellectuals. Many young sociologists who had been introduced to Marxist theory at foreign (particularly British) universities returned to South Africa in the early 1970s, concerned with the ethical and moral problematics of apartheid, to a context in which the competing discourse for white oppositional intellectual and political engagement – liberalism – was being eroded. A former member of staff who returned to the department in the early 1970s commented:

When we returned, liberalism was weak, and...new positions were being defined...It was the politics of the time. (interview, July 14, 2001)

The weakening of liberalism, a product of various political processes at the time, therefore conditioned the possibilities for the expression of a radical intellectualism and politics. Douglas notes:

At the English universities, which for years provided the space for a thriving liberal tradition, the government's illiberal attack, although serious, failed to dislodge liberalism in any fundamental way. Instead, the main assault on liberalism at the English campuses comes from the left. (1993:12)

So began the reconstruction of race in South African sociology and the birth of an oppositional intellectualism. It was to be cemented by the dramatic entry of Black Consciousness onto the political landscape, which by refiguring the analytic and politics of race, not only further undermined liberalism, but with it, secured the shift to Marxism.

It began in 1968 when Steve Biko and Barney Pitso (two African students) walked out of a National Union of South African Students (NUSAS)⁵ meeting and founded the South African Students Organization (SASO), a political movement based on the philosophy of Black Consciousness. Biko said at the meeting: 'Blacks are beginning to realise the need to rally around the cause of their differing – their black skin – and to ignore the false promises that come from the white world' (*Wits Student*, November 4, 1984). SASO, together with the Black People's Convention and the Black Community Programmes, formed the Black Consciousness Movement, and changed the landscape of South African politics. Its overt

concern with the revival and reconceptualisation of race fired the consciousness of a range of social groupings, from youth to women (Gerhart 1978, Lodge 1983, Pityana et al 1991). Hailed as ‘the single most important development in the internal politics of South Africa in the period 1967-76’ (Nolutshungu 1982:147), it marked the beginning of an intellectual and political refashioning that would, by the end of the following decade, revolutionise not just South African society, but, in a paradoxical way, also South African sociology.

Black Consciousness launched an unforgiving attack on liberalism. Themba Sono, SASO President in 1971, put it poetically:

Black Consciousness at its birth came out kicking and lashing furiously at liberals and liberalism, the breast from which it suckled its mother’s milk. (1993:7)

By directly challenging liberalism’s conceptualisation of the political role of white intellectuals and activists, Black Consciousness became the catalyst for accelerating a series of internal re-configurations of the white, English-speaking community of intellectuals.

It was no coincidence that Black Consciousness was borne directly out of frustrations with the liberal-dominated NUSAS – the representative organisation for white English-speaking student activists. It was a reflection of the complex politics that had always animated the relationships between black and white oppositions to apartheid, and the extent to which this set of politics found expression within the university and amongst students and intellectuals. Given its location, and content, it seemed inevitable that the politics of race it inspired would shape the emerging oppositional intellectualism.

Immediately, Black Consciousness was a direct threat to English intellectuals because it made race ‘the center of political discourse and Blacks the only legitimate spokespersons for race’ (Rich 1989). ‘The emergence of Black Consciousness unleashed a torrent of contradictory emotions and passions in the white society,’ observes Sono (1993:66). Liberals were ‘stunned and shocked’ (Sono 1993:66), and their reaction was one of defensive engagement. Black Consciousness was seen to be advocating ‘reverse racism’ and it was challenged on that basis (see *Reality* 1972). The attack by white liberals issued from the sense of isolation the Black Consciousness Movement had generated amongst them:

Excluded from power by the racist white majority, and excluded from the camp of the underdogs by blacks bent on going it alone, liberal

whites felt a sense of isolation and weakness. (Gerhart 1978:268)

But, this was not true for white liberals only. White radicals experienced the same sense of threat from the philosophy and politics of Black Consciousness, and if liberals had reacted through a defensive engagement, radicals displayed a reactive disengagement.

Black Consciousness presented serious dilemmas for white radicals, since it challenged the legitimacy of oppositional politics by whites. Therefore, argues Nolutshungu: 'The dilemmas that arose, in consequence, for white radicals were real' (1982:147). Those dilemmas reflected the political terrain and would eventually shape the embrace of a Marxist oppositional intellectualism.

Black Consciousness challenged the authority of white intellectuals' participation in a politics of liberation, which threatened their relevance. Richard Turner, who critically influenced the Marxist oppositional intellectualism at Wits Sociology, reflected the feelings of irrelevance that Black Consciousness had generated amongst white radicals, and his unwillingness to accept it:

It is said that change will come from the blacks and therefore any processes of change that happen to be occurring within the white group are essentially irrelevant. It seems to me that this is a very serious mistake to make. (1978:111)

Thus, for whites, in the face of the phenomenon of 'black consciousness,' to believe that they must now simply shut up and leave it to the blacks would be a serious mistake. (1972:21)

Turner is critical to the narrative of the development of an oppositional sociology for two reasons.⁶ First, along with Webster, he was the only 'sociologist' who directly engaged Black Consciousness. And second, he was one of two 'leading public sociologists during the apartheid era' (Webster 2004:6), and of all the social scientists at the time, the one who was 'particularly influential in the new generation of sociologists' (Sekgobela 1984:47), especially at Wits.

The first reaction to this perceived irrelevance generated by Black Consciousness, reflected by Turner, was to attempt to restore the relevance of white radicals. He suggested that Black Consciousness had 'confused' (1972:20) different categories of white critical politics, and had to differentiate between 'racist, liberal, and radical' whites. 'The introduction of the third category enables us to clear up these confusions' and restore relevance to some categories of whites, insisted Turner (1972:20).

Edward Webster, former chair of Wits Sociology, attempted a similar exercise in a paper on black consciousness delivered to a special seminar organised by NUSAS at Elgin Farm in December of 1973. The seminar was organised to discuss how the white left should respond to black consciousness, and was itself confirmation of the type of reaction the spread of the black consciousness idea was inspiring amongst the white left (Lobban 1996). In a very sympathetic account of Black Consciousness that both recognises its validity and really attempts to deal with its challenge, Webster attempted the same disaggregation of white activists. He suggested a category of 'committed radical' to differentiate white radicals from 'traditional' and 'despairing' liberals. But, despite Webster being arrested by the apartheid state and put on trial for delivering that paper, the Black Consciousness movement had never accepted the validity of these attempts to distinguish between radicals and liberals.

Biko consistently refused to admit that the radicals and liberals were sufficiently different to save the former from his critiques. In fact, he was forceful in registering Black Consciousness' inclusion of radicals in their definition and critique of liberals:

We now come to the group that has longest enjoyed confidence from the Black world – the liberal establishment, including radical and leftist groups....Who are the liberals in South Africa? It is that curious bunch of non-conformists who explain their participation in negative terms; that bunch of do-gooders that goes under all sorts of names – liberals and leftists. (Biko 1972:192)

It was in this context of negotiating a relevant oppositional politics between liberalism, on the one hand, and a Black Consciousness threatening to exclude them, on the other, that a Marxist oppositional intellectualism was adopted. In the context of an alienating politics of race, and the 'dilemmas' it produced, Marxism offered a re-positioning of race in the explanatory equation of apartheid in ways that constructed an intellectual and political role for this group of white, English-speaking intellectuals. Webster, one of the critical figures of the Marxist turn at Wits Sociology, explains this absolutely clearly:

Liberal institutions were to come under sharp attack by the Black Consciousness movement in the late 1960s because of their ineffectiveness within the white power structure. The emphasis of Black Consciousness on the need for blacks to mobilize as a group, left white liberals with a deep uncertainty about their role in change in South Africa. *Marxism, with its bold claims of class as the motor of*

history, offered a new generation of white academics an intellectually coherent alternative to Black Consciousness. (1985:45, emphasis added)

In their contradictory location between the liberal tradition, and Black Consciousness, this group of intellectuals found security in the intellectual and political repertoire with which they were already familiar. Marxism and the new left politics they had encountered at the British universities where they studied preserved their legitimacy as activists and intellectuals in a context where that was being challenged. One of them said:

We tried to construct a different politics than Biko. A different scholarship too. Marxism was much more appealing. Both in terms of politics, and theory...We really didn't have any direct relationship with the BC group, but I think it was because we really saw what we were doing as an alternative. (interview, August 8, 2001)

By redefining white opposition and the intellectualism attached to it, Black Consciousness, and the politics of race it engendered, compelled a generation of oppositional white intellectuals to protect their intellectual and political identity. The class analysis and new left politics they had been exposed to in their studies abroad offered that protection. Moodie, the first chair of Wits under this redefined political and theoretical project, is explicit about this:

I mean if you want to hear the honest truth, I think that the Marxist turn in Southern African studies...was the result of the formation of COSAS and SASO, the BC organization, the BC student movement. Because white students were finding themselves isolated. They were no longer welcome...And it was a very legitimate movement, the BC movement, and at that particular time it was absolutely essential. But it did mean that radical whites felt incredibly alienated. And Marxism was a way of talking about class, and avoid talking about race. So, it kind of still gave people a chance to get involvedAgain, because it was a way of avoiding the racial challenge... (interview, October 20, 1998)

This was certainly the way Black Consciousness leaders understood the Marxist turn. In a revealing direct reference to the Marxist radicals, Biko offered his explanation for the type of racial politics that their oppositional intellectualism reflected:

A number of whites in this country adopt the class analysis primarily because they want to detach us from anything relating to race in case it has a rebound effect on them because they are white. (interview with G Gerhart, cited in Nolutshungu 1982:158)

Nolutshungu explains that the way Black Consciousness understood it, white radicals responded to its challenge by reducing race to an ‘epiphenomenon of class struggle’, (1982:147) ‘as essentially a form of false consciousness’ (1982:62). He argues that an oppositional intellectualism, unfettered by self-defence mechanisms, would have understood race ‘as something more than “mere ideology” – a cover for economic exploitation, or a false understanding of it’ (1982:62-63). Indeed, two commentators reflected a similar understanding in a discussion of the ways in which this research agenda may have betrayed specific group interests:

‘the race question’ is suppressed in much intellectual debate on the left – partly, it seems, because of the racial make-up of the intellectual community (predominantly white), partly because of the hegemony of the political tradition of non-racialism, and partly because of the Marxist insistence on class as the fundamental contradiction, with its associated critique of the liberal insistence on ‘race’. This denial of ‘race’ can become dangerously self-serving for whites. (Hassim and Walker 1992:79-80)

Faced with an influential assault on the existing forms of white oppositional intellectualism and politics, Marxism was understood as the ‘self-serving’ discourse of protection. In the intellectual and political fallout of the war over race waged by Black Consciousness on liberalism, white radicals articulated a political and intellectual programme that negotiated a space for themselves between these competing politics of race. In so doing, they reflected power, rather than rejected it. Marxist oppositional intellectualism did not emerge out of the vacuum of social power that resulted from the removal of various constraints during this time. Instead, its genesis was securely located in a configuration of power, one in which its reformulation of the relationship between race and class represented a politics of survival and self-defence. Biko explained in an interview:

in terms of the liberal-leftist axis...we get a whole lot of reaction and self-preservation mechanisms from them. (interview with G Gerhart, cited in Nolutshungu 1982:159)

Turner had himself admitted that the challenge of the Black Consciousness movement for white radicals would depend on the extent to which they could ‘develop intelligent strategies of self-defence’ (Turner 1978:130). Marxism, offering young white English-speaking intellectuals a viable language for both an oppositional intellectualism and politics, could therefore be understood as a ‘self-preservation mechanism’. The oppositional

intellectualism that emerged amongst white English-speaking sociologists in the 1970s was therefore quite determined by the philosophy and politics of black consciousness, even if it was through a reactionary disengagement. Jubber, having argued that white English-speaking intellectuals articulated a Marxist oppositional sociology because they were ‘freed from a rigid determination by material factors’ (1983:59), actually admits the same:

White liberal and radical students and staff members were left in a political limbo, marginalized from white politics they were also marginalized from radical black politics...Through Marxism many concerned white English speakers found a way out of their doubly marginalized political position and sense of intellectual relevance. Class identity and class struggle were the key concepts, not race or ethnicity. (1983:61-62)

This intersection of the politics of race and social movements that fashioned the shift to a Marxist oppositional intellectualism at Wits Sociology, as an alternative to Black Consciousness, was refracted through the institutional politics of the white student movement. Represented on the Wits campus by NUSAS (National Union of South African Students), their struggles defined the challenges Black Consciousness posed for white intellectuals. With a distinctive history, marked by many twists and turns, NUSAS became, by the late 1970s, one of the more influential political organisations for white intellectuals (Kane-Berman 1990) – of both the liberal and radical varieties. Many of the Marxists who made up the sociology department at Wits were student activists in NUSAS and continued to maintain strong links with the movement on campus while lecturing. NUSAS furthermore dictated campus climate and the institutional milieu in which the department was situated and functioned (*Wits Student*, 1976-1984).

The effects of Black Consciousness on NUSAS were recognisable, and its responses represented the institutional context within which white scholars were partially located, reflecting and shaping their theoretical and political orientations. Brendan Barry, a former Wits SRC president, explains the effect of the movement on NUSAS:

Biko challenged NUSAS to define a political role for itself in South Africa. The walkout caused a crisis in NUSAS. It didn't know where to go from there. But it forced NUSAS to face reality. (*Wits Student*, November 4, 1984)

While NUSAS had considered a revolutionary role before, it had nonetheless, immediately prior to Biko's challenge, taken ‘a definite swing to the right,

and went back to liberal multiracial wine and cheese parties' (Sono 1993:23). SASO's walkout forced NUSAS to reassess its role.

That reassessment involved the staking out of a discourse that made the Black Consciousness challenge less threatening. It came in 1977, when NUSAS President Fink Haysom declared a new campaign for the organisation – 'Africanisation'. The Africanisation campaign was influential at Wits, and it was formed in dialogue with Wits Sociology. The Industrial Sociology programme had just been given a boost in 1976 with the appointment of a new lecturer, but the programme was under threat by the university because of its attempt to close down all two-year majors in the Arts Faculty due to 'budget constraints' (*Wits Student*, March 16, 1984). NUSAS students used their 'Africanisation' campaign strategically to assist in gathering enough student pressure to upgrade Industrial Sociology as a three-year major through additional courses (*Wits Reporter*, May 12, 1979). It worked, and the result was a continuing dialogue between sociology and NUSAS through the concept of Africanisation.

But the Africanisation campaign was formed in direct opposition to Black Consciousness. Haysom declared in his announcement of the campaign that its 'seeds . . . were sown in the walkout by black students in 1969' (*Wits Student*, November 4, 1984). The *Wits Student* editorialised on the Africanisation campaign: 'Black students called on their white counterparts to clearly define their role in opposition' (*Wits Student*, November 4, 1984). And, Max Price, a former NUSAS leader, was quoted in a student paper article titled 'Black Consciousness Re-Assessed' as saying: 'Africanisation started off as a lack of identity in English-speaking students... when they felt themselves lost between two powerful conflicting powers', one of which was Black Consciousness (*Wits Student*, May 24, 1977).

NUSAS, supplied with intellectual resources by the sociologists at Wits, began to theorise the racial project of apartheid as a class project. NUSAS newsletters contained many features by members of staff in the department that began articulating a Marxist understanding of apartheid, and by 1977 the organisation adopted the position that 'apartheid is an unjust system of the highest order, motivated by the capitalists and their desire to extract profits from the hard labour of the African peoples of this country. Apartheid can only be understood using Marx, and can only be overcome with a socialist revolution' (*Wits Student*, October 19, 1979).

A later NUSAS newsletter made the direct link between the rise of a Marxist intellectualism and the influence of black consciousness: 'in

contrast to the Black Consciousness period of the late 1960s and 1970s, people are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that conflict in South Africa is not simply between Black and White. Inequality is far more deeply rooted in a fundamentally anti-democratic system of exploitation and oppression' (NUSAS 1981:1).

It was the Africanisation campaign that galvanised this perspective, and was infused by the politics of race and identity that Black Consciousness had inspired. In fact, in the most telling statement, Haysom (the NUSAS president under which Africanisation was pursued) called the Africanization campaign an expression of 'White Consciousness' (*Wits Student*, October 19, 1979). It was a telling phrase, given that Turner was generally perceived 'as a radical political figure, who was concerned with formulating a notion of "white consciousness" to meet the ideological challenges presented by the emergence of black-consciousness doctrines' (Rich 1993:103).

If the reactive disengagement of the Marxist oppositional intellectualism in relation to Black Consciousness was conceptualised as 'white consciousness', it was more than just white English-speaking intellectuals seeking to secure their intellectual life by finding refuge in the concept of class. Black Consciousness made race an illegitimate area of inquiry for whites.

Webster, while still in England, had begun a PhD on the 1949 Durban Race Riots, in which Africans and Indians had clashed resulting in massive riots, death, and destruction. But, he was consistently urged not to pursue the topic – by the most prominent Black woman sociologist in South Africa, and two influential Black students who were later to become senior members of government:

The person who listened when I talked about these interests in England was the Pahads – Aziz and Essop. They were very disparaging of my work on the race riots saying what...are you as a white person looking at conflicts amongst the black people for...and Fatima Meer who was a colleague in the sociology department was also quite adamant that there was no way, I absolutely could not do this research, saying this was not appropriate for a white person to be doing this stuff on race, on conflicts between black people. (interview, June 29, 2001)

Similarly, students at Wits interested in pursuing research on race were discouraged by their Black colleagues, 'because they really, they really believed that whites had no business trying to interrogate race' (interview, August 8, 2001). White intellectuals were therefore pushed by Black

Consciousness as much as they were pulled by the alienating effects of the politics of race:

The relationship between Black Consciousness and the sociology in the department was one of push and pull...they pushed us away from dealing with race...we saw Shula Marks' seminar come alive in communities, and that pulled us towards class. (interview, August 8, 2001)

The Marxist oppositional intellectualism that captured the department in the 1970s was therefore a response to the tensions between liberals and leftists, black and white. It was not simply a removal of constraint that allowed a Marxist critique of apartheid to emerge. It's development was, instead, implicated in the racial politics of the time. The struggles and tensions surrounding race to which this gave rise made neither the content of the oppositional intellectualism at Wits Sociology – a reformulated analytic and politics of race – nor the particular identity of those who propagated it – white English-speaking intellectuals – coincidental. The reformulation of race was reflective of the emerging challenge of Black Consciousness. Threatening to make irrelevant this group of intellectuals, and their critique of apartheid, Marxism presented a viable alternative to Black Consciousness for this young generation of activated intellectuals, and together with the emerging labour movement, secured the shift to a Marxist oppositional intellectualism.

The triangle of labour politics and oppositional intellectualism, Black Consciousness, trade unions, and white activists

It was in the context of Black Consciousness that the emerging labour movement came to have decisive effects on English sociologists at Wits, helping them carve out an intellectual tradition for themselves that reformulated the equation between race and class in both an oppositional politics and intellectualism. The intellectuals who launched a critique of apartheid were not simply moralistically renouncing power, and the shift was not made possible by the simple removal of constraint. Instead, a very specific set of conditions in which power was implicated actively enabled them to define themselves in an oppositional relationship to the structures of authority. It was not freedom from social determination that made a Marxist oppositional sociology possible, but various politics that had emerged during the period conditioned the shift. Black Consciousness was the first of these politics that forced a reconsideration of race in analysis,

and whites in politics. The emerging labour movement represented the second of these politics by making available a viable alternative analytic and politics of South African society. With it, the shift to a Marxist oppositional intellectualism was cemented.

By the 1970s, being the only black organisations with any political recognition by the system, trade unions became the only legal way to secure political gains for blacks, and became substitutes for the political parties that had been banned. The phenomenon of ‘social-movement unionism’ was born and unions became the vehicles to secure not just labour, but social, political, and economic rights as well (Webster 1988). The importance of the labour movement lay, in part, in its nonracial struggle for national liberation, both in the sense that it was a class-based movement, and in the sense that was a voice for nonracialism.

The doctrine of nonracialism became a defining language for political incorporation in the 1980s. It eventually facilitated the establishment of what became the most important and influential political grouping in South Africa– the Alliance, between COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), the ANC (African National Congress) and the SACP (South African Communist Party). The attractiveness of the labour movement for white intellectuals at that stage lay in the fact that its oppositional politics was based on this discourse and politics of nonracialism. In the context of its major expansion in the 1970s sociologists at Wits and Natal began forming crucial linkages with the labour movement. According to a former member of staff at Wits Sociology:

Nonracialism was a very important thing – there was a mutual interest amongst the workerists and those with a more ANC politics, and it became *the* catch-phrase. (interview, June 17, 2001)

Labour was an active oppositional politics. When the young students who were to join Wits Sociology started coming back to the country after having been exposed to New Left politics in Britain, they returned to a context where the transformative power of class was being enacted in the public sphere. The widespread labour unrest of the 1970s – the Durban Strikes, the strikes on the Reef, and the continued stay-aways and go-slows in the factories on the Witwatersrand – were absolutely critical in solidifying the shift to a Marxist oppositional intellectualism amongst this group (interview, June 29, 2001). One of the former heads of department expressed the rationale for pursuing a PhD on labour processes, and describes this process well:

Shortly before I arrived in March 1973, a wave of strikes took place in Durban. I could not resist being pulled into this unfolding drama – first, as a teacher and later, as a researcher. (Webster 1983:i)

Rich also argues that ‘Marxism and methods of class analysis... would only start to make a renewed impact in the late 1970s in the course of the development of the trade union movement and more militant methods of struggle in both the factories and the townships’ (1993:116). The nascent labour movement, birthed during that critical moment in the 1970s, was therefore critical to the oppositional intellectualism that took hold at Wits Sociology.

Various institutional initiatives gave expression to this ‘critical sociology’ and assisted in converting it into a ‘public sociology’. At Wits, the Industrial Sociology programme was influential, as was the Fosatu Labour Studies course which ‘rested on a Marxist analysis of the situation’ (Webster 1992:90), and the establishment of the Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP), attached to Wits Sociology. At the same time, the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE) in Natal, organised by oppositional intellectuals attached to the University of Natal, was important in its hosting of worker education programmes, and the *South African Labour Bulletin*.

A ‘public sociology’ was activated in which strong and active links between oppositional intellectuals and the labour movement were forged, as academics became involved, students became involved, and the boundaries between intellectualism and activism slowly withered away (Webster 1992b). The politics that surrounded this shift were not disconnected from the politics that had begun to frame a ‘critical sociology’ though. Some Marxists deny the role of the Black Consciousness movement in precipitating the 1970s explosion of labour mobilisation. Hirson, in particular, is vigorous in his denial of the role of Black Consciousness in the strikes of 1973. ‘The BPC [Black People’s Convention] had little influence on the working class, and the one trade union they controlled had little effect on the strikes of 1973-76’, he argued (1979:156). But, Douwes Dekker, one of the authors of a long review on the new trade unions and the strike wave of the early 1970s, claimed that the flurry of union activity possibly lay ‘in the stirrings of a “black consciousness” movement...which emphasised the need for independent black organizations’ (Douwes Dekker et al 1975). Furthermore, Webster, as an influential participant in these processes, actually argues that of the two intellectual projects that influenced the ‘Durban moment’, ‘the first ... was Steve Biko’s attempt to formulate the political discourse and

practical programmes of black consciousness' (Webster 1992:89). Since SASO 'had no influence amongst workers' (Fisher 1977:333) and the BPC's efforts to establish a union through Drake Koka had failed, how could Black Consciousness so decisively influence the strike action of 1973? The answer lies, in part, in the ways in which Black Consciousness cemented the links between the emerging labour movement and the developing oppositional intellectualism. Marx summarises:

prominent among those who helped found the current unions were increasingly radicalized white intellectuals who had been excluded from BC in the 1970s. Lacking alternative avenues of involvement, [and]...at the same time that the BC movement was encouraging the development of racial identity and establishing its own unions, these white service organizations helped workers develop a class consciousness and organize unions independently of the BC movement. (1992:194)

While Marx presumes a particular 'directing' role for white intellectuals in the labour movement which may be both unfair and inaccurate, he captures the extent to which the strikes and its infectious activation of the black working class, was implicated in the politics of the relationship between Black Consciousness and white Marxist intellectuals. Sociologists at Wits were genuinely struggling with how to define their political role given the Black Consciousness intervention, and the labour movement offered an expression of a viable liberation politics, in a language they were comfortable with. The conversation between labour and academic sociologists played a role in cementing the embrace of class analysis, but it was facilitated, in part, by the reconfigured politics of activism and race inspired by Black Consciousness.

It was no coincidence that the two most influential initiatives undertaken by intellectuals in relation to black worker organisation issuing from the 1970 industrial action, were by Edward Webster and Richard Turner, the two intellectuals who most publicly and directly engaged Black Consciousness and admitted its role for framing an alternative class-based politics. But, it was in the relationships between NUSAS, the unions, and the intellectuals, that this process was most visible.

NUSAS was to prove very influential in the wave of trade union activity that revolutionised labour history in South Africa. It was the Industrial Wage and Economic Commissions set up by NUSAS, together with SRCs on some of the campuses, that played a critical role. As Hirson (1979)

argues, the Commissions were very influential for the labour movement. A former chair of Wits Sociology explains the linkages:

I wanted to go back [to South Africa], and Lawrence Schlemmer came to interview me, and I was still waivering in my mind about whether to come back, but it was 1972, and he said that there were these wage commissions the students had formed... it was an exciting time, and that's how I got drawn in. (interview, June 29, 2001)

The Durban Wages Commission, in particular, was important in its establishment of the General Workers Benefit Fund. Together with the Johannesburg-established Industrial Aid Society, it helped form what became the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu). But, these initiatives were, in part, inspired by the Black Consciousness movement. It was shortly after the Black Consciousness critique that NUSAS at Wits, alienated by it, sought to develop a space for white activism by constructing a relationship with labour on the Witwatersrand. Its newsletters show a growing concern with and awareness of labour activity in Johannesburg's factories, and quite self-consciously recognised it was a way to express themselves politically and could neatly reconstruct the relationship between race and activism that Black Consciousness had imposed: 'The labour movement in this country is making great strides in promoting a non-racial unionism that we need to support' (Nusas Newsletter, February 4, 1979).

By 1979 NUSAS and labour activists in the department had lent their support, decisively, to the Fatti's and Moni's consumer boycott which proved very successful: 'It showed students that NUSAS could play a meaningful role in the movement for democratic change in South Africa' (*Wits Student*, March 16, 1984). Encouraged by the triumph they led the Red Meat Boycott of 1980 and the Wilson-Rowntrees boycott of 1981/1982, and sponsored (together with the Industrial Sociology students) the Wits African Trade Union Research Campaign. It was the nonracialism of the labour movement, and the possibilities it offered for a political role for white students and intellectuals, given the Black Consciousness critique, that facilitated the commitment to a class analysis and politics. A scholar and staff member of the 1970s therefore said:

I would say that the labour movement offered every one of us at the time, NUSAS, the white academics, the white unionists, I would say it was an alternative to Black Consciousness. It was a nonracial politics that was about radical change. (interview, August 8, 2001)

This was also evident in the History Workshop at Wits, which was established

to create a gathering that would facilitate a conversation between academics and activists, intellectuals and ‘ordinary people’, to revitalise a ‘history from below’ neo-Marxism concerned with social change (History Workshop Files, Historical Papers). The History Workshop was centrally organised by key sociologists at Wits and was so popular and successful that it became an institution in its own right, a gathering place every four years that brought students, labour, communities, and academics into conversation with each other, cementing their relationships. On the list of organisations affiliated to the History Workshop, the dominance of nonracial unions and political organisations is clear and dramatic (History Workshop Files, Historical Papers; Tatham 1992). One of the organisers remains adamant that this was not by lack of invitation to more explicitly racial organisations (interview, June 17, 2001). But the perceived hostility to organisations that seriously engaged with race is shown by Tatham (1992), in her extensive research into the History Workshop, to have been the reason these organisations declined to make an appearance. The History Workshop was understood to be an event unreceptive to those struggling to understand apartheid in racial terms. Instead, the Workshops became very important institutional locations for cementing the organisation of resources and coalition of movements that established the viability of a white English-speaking tradition of thought – a class-based oppositional radicalism.

The embrace of class analysis was therefore not divorced from a politics of race. A participant in these processes observed:

Sometimes you hear this: Marxism was the best theory, the Durban strikes proved it was the best theory...but you know, it was all in a context...whether the reality proved the theory or the theory made the reality, I think we can argue about that one. (interview, August 8, 2001)

We can indeed argue much about the history of the relationship between the labour movement and a Marxist sociology at Wits – the role of intellectuals, the role of Marxist class analysis, the role of NUSAS, and the role of Black Consciousness. What is clear, though, is that the standard narrative that understands a Marxist oppositional intellectualism having been the necessary outcome of a context in which a black working class was in formation, misses the extent to which the content of the intellectualism was influenced by a politics of race inspired by the Black Consciousness movement. In SASO’s relationship with NUSAS over worker organisation, and NUSAS’s relationship with trade unions, to intellectuals’ relationships to both NUSAS and the labour movement, various historical forces and social processes

together shaped a Marxist oppositional sociology amongst white English-speaking intellectuals that remained committed to a class politics of liberation.

Conclusion

Sociology in South Africa is faced with a daunting task as it stands in the shadow of apartheid, having to negotiate its own reconstruction at the same time as it has to consider its role in the reconstruction of the nation. This requires a serious interrogation of the discipline's history, and an engagement with the genesis of some of the discipline's most pervasive paradigms, in particular the oppositional intellectualism that emerged in the 1970s. At Wits Sociology, a Marxist 'critical sociology' emerged not out of freedom from the constraints of power. Instead, its embrace amongst white English-speaking intellectuals involved a reconfiguration of race, inspired by the politics of race and class engendered by the Black Consciousness and emerging labour movements. The intersection of these racialised politics with social movements came to have decisive effects on this group of intellectuals, making possible a distinct radical intellectualism that reformulated the analytic and politics of race and class in ways that protected their intellectual and political voice. Oppositional intellectualism, in this case, was therefore not a rejection of power, but a reflection of it.

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Notes

1. Burawoy (2004) argues that a 'critical sociology', which had emerged by the 1970s, formed the 'conscience of professional sociology' and 'lays the basis for public sociology's engagement with audiences beyond the academy' during the 1980s. This paper does not attempt to explain the origins of the 'public sociology' of the 1980s, but attempts instead to analyse the conditioning forces and factors of the 'critical sociology' of the 1970s.
2. Moodie was not strictly a Marxist [his major work to that point had been on Afrikaner civil religion (Moodie 1975)], but he supported the work of the emerging South African Marxists in ways that made him instrumental in

fashioning the shift to an oppositional intellectualism during the 1970s.

3. That is, it may have been the rejection of state power, but was implicated in the processes of more broadly circulating power at the time.
4. Such a nationally and institutionally-delimited explanation relying on the specifics of context may seem specious given the fact that the turn to a Marxist oppositional intellectualism was not limited to white English-speaking intellectuals, sociology, Wits, or South Africa, but actually swept across most social sciences at most English-medium, and some Black, universities across the country, and indeed, all over Europe as well. How can such a context-specific explanation account for a phenomenon seemingly so widespread and independent of context? Disciplines develop, evolve, and mutate in a number of contexts, and with a great degree of local specificity. The same knowledges, implanted in different contexts, potentially have different causalities. What is subject to explanation here is not the development of the ideas themselves, but rather an analysis of the conditions under which circulating ideas find expression in specific context, amongst specific groups of people. The genesis of Marxism amongst black intellectuals in South Africa would, for instance, have a different causality. What is being interrogated here is the embrace of Marxism for this specific group of white English-speaking intellectuals in the context of 1970s South Africa.
5. NUSAS, the National Union of South African Students, was the national federation of Student Representative Councils from campuses across the country.
6. That Turner was a political scientist rather than a sociologist was irrelevant since the distinctions between sociology and its allied social sciences were quite blurred at the time.

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