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CHAPTER 12
BEYOND AFROPESSIMISM. IDENTITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN A GLOBALISING WORLD

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We are told by R.J. Barrett and J.Cavannagh (1996), that globalisation has conjured four areas of transnational connectivity- a global, unfettered, flexible financial market; a global network of manufacturing spaces and workplaces; a global shopping-mall and a new and visceral, global "cultural bazaar". These four areas of connectivity, we are told, are the latest feat of the world's capitalist system- a feat that has occurred on the basis of new productive powers which feed off the achievements of a profound microelectronics revolution and the informational technologies that it has spawned.

Scanning, the latest scripts of this phenomenon is not easy: it is not only that so much trivia is being written about this topic, save the claim that we are in a new phase in capitalism, s development and that new strategies, adjustments and forms of thinking are demanded of us, if we are to survive this brave new world. And for us in South Africa, having buried the gun we are faced with the problem of how we could come to understand our new roles and how to shape our aspirations beyond them. And how as social scientists we can learn about our present, how we should learn not to demean our past, and how to redefine our future.

Ordinary people in South Africa have responded to our globalisation, using their capacities to the full. The dominant image is of poor people with shopping trolleys raiding the streets and backyards for scrap metal; stripping everything that can be stripped off its metallic parts; fighting against municipal guards who are trying to chase them off the rubbish heaps to separate pieces of tin and iron from organic matter; others with guns are going for bigger booty- smart cars for syndicates and small cars for the "chopshops" and the scrap-metal merchants. And all of them have responded pronto, to a global demand for scrap metal that is being exported by shipload after shipload from Durban's harbour, to exotic places never even seen on TV or pronounced properly on radio. The thought is appealing too, a scrap-metal nation as metaphor and reality and of course, the defining image of the man or woman pushing and rattling the shopping trolleys through our streets and through our minds.

Of course to conceive of our role as a social scientist in South Africa in similar terms -resolute post-modern survivors scanning the streets and the information highways, raiding for scrap in globalised urban ruins, negotiating our identities through a maze of scrap dealers, is gutsy and profound but it is not what we have

come to expect of our revolution, even from its most startling defeats'. We wanted a different way through the paths, the famished roads and the high-roads of economic development. But to get there we have to clear some mental barricades: to dare to think that during these times of globalisation and of a wide spreading Afropessimism, our thinkings and imaginings do matter.

True, a world system of economic relations pre-existed capitalism's ascendance as Abu-Lughod (1989) demonstrated; true too, as Wallerstein has also pointed out, such a system was reorganised through at first European and then US hegemony; but the new writing seems to insist that as the mill nurtured feudalism and the turbine and its grease nurtured capitalism so has the computer, we are told, given us a new post-modern era: an informational mode of development.

Of course each claim is being actively contested. There are scholars who are trying to define how new is the new in combat with those who point to coherent continuities in all the acclaimed "new-nesses". But what is devastating for us, is that no matter how distinct their analyses might be, in all their texts there is a disturbing consensus: that Africa's prospects are bleak and worsening by the day.

What also is "consented" by all parties is that we are in the middle of a further splicing of the world's life-chances. The new world's flows of information and knowledge, presuppose a level of technological capacity if any meaningful "participation" or "connectivity" can exist- a capacity that is leaving nations, regions and clusters of people marginalised in a new way. As Castells (1989) has shown in his informational City, the new "place-less" logic of flows has brought with it new forms of radical inequality.

For example, we are told that we have entered a qualitatively different stage of post-modernism, post-industrialism, that demands new political and intellectual trajectories. We are also told that the new stage is an intensification of the "old"- it is indeed a hypermodernism with multiple capitalist energies and routes to modernity. So instead of a "polycentric world" (Amin,1985) with alternative economic systems, the new world order is interconnected and polycentric in its capitalist accumulation strategies (Watts and Pred,1991)

In his latest volume, Castells sounds a warning that :"the systematic logic of the new global economy, does not have much of a role for the majority of the African population in the newest international division of labour". (1996, p.1935) Africa's declining economic fortunes have turned into "structural irrelevance(ibid) with a possibility of a slide into a fourth world. Such a pessimistic scenario is echoed by Giovanni Arrighi who, despite his disagreement about the novelty of this new phase, concurs on our continental prospects:"entire communities, countries, even continents, as the case of sub-Saharan Africa, have been declared redundant superfluous to the changing concerns of capital accumulation on a world scale" (1994, p.330)

Afropessimism, the conception and image of Africa as a continent in institutional, mental, economic decline, a cauldron of misery is very much with us. Africa is presented as a continent of Islamic fundamentalisms in its north, of amassing

chaos and anarchy, an incubator of epidemics and disease, drought and scarcity, coups and genocide, in short, the world's horrific racialised "other". And during this real and symbolic moment where for the first time in history, as the postmodern sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1997) asserted, the "poor don't matter", our fate seems sealed: the tarpit of human degeneration or selective participation in a cultural bazaar-as commodified exotica or ornaments. "Afropessimism", this tendency with a name, this "claim" which is "highly skeptical of the continent's ability to rejuvenate itself from within. Whether seen as a problem of incomplete conquest or as one of unwise deference to traditional authorities" (Mamdani,1996a, p. 285) has become a daunting barricade.

Moving beyond Afropessimism is also a daunting prospect. For a sociologist like Castells, South Africa is a site of or for possible renewals:"the most helpful prospects for future development in Africa come from the potential role that could be played by the new, black majority South Africa, with strong economic and technological linkages in the global economy. The stability and prosperity of South Africa and its willingness and capacity to lead its neighbours as *primus inter pares*, offers the best chance to avoid the human holocaust that threatens Africa and through Africa, the sense of humanity in all of us" (1996, p.136). The responsibility is profound- on the one hand the image of the human holocaust on the other our role, *primus inter pares*, an agency for human and intellectual renewal.

But Castells who is a libertarian and a socialist intellectual, intends for us to think much further through his statement, however similar it sounds to statements from the World Bank, the EEC and the USA, flattering us into a belief that we could be the neo-liberal conduit for renewal and development. We are coaxed into such patterns of thinking by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki as well, who, during his honorary inaugural talk at the University of Natal, threw the challenge at the Academy: how are we to respond to the social tragedy of the Lake districts and of Zaire, could we become the central dynamo, fanning into space a new African Renaissance? Of course his office has proclaimed such a Renaissance and it seems to inform his diplomatic forays into crisis-areas and into bilateral and multi-lateral talks. People like Vusi Mazimbela (The Independent, 22.06.97) has started sketching some of its socioeconomic parameters: a move beyond mere structural adjustment to embody democratic forms of governance, self-determination and the lessons of the Asian tigers on growth and development.

The image of our resolute urban survivor with her/his shopping trolley returns; can this creature be the source of renewal and regeneration? Last year at the SASA Congress I argued that we are experiencing a waning of our sociological powers. A more apt image would be the same survivor pushing through the paths an imaginary trolley, pretending to be loaded with the most intricate ironworks. And like a character out of a Soyinka, an Okri or a Mda novel spend time both praising each item for its robustness and beauty and selling it to others who are carrying wheelbarrow- loads of imaginary money. I insisted that at a moment when the most acute need for innovation and imagination in order to respond to our reconstruction and development needs, our ranks were depleted, our visions

were dwindling and at best we became poor imitators of and borrowers of recycled modernisation and post-modernisation ideas. There have been some swift responses to my exaggerated claims: Eddie Webster (1997) has argued that indeed that we are not just imitators and that there were texts around that demonstrated an interaction between global and local ideas. Charles Crothers (1997) too has responded by pointing to the varied work that is happening which at least was rooted in some real problems.

I am worried that we might be patting ourselves on the back for the wrong reasons- most social science in South Africa and dare I say in Africa as such, has been linked to narratives and visions of emancipation- whether it was about the return of a pre-colonial past or the construction of a 'modernised" society, whether it was to bring about development or socialism, healing or reconstruction, such narratives gave research and writing a direction. Not only have some of these ideas been rubbished by post-modern trends, but some of the most crucial ones have failed because the experiments carried out in their name were either defeated or led to imponderable messes.

The continent has had a sad record of dwindling dreams of identity, self-determination and development; and anyone honest enough has to admit that for example Nkrumah's panafrican vision for an autonomous community of economic relations against imperialism, has been distorted; that the revolutionary trajectory, inspired by Marx and Fanon, that looked at either the proletarian or the peasant as agencies of revolutionary ferment has been distorted too; the various classes and agencies for transformation gave way to different patronage systems; if at all, Fanon's writings have become canonical, figurative texts, in the battles of black emigre intellectuals in Europe and the United States. (Ehabha,1993 and Gordon et al, 1996.) And, honest analyses of the collapse of visions, dreams, narratives and meta-narratives have been the preserve of novelists from Armah, Ngugi, Achebe to Okri, Hove and Mahfouz, rather than the preserve of social science.

Southern Africa after the decolonisation of Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Zambia, was animated by the anticolonial struggles of Mozambique, Angola and the struggles against the Rhodesian and South African settler regimes. Through them there was a turn to left ideas and theories. Whether the struggles were informed by Marxism-Leninism, by Mao, Cabral, Fanon or others, they inspired scholarship and debate about the nature of neo-colonial economic relations, dependency, self -reliance, in short "inequality"; and through these discourses of power and powerlessness, of racial domination and subordination, the issues of identity and development emerged as liberation politics. It was in little enclaves of research and scholarship that such ideas matured, in University environments that were hostile to even conservative forms of liberalism.

The image of the social scientist was of a person (man and woman) with a book under the one armpit, an electricity pole under the other, with an AK47 on the back with a heads of corn dangling from a belt of sackloth-s/he was about emancipatory development, indeed: *uhuru*. Different national independence

movements dressed the image differently: from leather and cloth from precolonial times to factory overalls, from military fatigues to dresses. By placing the two images next to each other, the contrast is startling and demands volumes of words to describe the process of transmutation that places a shopping-trolley with scrap in her-his hands.

What I am trying to express through such images and figures that haunt our pages is that we are facing three major problems as social "scientists" before we can even start thinking of our own trajectory and maps : we are facing a significant decline in the material resources that underpin scholarship with its concomitant implications; we are witnessing a drift towards deterioration in the scholarly milieu that informs our work and finally, we are growing our very own psychological blockages. All this is occurring in the midst of a collapse in our broader socio-ethical commitments.

Firstly, Universities are in decline as institutions; this reflects a broader global process of reductions in public spending as monetarism in the West and structural adjustment in the so-called "third world" has nudged funding away from most tertiary institutions. Whereas this process has led to a regrouping of Universities away from the Human and the Social Sciences and a rapid needs-driven "professionalisation", the weakness and maldevelopment of many countries in the world's periphery (and in Africa in particular) has led to a real constriction-on posts, salaries, and whole departments and sections. And, as academics had to move out of their formal employment and earn to subsidize their dwindling incomes, they became party to forms of developmentalism nurtured by aid-related Western NGOs and started researching other people's agendas. At worst many social scientists became second-tier players in international developmental fashions. At best, many were lucky to collaborate on many progressive intellectual foci initiated by more sensitive and sensible institutions. The development of a funded interest in gender research for example, has been both empowering and restricting. (M.Snyder and M.Tedesse, 1995, A. Mama, 1996)

In South Africa, the proliferation of black/ethnic/homeland Universities during the Apartheid years made sure that the broader racialised inequalities reproduced themselves programmatically. Already in 1985/6 the Sociological Association (ASSA) was raising the alarm about staff: student ratios in the HBUs and the demographics of social science experts in the country. Although the resource imbalances are beginning to be addressed through the new government's policies we have still, for example a Department of Sociology at the University of the North with 2.5 members of staff teaching 900 students and departments in HWUs with a complement of 14-16 teaching the same number of students. The tragedy is that as transformations are proceeding, the new policies encourage a shift away from the human and social sciences and a renewed emphasis in engineering and technology. So the thought, entertained by Castells that the well-resourced south might be playing a role of renewal and collaborative leadership might be a momentary flattery.

Secondly, as I have already argued before (Sitas, 1996) our sociological traditions were hybrid amalgams of trans-disciplinary work, all patched-up together to respond, with vigour and imagination, to problem-contexts thrown up in actual struggles by a plethora of social movements. Not only is there a change in the kind of problem-contexts we encounter, but the intellectual milieu and its creativity are in a kind of (and here since I have been criticised about the usage of the word "waning") recess. True enough, the ANC-led government has established Commissions with remarkable research agendas: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Gender and Human Rights Commission, the list is long and growing.. Through them many scholars have found challenges and their contribution is too early to assess; each Ministry furthermore, seems to be taking research very seriously indeed and for its part the Human Sciences Research council has pioneered serious capacity-building programmes. The trajectory is not bleak, it is rather like all government initiated Commissions rather narrow.

Unless, associations such as ours move to create a new dialogue between intellectuals in power, in office, in social movements, in NGOs, in Research NGOs and the Academy, a parting of our "professional" ways is a first defeat in which intellectual suspicions can and may proliferate. Without that intellectual community, renewal will be a slogan. And in this context alone, fighting for a SASA that is both generous in its tolerance of diversity and highly focused on our prospects of renewal, is more than a worthwhile task.

Thirdly, there is a serious pressure to define ourselves as "different" in the world context of ideas. Trying to be more than peripheral exotica in the "global cultural bazaar" of social science we are bumping up against the niche trading tents we have been offered. Such a niche, usually defined by African Studies programmes keeps our work separate from the mainline of social scientific work. Of course we can be cynical and say that even here,.very few of us are considered good enough to be included, like Ali Farka Toure and Azof N'Dour in the category called "world music", as decorative additions.

But cynicism is misplaced as the form and nature of the bazaar these days, despite its colonial origins, has been formed through exhaustive intellectual struggles: African American intellectuals and immigrant communities in the world's metropoles whether Carribean, Algerian Turkish, or Cypriot have opened up spaces for the voice of the world, s others; what they did not intend was a bazaar or spaces for figurative inclusions. But that is what exists for us and it creates a "voice-distortion" which makes for both demeaning and empowering experiences. And we do cut a peculiar image with our feral shopping trolleys rattling up and down the stands. As Appiah has stated recently, a victim and victor in the process which is created by "a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them, both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other and for Africa (1991, p.149)

So finding a critical space and a voice at once particular, unique, resonant in South Africa, and the continent- a voice which is at the same time universally appreciated and meaningful becomes a major task in the context of declining resources and possibilities. And we do need to move beyond the image of the trolley-pusher in the context of the tasks that lie ahead.

There have been remarkable attempts by CODESRIA and OSREA to create research networks which now have become available to and desirable for many meaningful collaborations. Collaborations though sound at a formal level could be fascinating but if there is no substance, commitment and creativity, they can turn bothersome and useless. They presuppose active and searching, committed and reliable scholarship. But can we speak of social science here and beyond our borders in the same way as Appiah does about popular creativity in Africa? According to him, "despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite unimaginable poverty; despite wars, malnutrition, disease and political instability, African cultural productivity grows apace: popular literatures, oral narrative and poetry, dance, drama and music and visual art all thrive". (1991, p.136). I think we can, with some caution.

But to declare that "we" can, is already a political question of identity and identification, and to ask "what" are we to do throws up the question of teleology, progress, development, transformation: "We" sociologists. "well social scientists, "we" panafricanists,"well nationalists, "well blacks, "well whites, "well women, "we" members of the Ethekwini surfers' soviet, these are profoundly political claims, empowering and exclusive, as we are trying to negotiate identities in this maze of problems. And as Africa has been constructed through racialised categories, through slavery and violence and through geographic randomness, any category in use is marked by history and oppression.

Of course here in South Africa, "our" task has been to "nation build" and to create a new South Africanism beyond our apartheid past. At its crudest such a process manifests itself as emanations and invocations of a "rainbow nation" at its best it is involved in reconstruction and development and the creation of a society of civic virtue. At its most disappointing it has brought about the anti-social practices of raiding, maiming and smashing up; at its more tragic it has involved the oral testimonies of hundreds of victims of Apartheid abuse and torture, violence and oppression to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission despite the realisation that the process is mostly symbolic and performative. But as we are searching for that ever elusive and unattainable "we", we know that such essentialisms are crumbling in the new global world of ideas.

There is.a growing crisis of "territoriality", to use the jargon, as the "nation" and the "nation state", this complex mix of people, history and territory is shown up to be a problematic category. As we are standing here a debate is raging in India whether India should be considered a nation with a national state or, many nations demanding fragmentation. T.K. Oommen defines the nation as "a territorial entity to which the people have an emotional attachment and in which they have invested a moral meaning: it is a homeland-ancestral or adopted. It is the fusion

of territory and language which makes a nation; a nation is a community in communication in its homeland" (1997, p.33) This leads to a conception of India as many intertwined nationalities held together by a post-colonial state. For Mukherjee (1997) has argued the importance of the nation-state forged through the anti-colonial struggles and the collective forms of development that it can and did generate. In the former, any notion of a "well becomes bracketed in the latter it is a legitimate marker of a collective disposition.

Claude Ake's work too had shifted from looking at nations as subjects of emancipation in an imperial world (Ake, 1987) to look at democratisation and the "forgotten" people of Africa's modernity (1996); similarly Mamdani's (1996) Citizen and Subject, inveighs against versions of the traditional and modern and the implausibility of the post-colonial states.

Inspired by new theories of 'difference" and "essentialism" scholars everywhere are trying to define multiple destinations. For example, Appiah criticises the appellation "African": "many African societies have much in common with traditional societies that were not African than they do with each other"(1991, p.91) ; similarly, Mamdani's (1996) injunctions about African studies "as the study of self and indeed of selves- as a source of self knowledge" with profound implications for ontology ("what is Africa?" "Who is African?"), beyond racial and racist genetic, stereotypes) are bound to anger Afrocentric nationalists..

For some time the growth of critiques of Euro-centrism (See Amin, 1992) has spawned other versions of "essentialism". As Wallerstein has remarked recently (1997), "even if, as a result of the declining position of the Western world, Eurocentrism was to die out as an intellectual force, it might come to be replaced by some other "centrism", Japanocentrism or Sinocentrism, for example." And, in our case, dare I add, Afrocentrism. What is occurring in modern trends of social science and cultural studies is a dismantling of essentialisms, centred-subjectivities and collective identity assumptions. Indeed, any claim to an essential collectivity, from race to class, from ethnos to gender-specific identifications is seen as both invalid and a commitment to metanarratives of suspect proportions.

So "our" dilemma is enormous: not only have the movements who gave meaning to the contexts of our research declined; not only do the new globalised trends leave us behind, but our intellectual, moral certainties, our identities and identifications, our abilities to group ourselves and slouch towards some Jerusalem, Mecca or Utopia are questioned.

So is there a way out? I think, and here I am sticking my neck out for the post-modern theoretical scalpel- there has to be a way out. There has to be one because we are told that Africa's and more specifically, South Africa's poor have become, like the 34.20i of the population in the United States: poorer. And as Castells and Arrighi pointed out, such woes are becoming irrelevant for the Group of Seven superpowers that run our accounting columns. The US aid story of radical cuts of up to 40% and a growing emphasis on programs that enhance marketisation. (Cason, 1997) is worrying enough. And it is, the World Bank and the IMF-imposed marketisation and structural adjustment programmes that have brought ruin,

according to Michael Barratt-Brown (1995) to Africa's agriculture, to its social and communal infrastructures and by implication have caused increased indebtedness. In turn, it is these policies we are told that have fueled ethnic tensions and violence.

For the UN sponsored Commission for Africa (1989) the road for recovery was away from structural adjustment programmes. Its emphasis was on a different track- it was on the creative potential of indigenous institutions, on grassroots forms of cooperation and values. As Barratt Brown noted, and here we return to the question of identity again: an Afrocentric way would have to build on African perceptions of "human beings as the fulcrum of development"..with its emphasis on the "extended family, (the) cooperative spirit of self-development and traditional sanctions on leadership "(1995, p.168) It has to build on cultural formations that are "while not communistic ... (they were) communitarian (ibid, p.4).

Whether romantic or suspect, a range of sources are beginning to hint at the possibilities of a renewal and the re-configuration of the social sciences to shove and push us beyond Afropessimism: the notion that there is value in our local experiences and traditions; the notion that despite the ugliness and pain, the " Violence and the images of thousands of people fleeing their land, their homes, popular creativity continues; the notion that we can be different but in constant comradely dialogue with others. The list, can be expended into a wall-chart.

So if the image of the sociologist and intellectual as an enabling guerilla of the spirit emerging from a liberation struggle with books and electricity for the people, does not count or fit current sensibilities; if the image of the urban raptor gathering scrap is, for our craft's sake, misplaced; the only metaphor for social science comes from our very own local experience: a patched-up oxcart, made of the trinkets and tarnish and stuff we have gathered, might be more appropriate. Indeed, oral poets, izimbongi in the growing labour movement of the 1980s used the expression "inqola masondosondo" 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. And finally, it is neither pre-modern, modern or post-modern, it could be all of them at once, and at once communally accessible.

We should have learnt that our best work as social scientists created four creative ferments: it was in dialogue with ordinary people (and here I need to emphasise black people) and their organisations. This dialogue did not happen because such a dialogic relationship generated better data, insights, qualitative quotations for dissertations but because the cultural formations, resistances and filters people created had profound theoretical relevance. They caused an irruption of situational knowledges and narrations, beyond mere "oral testimonies" and "rural-urban appraisals". We have not even begun to learn from this source of creativity and at a moment, like ours, when a new politics of the poor is emerging around us, we search for platitudes in either technocratic modernisation narratives or post-modern obscurantisms.

Secondly, if there is an intellectual lesson that was crafted on our sensibilities, it was that Weber and the post-structuralists were wrong: the institutions of racial, gender and class domination did not and could not "interpellated people as "subjects". From the plantation, the mining compound, the hostel, the prison and the prison of the "house of fish", Robben Island, we have learnt that, despite the totality of controls and despite, "the most ingenuous system of exploitation, yet devised" (Rex, 1994) and despite "power" being dispersed everywhere, people generated forms of resistance that were dissonant, alternative and polyvalent. The theoretical implications of these "refractions" and "diffractions" have not been gathered or hunted out, yet.

Thirdly, any psychologist who has dealt with torture and violence victims; any cultural activist who has facilitated workshops with those who survived the civil war; any activist social scientist who had to sustain torture and interrogation; any woman or man, most often black who had umkhumulatntsika, the destruction of the pillars of the home; happen all around them; any person that had the pressures and spirits of evil chase them to an inyanga, a sangoma or a counselor; any and all of them/us know that post modernism's 'decentered subjectivity" is a privileged piece of superficiality. The struggle to keep one's navigating mechanisms as a human being centered and the consequences when torture and pressure tore that "centering" apart, and the shards and fragments and de-centered furies that followed, make most current theories banal and in a post-modern way, West-centric.

Fourthly, any metanarrative of emancipation cannot be "totalising": when we scratch on paper the words "human-centred" we can never mean one thing. What we have learnt, I hope, it is at least three things- that it should cover individual gendered freedoms, group and cultural formation-based freedoms and yes, collective, generic, freedoms. To put it crudely: rights for one, rights for some and rights for all. Phrased differently- our social scientific experience in dialogue with emergent resistance movements has taught us that there is an asymmetry between structure and function; between the collective and the particular; between the group and the micro-organisms that make it.

Here, the construction of the most militant labour movement occurred on the mobilisation and respect of cultural diversity and creativity.

In general, our patched-up oxcart brings with it knowledges, experiences, theories, conjectures, status scripts, noises and data that we need to share in a globalised world of puzzling proportions. The confidence that we have something to say through all this cargo will be a first enabling step. Whether ours can be shared, whether it can be a source for a renaissance, whether it can function as a primus inter pares, whether it can be strong enough to sustain research on identities and development, remains a question for all of us. To think that the answer is "yes" you have already positioned ourselves beyond Afropessimism.

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