

### "Wonderfull times to be a sociologist, everywhere is your laboratory": interview with Prof. Ari Sitas (Cape Town)

Goecke, Tobias

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**“Wonderful times to be a  
sociologist, everywhere is  
your laboratory”**

## Interview with Professor Ari Sitas

*(University of Cape Town,  
South Africa) on 23rd June, 2010.*

conducted by Tobias Goecke

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### **Q: Mr Sitas, please, tell us about the history and development of sociology in South Africa.**

**A:** Sociology has a specific history in this country. It started from being a very conservative discipline in the 1930s. During this time, it was much about social order, and about – let me be frank – social blindness, because the Other didn't exist. The Other was for anthropology, not for sociology. So sociology at that time was a white social order discipline.

Until the 1970s most of the social ideas or sociological thinking grew from outside the universities in the context of the rising anti-apartheid movements. It started to get into the universities only after the big strikes by black workers in 1973. And all of a sudden liberal academics like Leo Kuper, Fatima Meer and Ben Magubane wanted to understand what was going on, and were opposing the separation of the colours. Universities opened up spaces for more critical studies of society. And that's when the change slowly began.

There are five strands which are important to the development of South African sociology. Initially it was multi-disciplinary, a lot of mixing. For me the boundaries between sociology and anthropology are a colonial construction anyway. There shouldn't be any boundaries.

The first thing that started getting strong in South African universities was labour studies. One example is the work of Wiebke Keim, which is about central and peripheral sociologies.

The second strand was a political sociology which tried to understand race, ethnicity, conflict in society, and social movements.

As third strand, increasingly because of the HIV/AIDS problem, you have a lot of health sociology strengthening, and then by implication development sociology.

And finally there are the beginnings of some theoretical work. Very much in a quandary about where it should be going, but it's getting stronger.

### **What are the major developments in contemporary South Africa as a society?**

Firstly, if you imagine a highly regulated system of urban and rural controls, of homelands, of apartheid, of no freedom of movement etc., and when all of this suddenly breaks down or is transformed, a whole range of new dynamics are emerging. – A lot of people moving into urban areas, a lot of (illegal) immigration from the rest of the continent, because of the opportunities here. Cities are changing. – The base of the society is quite uncertain. And there is a lot of unemployment, also because of changes in work patterns and livelihoods, so you find a lot of marginal economic activity.

### **And all this happened because of the system's change after apartheid ended in 1994?**

Yes. – Secondly, there is a process of economic transformation happening supported by Affirmative Action programmes, which are about putting black people into jobs and positions. There is a lot of tension around that. Whatever is happening in the area of race and economy, it is highly mobilised now.

Thirdly, there is tension between what is in the constitution – people know now what is in the constitution – and what can be delivered by the

government. People are demanding services etc. And although there is integration there is also conflict and polarisation.

Equality is not there. Redistribution has not happened as it was envisaged to happen. Some of the disparities are increasing. These are problems of a society that has gone through a socio-political revolution without going through an economic revolution. There is more freedom, definitely. You can say what you want, the state won't beat you up, but others might do [laughing].

South Africa has moved economically too, just as the rest of the continent. Like Brazil, India and China, we're beginning to become a regional power that is quite decisive for the region. So there is the question: Does South Africa become a little imperial overlord, or a partner in development? So these are wonderful times to be a sociologist, because everywhere you go it's your laboratory [laughing].

### **Is there a South African sociology? In contrast to e.g. American or European sociology?**

There are people who want to put labels. Of course there is South African sociology, and of course there is American sociology. But substantively we all agree that we are looking at a world that is interconnected, interdependent, patterned, unequal and evolving. We disagree about what we put in there. What for some people is called modernity, for others it's called imperialism or neo-colonialism. There are different inflections in the story. There is not only one story.

## How is the issue of race addressed and discussed in South Africa?

There is a lot of work on race, colonialism, etc. But in South Africa these issues are a little different from the US context, because we are not talking about minorities here.

In the US, the African American slaves were always a minority of the population. There is a certain dynamic which is similar to the history of race in South Africa, but not exhaustively. Their non-racism for instance means the inclusion of African Americans in the US, whereas non-racism in South Africa is not that. Because here we are talking about a majority of black people that was never properly enslaved. Apartheid and segregation created all kinds of exclusions, forms of domination, but it's the majority effected here. And once the majority starts mobilising, it is soon the question whether whites are acceptable to blacks, and not the other way around.

South Africa was also the only place in the world left with the institutions of racial domination continued until 1994. So this institutional prop is very important.

## What are the most recent developments in the field of the social sciences?

There is a sense and a search for sociologies of the global south. We are working hard – and it's going to take years – to change the canon of sociology, so all the stories in the world can be told. Not only looking at the common sequence of Western development. But trying to look at the world as more interconnected since the 17th century, and to understand institutions emerged anywhere in the world as in relation to each other.

Also to see not only what the rest of the world lacks, but what the rest of the world has which has to be articulated.

## In Germany we have a lot of discussions about economisation of universities, and funding cuts in the humanities...

There have been cuts in the humanities in South Africa as well. The sciences and engineering have benefited. There has been vocationalisation. People say: "You don't need sociology, you need *industrial* sociology." There has been a lot of that pressure.

There are universities in this country that have closed their social science sections completely. That is a global phenomenon. On the one hand the market is coming into the universities, on the other hand there is more regulation. Everything has to be assessed all the time. A lot of bureaucracy is moving in to monitor the funding and the performance of academics. Germany is starting to feel the pinch, and if you don't resist it, you'll be like England quite soon where these things are the most extreme.

## What are the future prospects of South African sociology?

Good in the short term, because our minister of higher education was a sociologist [laughing]. – Because of its credibility as a critical and public sociology, South African sociology will survive well and will grow in the future. The thing is to get the funding of the social sciences right, to fund well a younger generation of scholars at the PhD level, so they don't have to work at the same time to support themselves whilst they're researching. South Africa has got the university infrastructure to make it a success – unlike many other developing societies.

## What impact has the Soccer World Cup 2010 had on South Africa?

Psychologically there was a lot of enthusiasm around the World Cup. People came together – South Africans, foreigners, blacks and whites. It felt like unity, and we all wanted to show the

world how conspicuously nice we are, and that we can achieve this and that. The power elites have gained a lot of confidence. And the majority had a good time watching the matches. – Issues of class, inequality were not raised. And the realisation of how much of the social product has gone into this World Cup and how many years we will be paying for it afterwards, it's another story.

### **What will be the results, the developments after the World Cup?**

A little bit of a better infrastructure in some places, improvement of facilities. But it all has to be one aspect of public expenditure. You have to have a plan to continue growing the economy, to continue improving things. Otherwise it's all a flash in the pan, and then it's gone. A lot of the stadiums for example, will be in trouble in the near future. Who is going to fill them? There is no team in Cape Town that can have 64,000 people watching it. They should be given over to the Anglican churches, they can get the crowds [laughing].

### **What would you recommend young students and researchers in the field of sociology?**

I would go back on what the current president of ISA, Michael Burawoy, has said: Every society has to find a balance between its professional, its policy, its critical and its public sociology. Critical sociology is checking out what professional sociology is doing. Public sociology is checking out what policy sociology is doing. – I think the exciting interfaces of more globality, how societies are transforming themselves without mimicking each other – these are very fascinating areas. And the new communication possibilities create new (imagined) communities which is unlike other periods.

There are a lot of new phenomena coming up. And with some economic crises in the future, there will be a lot of social tensions. As sociologists, we have to test what we think, try and sophisticate our approach, not only in order to plan better, but also to increase the possibilities of social creativity.

### **How should students and young researchers approach their work?**

There has to be respect for what's gone before. But there mustn't be cowardice into the previous generation, because the previous generation has messed up this world. So critical sociology will have to flourish through the new generation once again. Surely the result of our studies must not be a more repressive society.

And the lesson really is that there is no Us and Others, we are all Others. We will sooner understand that, and get on with life [laughing].

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**Professor Ari Sitas, born 1952 in Cyprus,** is professor at the University of Cape Town. His main fields of work are labour studies, post-colonialism and social movements. He has served as vice-president of the International Sociological Association and president of the South African Sociological Association, and was fellow at Berkeley and Oxford. Currently, he is also managing the Global Studies Programme in partnership with universities in Freiburg, New Delhi, Bangkok and Buenos Aires ([www.globalstudies.de](http://www.globalstudies.de)). Sitas is also a celebrated poet and