

Decolonizing South African Sociology: What the White Academy Can Learn About Race From The History of Black Thought

Introduction

In June 2014 the Council of the University of Cape Town, the highest decision making body in the university, voted to replace “race” with “economic disadvantage” in its affirmative action policies. The Council decision was an endorsement of an earlier decision by the governing body of academics, the Senate, in November 2013. In the period leading to the Senate vote I wrote an article in the local newspaper, *The Cape Times*, suggesting that the whole process raised “serious ethical questions about whether a structure (the Senate) made up of predominantly white professors is in a position to decide on a policy of racial redress in higher education in South Africa” (...2013).

The university’s Vice Chancellor, Max Price, responded in the same newspaper, saying that I had “insulted the Senate” by making a “presumption that intelligent, educated people, cannot make ethical and rational decisions because they are overwhelmingly interested in preserving the interests of those of the same skin colour” (Price, 2013).

Eager not to be misconstrued as making a gratuitous attack on my colleagues, I wrote back saying that “ the everyday systems in which members of any community move, their-taken-for granted field of social action, is populated not by anybodies without qualities but by somebodies, concrete classes of determinate persons positively characterized and appropriately labelled” (Geertz 1973, 363). And that, in South Africa, those “concrete classes of determinate

persons” were racially formed, which is exactly what the university administration was at pains to deny.

This paper argues that the decision to replace “race” with “economic disadvantage” as the main consideration in student affirmative action policies is an illustration of the combined problem of white intellectual hegemony in South African universities, and the implications thereof for our understanding of race. If anything, the arguments put forward by the university’s overwhelmingly white academics demonstrated how little they knew about Black people’s historical conceptions of race. Instead of a rigorous, scholarly engagement with those conceptions, the decision reflected the anxieties of the overwhelmingly white academy.

Race and Its Critics

The common argument among many white academics at South Africa’s predominantly white, liberal universities is generally two-fold. On one hand, they argue that race must be discarded because it is unscientific. While these scholars often accuse those who embrace race of essentialism, they are blind to the manner in which their arguments give validity to the essentialist view of race as “merely a biological holdover from a less enlightened time that lacks any present political or social meaning (Guinier and Gerald Torres 2002, 43).

The idea that there was a time in the past when people did not see or talk about their phenotypical differences is of course ahistorical. As Bindman and Gates argue, the use of the word “black” goes back thousands of years, and can be seen in the names of countries such as Sudan, which means “the blacks” in Arabic or Guinea, which means “the land of the blacks” in Berber. The root word of countries such as Niger and Nigeria is *niger*, which means black in Latin (2010, xiv).

The idea that there was no racial discrimination has also been made by Black people who seek to demonstrate the evil ingenuity of white racism. But this claim of an innocent without prejudice is belied by the facts. As Tanner puts it, “neither ancient Egypt, nor Greece and Rome were before “colour prejudice” (2010, 39).

As we shall see in the second half of this paper, almost every major historical text had racial identification in its title - as in *Abantu Aba-Mnyama or Aba- Ntsundu* (Black/brown people). The major Black newspapers were also similarly titled, as in the case of Imvo Zaba Ntsundu (Black Opinion) established by John Tengo Jabavu in 1886 or William Wellington Gqoba’s essay, *Ulaulo Lwabantsundu (The Administration of Black People)* published in 1880. We shall also see how, a hundred years later, the Black Consciousness movement provided a political definition of Blackness which was not based on apartheid or the biological conception of Blackness enamored of critics of race-based affirmative action.

This history of racial consciousness in the writings of Black intellectuals is simply ignored by critics of race-based affirmative action policies. Because of this blind spot, these academics then turn to class as the preferred category of analysis. In higher education the preferred concept is “economic disadvantage”- presumably because the liberals cannot quite bring themselves to use Marxist terminology, even though they are both united in their rejection of race. Jonathan Jansen attributed the idea of the “disadvantaged student” to white and English academics who sought to avoid reference to ‘the more appropriate label, black student” (1998, 106-116).

To be sure, the rejection of the validity of race is not limited to white academics. The Black Marxist scholar, Neville Alexander (1979) - writing under the pseudonym *No Sizwe*- rejected the unscientific, “subjective rendering of the old and discredited anthropological

conception of race”; and that those who identified themselves racially were “not aware of the historical, social and political ways in which their identities have been constructed” (1979, 135). So opposed was Alexander to the use of race in the struggle against apartheid that he welcomed the banning of the Black Consciousness movement in 1977 as an opportunity for the development of Marxist class theory: “Indeed the banning of the movement cannot but be conducive to the rapid development of the theory” (Alexander 1979, 125).

Alexander’s insistence on class solidarity notwithstanding, unity between Black and white workers has always been elusive. As Hall noted, the state in South Africa was “sustained by the forging of alliances between white ruling-class interests and the interests of white workers against blacks” (1996, 426). In recent years there have been abortive attempts to create an alliance of Black trade unions and their white counterparts but this too has proven to be a pipedream because of these conflict interests. The largely white trade union federation, Solidarity, is firmly opposed to race-based affirmative action programs while the Black Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is a strong defender of these policies. Solidarity see race-based affirmative action as inimical to the advancement of white workers and COSATU regard such policies as consistent with the interests of Black workers.

More recently, the argument that class should replace race has been made by a growing number of sociologists. UCT sociologists Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass (2005) argued that the apartheid government had begun to distribute welfare to Black people as soon as it had achieved its goals of full employment and extensive welfare rights for whites. At that point exclusion was no longer racial but in terms of class. Thus, they contend that “ the distributional regime was never as neatly exclusive as apartheid discourse suggested; even under apartheid it extended benefits to the poor, and since 1994 it has had more universalist ambitions. But the

underlying bases of distribution remain fundamentally inegalitarian” (Seekings and Natrass 2005, 6).

This inegalitarian structure, they argue, was simply extended to the post-apartheid period as “a growing number of black South Africans had moved into the higher classes and income deciles, and they too could pass on their advantages to their children”(Seekings and Natrass 2005: 6). It is worth quoting Seekings and Natrass at length on this:

Race ceased to be the explicit basis of structured income inequality in South Africa. But inequality persisted because race had given way to class, with the advantages and disadvantages of class replacing racial discrimination as the motor driving stratification. The post-apartheid distributional regime underpinned and reproduced class advantage almost as emphatically as its predecessors had stratified society on the basis of racial discrimination and segregation. (Seekings and Natrass 2005, 377).

This is a ridiculous proposition. Seekings and Natrass (2005) draw a seamless transition from apartheid inequality to post-apartheid inequality despite the starkly different moral foundations of the periods under question. The moral equivalence they draw between these two periods blinds them to the racial violence perpetrated against Black people under colonialism and apartheid. To them the black experience under colonialism and apartheid is best seen through the lens of income inequality. West (1999) describes this as the classic left-liberal explanation of Black oppression as a matter of incomes that can be ameliorated through the labour market. But as von Holdt puts it,

white rule in South Africa was “constituted through violence: colonial conquest, dispossession, slavery, forced labour, the restriction of citizenship to whites, and the application of violent bureaucratic routines to the marshalling, distribution and domination of the black population” (2013, 122).

Yet another influential sociologist Gerhard Mare also foresees the inevitable rise of class over race:

Race will no longer obscure the economic processes that drive this [capitalist] growth, and race will no longer protect those who exploit, no matter what their colour. Class conflict will take centre stage, as the vocabulary used to classify groups whose lives are so materially different from one another, and used to explain these differences, shifts from race to class categories (2014, 35).

Mare’s view is that “there may be no longer an official classification through the Population Registration Act, but there is, and has been since 1994, official demand for race allocation” (2014, 100). What irks him even more is the complicity of South Africans with the system:

And here lies the rub. We all participate in keeping this system of classification operational, we are all expected to be its minions, because we can draw on the ‘standards’ implied in any classification, already familiar to us- in this case, the very criteria set by apartheid (2014:101).

Here again we see the moral equivalence between the colonial/apartheid experience and the present moment. As Peller put it, “it begins to appear that the social subordination of various

groups does not have a complex, particular and historical context” (1995, 75). Or as I argued in an earlier paper, “the problem with this symmetric logic is that it becomes part of a theatre of denial and obfuscation that amounts to saying blacks were just as bad as whites, and therefore whites have no responsibility for what is a universal moral fault” (...2001, 23)

One of the most vociferous opponents to the concept of race is sociologist Crain Soudien, also the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Transformation at UCT at the time of the decision to do away with race as the major criterion of affirmative action in student admissions. Soudien’s rejection of the race concept was rather ironic for a person tasked with racial transformation at the university- like having a Pope who did not believe in Catholicism. Soudien believed that race had become “a portmanteau concept to absorb the social factors of class, place, culture and gender...instead of being used to show its articulation with them” (2015, 162).

A proud student of Neville Alexander, Soudien often invoked his mentor in his arguments against racial consciousness:

Neville Alexander makes the argument that a focus on racial demographics is dangerous insofar as it perpetuates apartheid’s racial identities. ‘There is no need’, he argues, to use the racial categories of the past in order to undertake affirmative action policies’ (Soudien 2015, 160).

Indeed, such is Soudien’s opposition to any racial identification that he would strenuously object to anyone who referred to him as Black or Coloured. He insisted that he was a human being. Or as he put it:

Even when the realist argument is made that race exists, insufficient attention is paid to the hegemonic social and political modalities through which the idea of race has been constructed. Its constitutedness is elided and effectively

naturalized. Even where its effects through racism- are invoked to prove and demonstrate its materiality, what its *empirical substance* by itself consists of is never explained” (Soudien 2015, 161).

Thus, Soudien believes in the existence of racism, even though not in race itself. And that is because, he would insist, racism is based on a false consciousness that the oppressed would do well to avoid. In other words, we would get closer to the elimination of racism if we stopped thinking about its false foundations.

Reading these sociological critiques of race one would be forgiven for thinking that the history of racial thought can be limited to the history of scientific racism as it emanated from Europe in the late eighteenth century. And yet, even though it has been dominant in shaping the modern world, this particular way of thinking about race is not the only way. But because it has been dominant, “the conventional use of EuroAmerican racism as the implicit comparative norm may desensitize us to the in many respects more subtle characteristics of racialized representation in other traditions, even to the extent of blinding us to their existence (Tanner 2010, 15-16). And yet, the fact that European scientists and philosophers such as Kant gave “race” a scientific cast should not hide from view the alternative conceptualizations offered by the likes of Johan von Herder. Blum describes the latter as an “egalitarian racialist” because of his appreciation of racial diversity (Blum 2015, 27). Herder was critical of racism and the ill-treatment of Black people:

you human, however, should honor yourself. Neither the pongo nor the gibbon is your brother, whereas the American and the Negro certainly are. You should not

oppress him, nor murder him, nor steal from him:for he is a human being just as you are...(Bernasconi 2000, 26)

Blum credits Herder for the “non-biologicistic national strain” (2015, 27). However, the origins of the concept of race even preceded Herder, and those origins further reinforce the non-biologicistic approach. According to Sollors, the first use of the concept can be found in the Spanish Inquisition when Castilians referred to Jews and the Moors as inferior “razza” d (“races”). But even “at this terrible beginning race was hardly based on perceptions of “phenotypal” difference, but on a religiously and politically and hence “culturally” defined distinction that was legislated to be hereditary, innate and immutable” (Sollors 1996, xxxv).

II. Black Perspectives on Race

The distinguished African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois “proposed a definition of race based on socio-historical criteria” (Bernasconi 2000, xiv). He defined race as “a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common histories, traditions, and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life” (Bernasconi 2000, 110). Black people thus had their own spiritual ideals which played a constitutive role in the making of American culture- its songs, fairy tales, art, comedy.

Du Bois’s approach to race seems to prefigure Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s idea of a shared “text of blackness” that begins with slaves acquiring a literary culture in order to demonstrate

their humanity at a time when the Enlightenment defined them as non-beings. While other writers might write for the pure enjoyment of it, the black slave wrote in order to affirm his humanity. Over time the Black literary culture carried common themes or what Gates called a text of blackness:

“ ‘a concord of sensibilities’ shared by persons of African descent in the Western hemisphere. Texts written over two centuries ago address what we might think of as common subjects of condition that continue to be strangely resonant, and relevant, as we approach the twenty-first century. Just as there are remarkably few literary traditions whose first century’s existences is determined by texts created by slaves, so too are there few traditions that claim such an apparent unity from a fundamental political condition represented over two hundred years in such strikingly similar patterns and details” (2014: 140)

Gates is also quick to caution that the passage of these texts across the generations does not take place “through some genetic inheritance but as topoi and tropes that are then revised to speak to relevant conditions over time” (2014, 141). This text does not tell a uniform story of blackness but one that can be best seen as consisting of different chapters of an unmistakable narrative of oppression.

The actual production of these texts also does not follow one uniform convention. In fact it often involved the deployment of various tropes that go against the convention or standard meaning of the master’s language. The slave had to conceal the true meaning of things if he was to survive. Thus, over time Black people in the United States used the rhetorical trope of Signifying to mask or encode messages through indirect speech.

Signifying could thus mean saying or gesturing the every opposite of what one meant, but the meaning could easily be decoded by members of the Black speech community.

Omni and Winant similarly describe how slaves constructed a language of resistance from within the bosom of the racial dictatorship:

In their language, in their religion, with its focus on the Exodus theme and on Jesus's tribulations, in their music with its figuring of suffering, resistance, perseverance, and transcendence, in their interrogation of a political philosophy which sought perpetually to rationalize their bondage in a supposedly free society, the slaves incorporated elements of racial rule into their thought and practice, turning them against their original bearers (2000, 200)

South Africa's Black Consciousness movement, founded by Steve Biko in 1968, is a supreme example of this political practice. When the movement emerged as a Blacks-only organization the apartheid government celebrated that finally Black people had come around to accepting their ideology. Little did they know – until several years after the movement was formed - that the movement's definition of Blackness was not the same as theirs. If the apartheid government had a biological or essentialist conception of Blackness, the movement adopted a political definition.

According to the movement's definition Blacks were "those who are by law and tradition, politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying [sic] as a unit towards their aspirations" (Biko 2004, 52). Even though

Africans, Coloureds and Indians were different in phenotype they now identified as Black because of their common political experience.

Larry Blum has thus observed that “the experience of Black Consciousness - and its definition of Blackness in political terms that incorporated African, Coloured and Indian people- is an example of exactly the kind of non-primordial, historically contingent concept of racialized identity” (2015, 38).

As if to anticipate charges of essentialism, Biko argued that to speak of culture was to highlight the values that had been generated through the politics of resistance- again emphasizing the movement’s non-primordial conception of race. He maintained that culture was political because it “emanates from a situation of common experience of oppression”. It was precisely because of its political production that no culture could develop in isolation from other cultures: “I am not here making a case for separation on the basis of cultural differences, I am sufficiently proud to believe that in a normal situation Africans can comfortably stay with people of other cultures and be able to contribute to the joint cultures of the communities they have joined” (Biko 2004, 50). He further compared culture to fashion: “cultures affect each other, like fashions and you cannot escape rubbing against somebody else’s culture (Biko 2004:147)”.

But would knowledge of this history have led to a different path on the part of the academics? In others words, is it true that greater knowledge is enough to change attitudes of white people towards Black people? Or is the intensity of racial subjectivity so strong that no amount of rational deliberation would have changed the outcome of the discussion in the UCT Senate? What seems to be at play here is that both Black and white people have constructed the world in starkly different ways- even in the absence of racism. Gates describes these worlds as follows:

what we are privileged to witness here is the (political, semantic) confrontation between two parallel discursive universes: the black American linguistic circle and the white. We see here the most subtle and perhaps the most profound trace of an extended engagement between two separate and distinct yet profoundly – even inextricably- related orders of meaning dependent precisely as much for their confrontation on relations of identity ... as on their relations of difference (2014, 50).

Black Intellectuals and the Construction of A Shared Text of Blackness in South Africa

Like their slave predecessors in the United States, early Black intellectuals developed their own shared “text of blackness”. According to Saunders it was the Christianized Eastern Cape elite who blazed the trail in terms of the development of “a new African consciousness” (1973, 17; 1988). There are certain common themes that run through the historical writings of these early intellectuals- and their successors. They were concerned with the history of the race – which also meant the nation. They were also concerned with preserving the cultural identity of the race or the nation. The preoccupation with these themes is understandable given the fundamentally cultural nature of colonialism. As Karl Polanyi remarked about colonial societies in general, it is “not economic exploitation as often assumed, but the disintegration of the cultural environment of the victim is then the cause of the degradation ... The result is a loss of self-respect, and standards, whether the unit is a people or a class...” (Polanyi 1957, 157-158).

Tiyo Soga, the first Black university graduate and first Black ordained Christian minister, is regarded as arguably the father of cultural nationalism among Black intellectuals in South

Africa. Soga, who had been educated in Scotland by the missionaries in the 1840's, was incensed when his childhood friend, John Chalmers, wrote a newspaper article in which he described black people as indolent and incapable of development. Soga's response is the earliest known literary reference to an African diaspora by a Black South African writer. He rebutted Chalmers with historical evidence of Black people overcoming the greatest odds all around the world. He spoke of the Negro

returning un-manacled to the land of his forefathers, taking back with him the civilisation and Christianity of those nations (see the Negro Republic of Liberia).

I find the Negro in the present struggle in America looking forward – though with still chains in his hands and chains on his feet – yet looking forward to the dawn of a better day for himself and all his sable brethren in Africa. (cited in Attwell 2005, 39-41).

Soga's race consciousness can be seen in the advice he gave to his children on the eve of their departure to study in Scotland

I want you, for your future comfort, to be very careful on this point. You will ever cherish the memory of your mother as that of an upright, conscientious, thrifty, Christian Scotchwoman. You will ever be thankful for your connection by this tie to the white race. But if you wish to gain credit for yourselves – if you do not wish to feel the taunt of men, which you sometimes may be made to feel – take your place in the world as coloured, not as white men, as kafirs, not as Englishmen. You will be more thought of for this by all good and wise people, than for the other. (cited in Attwell 2005, 39-41).

For a long time it was not known whether Soga had any relationships with other Africans in the diaspora. Joanne Davis argues that in Scotland Soga found himself at the heart of “ a community of radical black intellectuals pioneering for black colonization of Africa” in Scotland (Davis, 2012: 93). She discovered that despite his eventual marriage to a white Scotswoman, Janet Burnside, Soga was initially engaged to Stella Weims, the stepdaughter of Henry Highland Garnett, a prominent organizer in the Underground Railroad in the United States. Garnett was a close friend of Alexander Crummel, one of the visionaries behind the establishment of “the Negro Republic of Liberia” that Soga mentions in his rebuttal of Chalmers.

Soga was also in Scotland when the prominent African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass visited the United Kingdom on a campaign to highlight the plight of slaves. Douglass spoke at the major churches in Scotland, drawing large crowds to his “Send Back The Money” campaign. The campaign was aimed at the Free Church of Scotland for taking money from American slave-holders. Given Soga’s membership of the church, he most likely would have heard Douglass speak.

In yet another newspaper article Soga called on African people to do more historical research to establish the foundations of their culture:

The deeds of a nation are bigger than its cattle, its money and its food. ...did we not have nations? Where is their history? Where are their customs, both good and bad? Where are the views of past chiefs? Did we not have poets and who were they praising? Where is the history?” (Soga, 1865)

The preoccupation with Africa's past can also be seen in Pixley ke Seme's famous Regeneration of Africa speech at Columbia University (Seme, 1906). Seme would later become one of the founders of the South African National Native Congress (SANCC) in 1912. He started the Columbia speech by declaring his racial pride:

I have chosen to speak to you on this occasion about the Regeneration of Africa. I am an African and I set pride in my race over against a hostile public opinion. Men have tried to compare races on the basis of some equality ... the races of mankind are composed of free and unique individuals ... In all races, genius is like a spark, which, concealed in the bosom of a flint, bursts at the summoning stroke. It may arise anywhere and in any race.

Like Soga before him, Seme then extols the resilience of African people:

come with me to the ancient capital of Egypt, Thebes, the city of one hundred gates. The grandeur of its venerable ruins, and the gigantic proportions of its architecture, reduce to insignificance the boasted monuments of other nations. The pyramids of Egypt are structures to which the world presents nothing comparable ... I could have spoken of the pyramids of Ethiopia, which, though inferior in size to those of Egypt, far surpass them in terms of architectural beauty; their sepulchers which evince the highest purity of taste, and of many pre-historic ruins in other parts of Africa. In such ruins Africa is like the golden sun, that, having sunk beneath the western horizon, still plays upon the world which he sustained and enlightened."

Seme also uses the same imagery of Black people breaking free from their chains:

The brighter day is rising upon Africa . Already I seem to see her chains dissolved, her desert plains red with harvest, her Abyssinia and her Zululand the seats of science and of religion, reflecting the glory of the rising sun from the spires of their churches and universities.

For Seme a higher racial consciousness- to be read as national consciousness - is required among Africans people for the regeneration to take place

The basic factor, which assures their regeneration, resides in the awakened race-consciousness. This gives them a clear perception of their elemental needs and of their undeveloped powers. It therefore must lead them to the attainment of that higher and advanced standard of life.”

In the same speech he also responded to the American politician John Calhoun’s statement that his attitudes to slavery would change if he could find an African who could master the Greek syntax:

What might have been the sensation kindled by the Greek syntax in the mind of the famous Southerner, I have so far been unable to discover; but oh, I envy the moment that was lost! And woe to the tongues that refused to tell the truth! If any such were among the now living, I could show him among black men of pure African blood those who could repeat the Koran from memory, skilled in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, Arabic and Chaldaic - men great in wisdom and profound

knowledge - one professor of philosophy in a celebrated German university; one corresponding member of the French Academy of Sciences, who regularly transmitted to that society meteorological observations, and hydrographical journals and papers on botany and geology ... There are many other Africans who have shown marks of genius and high character sufficient to redeem their race from the charges which I am now considering.

S. E. K. Mqhayi, arguably the most prolific black intellectual of the early twentieth century, also articulated the need for African historical consciousness and cultural identity as the basis of regeneration:

a person who knows nothing of the historical events of his people lives his life with blunt teeth, he can't really get his teeth into anything he does the person has been taught that his chiefs are sly and he believes it; he has been taught that the great men of his nation steal, that they are thieves, cowards, liars; and he believes it. He does not realize that in so doing they are misleading him into abandoning his fathers and his chiefs (cited in Opland 2012, 28).

Mqhayi blamed the Eurocentric curriculum of the missionary colleges for the mis-education of Black children:

in all our training schools the history of only one nation is taught, the English; they are the only people with intelligence prudence, knowledge, they alone have

national heroes, they have never been defeated by any other nation on earth; they claim as theirs even those things that clearly did not originate with them, and in this way they indoctrinate nations who do not appreciate their awe of the English is exaggerated, that their respect for them is excessive. That is why a fool runs wild when he discovers them to be empty vessels, recalling all the years he honoured them where no honour was due. (Opland 2009, 18).

Yet another major intellectual, Magma Fuze published his classic, *Abantu Abamnyama: Lapha Bavela Khona (Black People and Whence They Came)* in 1923. According to Mokoena, Fuze was frustrated that his elders had been unable to answer his questions about their origins. The book was thus an attempt by the *kholwa* (educated elite) to fill this vacuum but also to do as their counterparts in the United States were doing – to announce their arrival on the modern stage through literature. Mokoena thus observes that “Fuze’s position as a *kholwa* intellectual finds full expression in his writing about origin” and that for him “history and discourse was based on the assumption that reviving the past was the first step in the construction of Africanist knowledge” (2011, 160).

The shared “text of Blackness” was not expressed only in newspapers. Saunders (1988) notes that Tiyo Soga’s son and famed journalist and founder of the South African Native Congress, Allan K. Soga, is reputed to have written a 500-odd page book, *The Problem of the Relations of Black and White in South Africa*, which was due for publication in Boston and in East London, South Africa. However, the manuscript mysteriously disappeared as so many black critical writings of the time did. A similar fate

befell Walter Rubusana's manuscript, "*A History of South Africa from a Native Standpoint*". His other book, *Zemnk' Inkomo Magwalandini* is still regarded as one of the most authoritative texts on Nguni lineages. The other great work of historical writing was of course Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*, which documented the impact of the Lands Act of 1913 (Saunders, 1988).

Rubusana went on to become the first black president of the South African Native Congress and the first black parliamentarian in South Africa. He was elected in 1909 when black people enjoyed limited franchise in the Cape. He lost his bid for re-election- in large part due to John Tengo Jabavu's decision to enter the 1914 elections against Rubusana. The effect was to split the Black vote and allow the white candidate to win.

Jabavu had for a time been the most famous mission-educated Black person since Tiyo Soga. He established the first Black owned newspaper in 1886 – *Imvo Zabantsundu (Black Opinion)*. Again one can see in the title an explicit reference to racial identity. Jabavu's arrogance turned him against younger activists such as Allan K. Soga, all of whom joined hands in 1890 to form the organization that would ultimately become the ANC- the South African Native Congress.

However, by the middle of the century the tone of Black writers and political leaders had become much more radical. The famed writer Eskia Mphahlele noted that "those among us who listened to the people's exhortations in speech and song caught the mood and recorded it in our fiction" (2004, 37).

The idea of intellectuals as agents of their people was conveyed by the writer H.I.E Dhlomo in his tribute to the Zulu poet, EAH Made. Here again the reference to racial identity is unmistakable:

Conditions in South Africa are such that the African Race lives as a Nation engaged in a decisive and terrible war. Our manhood is degraded daily. Our children starve, cry and die. Our country is not our own. In times such as these a Race must rise and marshal all its forces. And one of these forces are words. The writer's duty is to give ammunition and inspiration; ideas and expression to the illiterate and inarticulate; balm and hope to the oppressed, the despairing and lowliest. He must mirror and tell of the people, reveal their soul and suffering, expose their exploitation, fight by their side, sing their tribulations and triumphs, their naked practical experiences and their hidden, flaming, and unconquerable spiritual valour... To do this, the writer must identify himself with his people. He must exploit, bleed and give of himself. That is where great creative souls in art science and literature transcend mere politicians, opportunists and others...

(Masilela 2011, 36-37)

Robert Sobukwe, who would later become the founding president of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), articulated this same quest for Black intellectual agency during his famous Completers Social speech in his capacity as president of the Students Representative Council at the University of Fort Hare in 1949:

It has always been my feeling that if it is the intention of the Trustees of this College to make it an African college or university, as I have been informed it is, then the Department of African Studies must be more highly and more rapidly developed. Fort Hare must become the centre of African studies to which students in African studies must come from all over Africa. We should also have a

department of economics and a department of sociology. A nation to be a nation needs specialists in these things. (Sobukwe, 1949)

Sobukwe questioned the predominance of Europeans on the staff and the all-too-often response that it would take time to create a genuinely African university:

After the college has been in existence for thirty years the ration of European to African staff is four to one. And we are told that in ten years' time we might become an independent university. Are we to understand by that an African university predominantly guided by European thought and informed by European staff. I said last year that Fort Hare must be to African what Stellenbosch [University] is to the Afrikaner. It must be the barometer of African thought.

Coming shortly after and inspired by Sobukwe, Steve Biko also laid great stress on historical writing as the basis of the struggle to restore Black people's self-knowledge:

We have to rewrite our history and produce in it the heroes who formed the core of our resistance to the white invaders. More has to be revealed, and stress has to be laid on the successful nation building attempts of men such as Shaka, Moshoeshoe, Hintsa. These areas call for intense research to provide some sorely-needed missing links. We would be too naïve to allow our conquerors to write unbiased histories about us but we have to destroy the myth that our history starts in 1652, the year van Riebeeck landed at the Cape. (Biko 2004, 70)

Biko argued that the failure to write this history could not be laid at the door of white people, if Black people themselves did not create their own institutions:

One must quickly add that the moral of the story is not that therefore we must castigate white society and its newspapers...the real moral of the story is that we blacks must on our own develop those agencies that we need, and not look up to unsympathetic and often hostile quarters to offer these to us (Biko 1972, 7-8).

Conclusion

Historically, South African sociology has been a conversation among white academics about how to treat Black people. What Black people themselves may have thought was never part of the equation. From its origins in Afrikaans universities as part and parcel of the system of the colonial and apartheid domination to its role in generating critiques of that system through class theory, and the less influential Weberian and liberal schools, the discipline never had Black thinkers as its central sources. Over the past four years I have sought to correct this situation by introducing to my students the history of Black thought I have discussed in this paper. The results have been phenomenal for Black and white students albeit in different ways. Suddenly, the performance of some Black students has skyrocketed because they can relate more to Steve Biko and Robert Sobukwe than they can to Talcott Parsons or Max Weber or Karl Marx. These are figures they would have grown up hearing about or about whom they can easily learn from their parents and community members. This is less so with Talcott Parsons or Karl Marx or Max Weber. Just as important is that this is the first time they have been taught by a black academic, and the first time they have heard anyone tell them that “Black history matters”. The rage we see

among Black students on predominantly white university campuses is a reflection of this alienation from their history

Some of the white students are just as upset that they have never been exposed to this history throughout their schooling experiences and in their own personal lives. To see the whites depend on the very Black students they would normally disregard as sources of insight is in many ways a comforting sight because of the relationships it fosters among them. The classroom becomes much more than a place of instruction, it is also a place of self-discovery. They ask in exasperation, “ But why have we not been taught this history?”.

Burawoy urges sociologists to stop thinking of students as “empty vessels into which we pour our mature wine, nor blank slates upon which to inscribe our profound knowledge” (2005, 9). Black students on the campuses have shown that they will not accept that condition.

Burawoy also urges sociologists to think of students as “carriers of a rich lived experience that we elaborate into a deeper self-understanding of the historical and social contexts that have made them who they are” (2005, 9). This is the historical and social experience that Black students are demanding to see in the curriculum. It is also the self-understanding that white students increasingly desire as they seek to break from the association with racism. Much of the sociology that is taught is based on a set of “domain assumptions” that are at odds with the “infrastructure of sentiments” in the broader society (Gouldner 1971, 398). As in the United States in the 1960’s the protests are a manifestation of the dissonance between the taken-for-granted assumptions of the white academy and the lived reality of race among Black students.

The dissonance provides an opportunity for creative responses that could in turn lead to different conceptualizations of race, culture and identity in the academy. Those creative responses can no longer be just the provenance of white South African academics, or draw on the

same sources of knowledge. The implications of this are clear for sociology. South Africa needs more Black sociologists defining the curriculum- a challenge that will require more than the handful of Black sociology professors in the country. The shared “text of Blackness” could be the basis of a conversation between Black and white academics about how a new sociology might look like.

Biko envisaged a “joint culture” for South Africa: “Sure it [the joint culture] will have European experience because we have whites here who are descended from Europe. We don’t dispute that. But for God’s sake it must have African experience as well” (2004, 148). He also famously suggested that “a country in Africa, in which the majority of people are African must inevitably exhibit African values and be truly African in style (2004: 26) . This is no less true and urgent for South African sociology, twenty years after the end of apartheid. For, as Worger (2014) has observed, South African universities “remain overwhelmingly white even as the structure of South Africa’s politics has completely transformed (Worger, 2014:211).

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