Review


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*Voices that Reason: theoretical parables* not only signifies a creative and scholarly contribution by Ari Sitas, especially to theoretical development about the world around us, but also a source of optimism for the historically marginalised and dominated scientific voices in the South, especially in Africa. The main concern in this book is with the challenges facing the social sciences, and in particular sociology in South Africa and the rest of Africa. In examining these challenges and constraints, he makes some bold concrete proposals on how they could be overcome. Amongst the key challenges he identifies is that of Afro-pessimism. He notes with grave concern that there is pervasive Afro-pessimism within the current hegemonic post-modern globalisation discourse in which Africa and its people are seen as having no special contribution to make to the world’s development. As Sitas points out, within this discourse, there is overwhelming consensus amongst the non-African scholars, centred on the perception of Africa ‘as a continent in institutional, mental, economic decline, a cauldron of misery … as a continent of Islamic fundamentalisms in its north, of amassing chaos and anarchy, and incubator of epidemics and disease, drought an scarcity, coups and genocide, in short, the world’s horrific racialised “other”’, that ‘… Africa’s prospects are bleak and worsening by the day’ (16). Other challenges and constraints to social sciences and sociology in Africa identified by Sitas, mainly internal to SA, include the decline in universities as institutions within which scholarship occurs due mainly to reduced public spending and shift in funding towards science, engineering and technology disciplines. This has led to disturbing staff: student ratios, especially in the historically black universities, and also to situations where low salaries for academic staff
exacerbated by reduced funding, have pushed staff into consultancies in order to supplement their income (18-19).

While Sitas acknowledges the serious challenges confronting the social sciences and sociology in SA and the rest of the continent, he however challenges the pervasive Afro-pessimism. He instead argues that Africa has a chance and capacity to reassert itself and claim a place in today’s competitive world. This, he argues, is presented by the discourse’s libertarian principles that acknowledge social plurality and difference which led to the questioning of the First World’s scientific values and grant theories, present opportunity for the ‘other’ and the historically marginalised. This is captured in the following remark by Sitas: ‘It was not long before an emerging politics of difference pioneered by feminism and …those who have been “othered” and “marginalised” generated the advocacy of multi-perspectivism and pride in cultural autonomy … They pioneered … the “politics of identity”’ (27). A challenge to Afro-pessimism can also be detected within the culture-economy debate whereby claims made that African traditions, cultures and thought systems are inimical to socio-economic, intellectual and technological progress and development,¹ were met with strong criticism discrediting those claims.² A further source of hope for the social sciences in Africa, although inadequate, is according to Sitas the attempts made by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSREA) to create and support research networks for meaningful collaboration. He however argues that for these to become a success, they should be supplemented with ‘substance, commitment and creativity’ (20).

In the light of the possibilities that are presented by the post-modern discourse that recognises difference and plurality, Sitas suggests that for African social scientists to take advantage of such opportunities and make a meaningful contribution to the world of knowledge and ideas, they should not only overcome certain ‘mental barricades’ but should also appreciate the value that lies in their unique, dynamic local experiences and the activities of ordinary people as they creatively and actively engage with their environment. Note here his outline of what he sees as the task for social scientists in Africa:

… the only metaphor for social science comes from our very own local experience: a patched-up ox cart, made of the trinkets and tarnish and stuff we have gathered, might be more appropriate. Indeed, praise poets (izimbongi) in the growing labour movement of the 1980s, used the
expression ‘inqol’ emasondosondo’ to describe and praise the
organisations they were building. They invoked ox carts, both vulnerable
and patched up, made of many things but for a purpose, a mission, a
struggle; their wheels turned, perhaps not as smoothly as we want, but
they worked; and they fed people. Such an image, I feel, begins to
capture our task: it is universally comprehensible but arrogantly local.
(23)

This, he argues, can only be best accomplished through dialogue with
ordinary people and their organisations with the view not to gathering data
for ‘qualitative quotations for dissertations’ but critically to examine,
decipher, and unearth the rich theoretical content and value that lies in their
perceptions, attitudes and activities. Sitas thus calls for a shift in approach
from the sociology ‘for’ and ‘of’ towards the sociology ‘with’, ie what he
refers to as a ‘sociology of civic virtue’ that is in dialogue with the ordinary
people.

He demonstrates the possibility for the renewal and reassertion of
African social science, and sociology in particular, through the study of the
parables and daydreams of ordinary South Africans as forms of
communicative practice rooted in popular cultures. I would here refer only
to two prominent examples he cites, ie Phumelele Nene’s life experience and
the story of day dreams amongst South African workers. Phumelele Nene is
a woman, a mother, a deserted wife as her husband has left her for migrant
work in Johannesburg, a former rural peasant, former hawker, a waged
worker, a shopsteward and cultural activist. In her story, Sitas found that a
complex set of factors has influenced her choices, behaviour and action as
well as her self-perception. He argues, challenging the structuralist accounts,
that while the general theories of identity (eg race, gender and class) can
explain the wider structural context in which she lives and acts, they cannot
adequately explain her identity formation processes, her choices and actions
that saw her moving from being rural peasant to eventually becoming a
shopsteward and a cultural activist. Of particular significance here is the
influence executed by her feelings such as self-blame, self-doubt and fear
of being rejected by her community due to loss of respect. Thus, mounting
a challenge to structuralist accounts, he argues on the basis of the evidence
arising from Phumelele Nene’s story, that ‘… a politics and a praxis that
ignores her very own structures of feeling, her difference and her autonomy
within a broader collective project is a lifeless, sapless, modern futility’ (36).

Sitas consolidates his theoretical findings and contribution through the
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analysis of daydreams at work which he argues constitute an invisible labour process with determinant influence over social behaviour. He found that daydreams enabled workers to engage in a process of identity formulation, what he calls the creation of the ‘self’ or ‘selves’ that went beyond their conditions of working life. Hence, that although these identities tend to be fragmentary and incoherent, they enabled workers doing menial, repetitive and routine work, to resist and adjust to the dictates of work process. It should be noted that while Sitas advances a non-structuralist analysis, revealing the limits of the structuralist accounts, he does not totally dismiss the explanatory value of these accounts. Note here his argument that represents his balanced view:

In an admirable way, micro-studies such as Roy’s and Burawoy’s point to the irreducibility of concrete behaviour to broader social considerations…Without losing sight of the broader social dynamics, particular factory politics and relations have their own murmurings that constitute determinants for social action. But I would go further; our own invisible headcraft could also be a serious determinant of social action. (72-73)

This concept of the invisible labour process, which he also refers to as ‘the invisible head craft’ marks a special, locally grown theoretical contribution by Sitas to the theory of labour process and the broader field of the sociology of work. For instance, while Burawoy coined the concept of factory regimes in seeking to understand forms of control and domination in the workplace, whereby he laid emphasis on political aspects, Ching, later on, discovered through her ethnographic study of Chinese firms that factory regimes also have cultural logics to them. What Sitas shows through his study of daydreams as invisible labour processes is that there is also psychological dimension to workplace or factory regimes with significant influence on workplace relations and activities. As noted from the preceding paragraph, daydreams have, according to Sitas, a dual effect of enhancing both resistance and adjustment by workers to the dictates of work. Note here his reference to Burawoy’s point about exploitation being secured and obscured by workers willingly and by so doing surrendering and intensifying the expenditure of their labour power (72). In line with the point above about daydreams having the dual effect of enhancing both resistance and adjustment by workers to the dictates of work, Sitas argues, drawing from his previous research findings on black workers in South Africa, that they (black workers) responded to the anomic and alienating workplace pressures
through *defensive combinations* which in turn gave rise to the *cultural formations* with definitive influence on identities, behaviour and practice. It is within the context of these cultural formations and the narrative streams, he argues, that the *invisible labour processes* are generated (73).

Thus through this text, Sitas makes a vital scholarly contribution to the advancement of African sociology which presents a serious challenge to Afro-pessimism within the current post-modern, globalisation discourse. This text should therefore be seen as a well-timed and welcome contribution to the debate, on the history, the current state and future prospects of social sciences, and in particular sociology, in Africa. The special contribution by Sitas through this text is that he takes the debate a step further by going beyond general propositions on how sociology and the broader social sciences in Africa could be advanced in the light of the constraints and challenges confronting them. This he does through reference to concrete examples in the form of the parables and daydreams of the ordinary people. Furthermore, the text would also be valuable to the current broader debate on transformation of higher education in Africa, in the context of intensified complex processes of change that transcend national boundaries, often described as globalisation.

While this book marks a significant theoretical breakthrough, it is however pitched at a high level in term of the rigour of its analysis and language used which makes it a difficult read for the undergraduate students. Its theoretical and scholarly value will make it both a fascinating and thought provoking text to all those concerned with debates on African social sciences; on industrial sociology and/or sociology of work; on higher education and transformation in post-colonial, post-apartheid Africa; and on the broader discourse of globalisation and development.

**Notes**

