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## **“Counter hegemonic currents and internationalization of sociology. Theoretical reflections and one empirical example”**

– Manuscript –

### **Introduction**

This paper deals with the position of Southern sociologies within the discipline. The role of local scholarly communities has been widely reflected upon in the context of discussions around internationalization or globalization of sociology (see, for instance, the last World Congress at Durban). The debate was initiated by Akiwowo’s piece on indigenization of sociology – one of the first attempts to criticize the problematic position of Southern sociologies and to encourage a more self-reliant and self-confident take – that provoked various responses (see the articles from *International Sociology* gathered by Albrow/King, 1990; see also Akiwowo, 1999; Adésinà, 2002). The ISA journals have since published a series of articles on the topic (Archer, 1991; Gareau, 1985; Oommen, 1991; Genov, 1991; Arjomand, 2000; Diawara, 2000; S.F. Alatas, 2001; S.F. Alatas, 2003; Baber, 2003; McDaniel, 2003; S.F. Alatas, 2006b; S.H. Alatas, 2006), further important contributions have appeared elsewhere (S.H. Alatas, 1974; S.F. Alatas, 2006a; Adésinà, 2002; Lander, 2003; Connell, 2006; Connell 2007).

In sum, a variety of critiques of “Eurocentrism”, or more precisely “North-Atlantic domination” (Keim, 2008) have been articulated in recent years that can be strengthened by empirical evidence of structural inequalities and distorted communication mechanisms at an international level. If these critiques are important and necessary, what has been largely missing so far is the demonstration of viable alternatives to North-Atlantic domination, as well as analyses of conditions of their emergence<sup>1</sup>. Here, I would like to open up a different perspective by highlighting counter hegemonic currents emerging out of the South despite the peripheral position, i.e. by attracting attention towards challenging scholarly communities that have not received much, if any, attention in the discussions so far. This may eventually allow us to respond to the question: What has to happen in order for North-Atlantic domination to be weakened?

### **Centre-Periphery in international sociology**

The international relations within sociology, i.e. the distribution of scholarly communities, their output, and communication between them, can be characterized as centre-periphery-relations. Through an analytical model, three dimensions of these centre-periphery-relations can be distinguished and empirically tested, namely the dimensions of development/under-development, autonomy/dependency and marginality/centrality (Keim, 2008; Keim, forthcoming). This distinction of three interrelated dimensions allows to account for such diverse manifestations of the centre-periphery divide as global differences in research output; asymmetries in the reception of scholarly publications; or global inequalities in prestige ascribed to academic production, social scientific institutions and individual scholars. These

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realities originate in the history of the discipline: Sociology as a scholarly discipline within modern specialized institutions – as opposed to social thinking, which is probably as old as humankind and present all over the globe – emerged in Europe. Like the whole of the modern scientific system, it expanded through colonialism and imperialism to the rest of the world (Cf. Mac Leod, 1982; Polanco, 1985; Polanco, 1990; Polanco, 1992; Petitjean, P. et.al., 1992; Todd, 1993), i.e. sociology in the global South originated as an exogenous, subordinated and dependent sociology (Cf. S.F. Alatas, 2001; S.F. Alatas, 2003; S.F. Alatas, 2006b; S.H. Alatas, 2006, Hountondji, 1990; Hountondji, 1994; Hountondji, 2001/02). After decolonization, structures of dependency more often than not remained intact (Waast, 1996; Waast, 2001; Waast, 2002). The United States as the new centre of the international scientific system have also had considerable impact particularly in Africa, Latin America and India, partly because of their encouragement of US-style social science as an ideological weapon in times of the Cold War (Chekki, 1987).

Among today's reasons for the remaining centre-periphery structures, underdevelopment problems seem to be the most important explanatory factors in the poor countries: lack of the necessary material infrastructure (Keim 2008, Waast, 2001, Bako, 1994, Bako, 2002) and academic freedom (Diouf/Mamdami, 1994). Yet, the historical inequalities remain even in countries with strong local social sciences, as the example of Japan clearly shows (Koyano, 1976; Lie, 1996; for the following see Keim, 2008). I will insist here on the intra-scientific problems of marginalization and dependency<sup>ii</sup>.

First of all, institutional relations remain distorted and unequal. African and Latin American sociologists get their PhDs in the prestigious universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Sorbonne or Harvard, make use of their libraries, aspire at getting published in British, French or US-American journals (Arvanitis/Gaillard, 1992; Szanton/Manyika, 2002). Even cooperation at the personal level are often deeply unequal. Thus, African sociologists complain that through so-called "cooperation programmes", researchers from the North instrumentalize contacts only to gather local data for their own scholarly work, while the conceptualization of the research, as well as the evaluation, interpretation and theory-building is done back in the North (see Gaillard, 1987; Gaillard, 1996; Gaillard, 1999; González Casanova, 1968; Hountondji, 1990; Hountondji, 1994; Hountondji, 2001/02, Sitas, 2002).

Another feature inhibiting more equal relationships is the disciplinary structure of the social sciences that channels discourses, personal and funding and keeps the southern production away from the core of the discipline. Typically, ethnology/social anthropology and orientalism deal with societies outside of Europe, completed by "area studies" since the Cold War. An analysis of invited speakers at the "Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales" (EHESS), one of the most prestigious French social science institutions in Paris, reveals that an invited African or Latin American social scientist most probably ends up in the Department of African or Latin American Studies, which means that s/he relates to regional specialists, not to general sociologists (Keim, 2008). The same is true for publishing opportunities, where regionally specialized journals are more accessible to sociologists from the South than more prestigious general sociological journals. Thus their contributions remain largely invisible to the Northern and international sociological community. Finally, despite several decades of postmodern deconstruction and disillusion, certain

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evolutionist assumptions continue to shape most of general sociological theory, reducing the time, location and social experience of scholars in the global South to “case-studies” that lag behind the “peek of human development”. These conditions of foster intellectual dependency, i.e. receiving and applying concepts, theories and methodologies developed in the centre.

### **Development through “catching-up”**

The perspective I would like to develop in this article focuses on the emergence of autonomous, original approaches that develop out of sociological endeavours around locally specific, relevant problem-areas, independently and somehow disconnected from the international, northern dominated mainstream. This can lead to “autonomous traditions” (S.F. Alatas 2006a, S.G. Alatas 2006b, S.H. Alatas 2006), if the developments span longer time periods. However, this argument essentially contradicts a commonly held assumption on scientific development as “catching-up”. Therefore, this latter perspective will be exposed here in some detail.

Gaillard, one of the most convinced proponents of “catching-up”, started in 1987 with a study on careers of scientists in the South, in which he develops the idea of “the split scholarly community”: Researchers in the South have to decide whether they want to follow an “auto-centred strategy” or an “international” one in building their careers (Gaillard, 1987:138). The author reinforces this position in a more recent study (Gaillard, 1994:225) and favours a development strategy closely linked to international trends. He finds out that researchers who have studied abroad and who are active in international circles are the ones who are most deeply influenced by occidental thematic preferences and methods; that they have often lost the connection to the daily problems of their home countries; and that they are the first candidates for emigration and thus brain drain. Nevertheless, he pretends that they are most likely to be successful in promoting scientific development in the South (Gaillard 1987:12). Gaillard concludes from this observation what he already takes for “generally accepted”: that peripheral scholarly communities can only develop if they continuously maintain contact and receive the latest developments from the metropolis (Gaillard 1987: 11).

Disconnection from the “international community” under North-Atlantic domination, even for a certain period of time, is seen as inconvenient: „Nous voudrions seulement souligner le risque payé par le développement d’une science plus nationale, plus endogène, celui d’un divorce avec la communauté scientifique, c’est-à-dire, reconnaissons-le, la communauté scientifique telle que définie par les chercheurs des pays riches. On peut en effet penser que, de plus en plus sans formation identique et partagée, les chercheurs formés au Sud – et pour le Sud – iront progressivement vers une rupture de cette adhésion commune aux mêmes valeurs“ (Gaillard/Schlemmer, 1996:132).

A disconnection from the mainstream would mean deterioration of the situation in the South: loss of quality in the formation of researchers, interruption of international communication and disconnection from international developments, exclusion from the “scholarly community”. However, underlying this vision is the assumption that path-breaking knowledge is always and exclusively developed in the North. The possibility of theoretically relevant alternatives in the South is not taken into account.

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Consequently, the authors believe that “the scholarly community” that is “let us admit, defined by researchers from the North”, would reject production from southern countries. Consequently, southern science would be seen as secondary, “subaltern” science (Gaillard/Schlemmer, 1996:132). Their solution is thus: more applied than basic research, more practice than theory, more deduction than induction. This perspective assumes that North-Atlantic science is the only viable one and that the South needs to “catch up”.

Gaillard mainly focuses on the domain of the natural sciences. It could be worthwhile to discuss his assumptions for these disciplines, as the object of the natural sciences is usually less conditioned by particular social circumstances than is the case in the social sciences – assumptions that can not be further inquired here. However, the possibility of alternatives to the current mainstream needs to be differently viewed in the more context-dependent disciplines: First of all, the authors admit themselves that the “international community” is dominated by actors from the North. The possibility of locally integrated, disconnected communities that lead to theoretically relevant knowledge, i.e. knowledge that can inform the discipline as a whole, is not taken into account. This means that the rejection of southern as secondary, subaltern sciences is not to be expected after a concentration on local problems, as the authors pretend, but it has characterised international relations for a long time. Recommendations such as “more applied than fundamental research”, “more practice than theory” and “more deduction than induction” would actually reinforce the current marginality and dependency within the international division of labour. Second, the planned or wished for “international communication” and catching-up with “international developments” is a phantasm. It has been empirically pointed out that this communication is strongly hierarchical, most often rather unilateral, and that “international development” generally means development according to North-Atlantic standards (Keim, 2008). What Gaillard and Schlemmer predict for the case of a disconnection from international business has actually already happened and does not represent a danger to be avoided but a current problem to be resolved.

The solutions Gaillard proposes thus seem to be inappropriate for the social sciences. They can not improve the situation in the South but rather strengthen centre-periphery-structures. And they will not encourage an integration of Southern sociologies into the “international community” on a more equal footing. It thus remains open to question how this could be achieved.

### **Critical and deconstructive endeavours against North-Atlantic domination – a short and critical appraisal**

In recent years, several attacks have been launched against the stated North-Atlantic domination in the social sciences. S.F. Alatas has very adequately systematised and conceptualized in how far imported approaches may be irrelevant for the analysis and understanding of local societies, and proposes a set of criteria necessary to render Southern sociologies more relevant to their own contexts (S.F. Alatas, 2001). A variety of authors have criticised Eurocentrism in general (Lander, 2003; Fals-Borda/Mora-Osejo, 2003) or in particular theoretical approaches, for instance, Amin (1988) for modernisation theory or Connell (2006) for contemporary general theory such as Bourdieu, Coleman and Giddens. Calls for Afrocentrism (Asante 2003) have

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been pushing towards the opposite of Eurocentrism. Interestingly enough, the current engagement of China in the African economies seems to be accompanied by a social scientific alliance building on a common critique of Eurocentrism, as passionate debate during the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on “Multicultural discourses” (Hangzhou, 13.-15.4.07) with considerable African participation demonstrated. This reminds us that the instrumental use of however critical discourses has always to be kept in mind.

Chakravarty (2000) goes as far as “provincialising Europe”. Said (1978) offers a brilliant account of the functions and the power-discourse-relationship within Orientalism, and Mafeje (s.d.) and Mamdani (1997) join him for the deconstruction of Anthropology and African Studies (See also Sow, 2007:3ff.). At the same time, the constructive approach of the indigenization project attempts to develop sociological concepts from social knowledge contained in oral poetry (Akiwowo, 1986; Akiwowo, 1999; Makinde, 1988; Lawuyi/Taiwo, 1990; for a critique see Adésínà, 2002; Keim, 2007).

These very diverse approaches have been paramount in pointing to North-Atlantic domination and in opening up spaces for alternative voices. However, they haven't had a decisive impact on the hierarchical structures of the international social scientific community so far. As Sitas (2002) points out, this has led to frustrations within the Southern communities who felt their reclamations remained trapped. This explains the ongoing need for declarations of independence, as for instance during the founding congress of the African Sociological Association (Grahamstown-iRhini, 15.-18.7.07. See, for instance, Sow, 2007). Furthermore, the above mentioned deconstructive projects have appeared as political critiques in the first place, while their attack on the very epistemological foundations of sociology has seldom been recognized as such.

Thus, their shortcomings as real alternatives to North-Atlantic domination have to be clearly pointed out. First of all, the theoretical and deconstructive efforts as well as the indigenization project remain limited to the level of discourses, theories and texts and do not take into account material inequalities and institutional and power factors. Second, they exist as reactions, as necessary, critical deconstructions of already existing North-Atlantic paradigms and thus have little constructive and creative potential. Thirdly, and maybe most importantly, they rely on the dominant arena of competition (for the concept of “arena of competition”, see Shinn, 2000<sup>iii</sup>). The main idea underlying the concept of “arena of competition” is that the problem of marginalization in international sociology – i.e. the marginality of the Southern and the centrality of the North-Atlantic sociologies – is a problem of reciprocal recognition. This recognition happens in two steps. In the first step, everybody has to agree on a common “arena of competition”, i.e. the mainstream international community with its platforms, its international journals, its prestigious institutions etc. Only in a second step can the battle for recognition and prestige within this common arena of competition begin. The mentioned theoretical attacks thus rely on the dominant arena of competition, which they are actually trying to deconstruct, in order to receive recognition and to develop their critical potential.

Finally, the critical and deconstructive attacks emerged at a time when post-modern laissez-faire characterised large parts of sociological activities in the centre and

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world-wide. This is especially true when it comes to defining scholarly discourse as a discourse of power. From then on, within large parts of the North-Atlantic public, any effort for deconstruction was welcomed; yet, apparently, the need to defend positions was no longer felt, resulting in the emergent critiques attacking the void. Regarding the limited success of the critical and deconstructive as well as the indigenization projects, the question remains: Which are the possibilities to overcome North-Atlantic domination?

### **Counter hegemonic currents through engaged practice and defying scholarly production**

Precisely with regard to the difficulties pointed out with regard to explicitly deconstructive sociological projects, I will propose a different view on the emergence of what I would call counter-hegemonic currents in a real and practical sense. This is meant as a change of perspective, not as lowering the importance of the above-mentioned critical approaches. But what has hardly been taken into account so far is the existence, in Southern countries, of vibrant, engaged scholarly communities around specific, most often locally relevant topics that function *despite* the strictures and structures of North-Atlantic domination. Maybe generalized ignorance of these communities is due to the fact that they are often rather small communities – in comparison with the huge national communities of the North – and can thus not be accounted for by the means of quantitative analysis. Yet, as non-explicit challenges to the global mainstream, these communities, their production and the conditions of their emergence do deserve attention as counter hegemonic currents.

The central feature of what I call here counter hegemonic currents is their refusal to participate in the common arena – less through theoretical discussion and explicit critique, but rather through specific forms social scientific practice. As soon as a sufficiently large community turns its back on the so-called “international community” and orients itself towards alternative arenas – local scientific communities, non-academic actors and audiences – North-Atlantic sociology loses importance and the very foundation of the dimension of marginality gets dissolved.

The concept of counter-hegemonic current thus refers to the emergence of original, autonomous sociologies at the periphery. We can generally distinguish three phases that lead to growing independence from North-Atlantic domination. In the first phase, constituted as public and policy sociology (Burawoy, 2004; Burawoy s.d.), counter-hegemonic currents shift their arena of debate and interest from the international, Northern-dominated scholarly community to the local community of sociologists as well as to extramural actors in their own society. The North-Atlantic hegemony loses importance as locally relevant social problems are dealt with. Commissioned and consulting-type research constitute a solid basis of empirical data on which subsequent theorisations and generalisation can be elaborated.

Engagement for social or political questions in the practice of public sociologies favours socially relevant orientation and proximity to the lived experience of the engaged actors. Existing concepts and theories may appear inappropriate and need to be adapted, further elaborated or supplemented by alternative ones. Thereby, the

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basis for a genuine, inductive theory-formation is gradually provided, as opposed to the deductive application of pre-existing, imported theories and concepts.

In a second step, professionalization of the discipline and the emergence of “critical sociology” (Burawoy, 2004) is taking place, building on the achievements of public and policy sociology but also on a more self-confident lecture of received theories. Out of social relevance, these currents start to develop theoretical relevance. Finally, the scholarly community, integrated on a local level, becomes active on more equal terms within the international scholarly community and makes original contributions to the advancement of the discipline. Obviously, these broad, abstract phases of development can look differently according to their concrete local realizations. In any case, counter-hegemonic currents as conceptualized here challenge the present North-Atlantic domination in a different way than the mentioned deconstructive and indigenization projects, namely through social scientific practice: the emergence of integrated and productive scientific communities; the production of data, knowledge, texts and of new a generation of scholars; and close interaction with local extramural actors.

This means that the emergence of original sociologies in the South is apprehended in a perspective of academic development. The proposed development steps are not to be taken for “stages of development” in the strong sense, i.e., for instance, in a unidirectional and uniform sense as Rostow (1960) proposed for economic development. On the contrary, examples of “inversed development” or stagnation can be illustrated for the domain of academia and research (Waast, 2001; Keim, 2008). Nevertheless, we are dealing here with a domain of human activity in which development certainly takes place: scholarly communities and institutions are gradually built, knowledge production gets deeper and more detailed, more comparative and generalizing. The first developmental step would thus consist in a sort of “import substitution”, if one wants to remain within political economy discourse. The comparison is only partly suitable, in the sense that classical theory and methodology as well as contemporary developments from the North-Atlantic centre are usually not completely ignored. However, they do not appear as central any more for the self-understanding of sociologists in the South. Once disconnected from North-Atlantic hegemony, the gradual development of an autonomous tradition, of professional and critical sociology begins and completes local sociology.

### **South African labour studies – example of a counter hegemonic current**

Examples of counter hegemonic currents could certainly be found in many, and maybe in the most unexpected places<sup>iv</sup>. Here, I will focus on one empirical example, namely the development of labour studies in South Africa<sup>v</sup>. The case study deals with the development of the sub-discipline in a historical perspective, from its emergence out of a specific historical constellation, through its development as public and policy sociology to recent professionalization and current internationalization<sup>vi</sup>. I will provide here only a summary of a few features of the case study.

In the South Africa of the 1970s, the political opposition was banned and the only broad social force against Apartheid remaining in the country were the black trade unions newly emerging after the Durban Strikes of 1973. Progressive intellectuals in



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the liberal white English-language universities entered into contact with the labour movement and started programmes of research and teaching in support of the black trade unions, thus initiating the first phase of counter hegemonic development.

Instrumental in this contact were the so-called “Labour Service Organizations” (LSO), university-based non-governmental organizations that provided research and training for the newly emerging trade union movement. LSOs were a first element accounting for the public and policy sociology aspect of the subdiscipline. The reason for installing LSOs on campus was mainly that the liberal universities, where sociologists enjoyed a considerable degree of academic freedom, provided a relatively secure environment for oppositional activities in the highly repressive apartheid-environment. Furthermore, universities acted, as several sociologists ironically put it, as “money laundering” institutions, channelling funding from the international anti-apartheid solidarity into the labour movement or using it to provide support in the form of commissioned research and trade union education<sup>vii</sup>.

It is important to note that in many cases these early activities were carried out with little scholarly ambition. The scholarly community, which interacted strongly with the broader “intellectual formation” (Sitas, 1997, forthcoming) of labour-specialists in unions and NGOs, of lawyers and journalists, defined itself through their “critical engagement” (Webster, 1992; 1996) in the struggle against apartheid rather than through their professional identity as social scientists. Nevertheless, they paved the way for the development of labour studies as the dominant sub-discipline in South African sociology throughout the 1980s and ‘90s: a large amount of very detailed commissioned research on company profiles, wage levels, health and security issues and other relevant topics provided solid knowledge about the realities of work and industry in apartheid South Africa. These activities were also instrumental in training students in empirical research through internship programs and thus to strengthen their research skills and to raise their awareness for local social problems. The provision of training and didactic material for workers’ education courses as well as the publication of research results in the “South African Labour Bulletin” was decisive in popularizing sociological insights into the researched areas of work and industry. These texts also served in university teaching, thus reducing the dependency on imported textbooks.

Finally, the LSOs acted as platforms where sociologists and representatives from the “real world” interacted. Not only did labour sociologists and LSO-staff provide commissioned research and training, and acted as specialists in labour courts or as consultants on health and safety issues, in many cases they employed former trade unionists and NGO-based researchers and thus brought representatives of other sectors of society into the university. Also, in the adverse sense, a lot of sociologists and former LSO-researchers at some point left the university-sector to become active in unions, business, NGOs, journalism and since 1994 in the new government.

Public sociology characteristics also apply to the “South African Labour Bulletin”. It was mentioned by all the interviewees as the most important publication outlet and resource. The most interesting fact about the Bulletin is that it is not a scholarly journal but a popular one, “read by anyone who is a role player in the real world”<sup>viii</sup>. This means, however, that since the introduction of individual evaluation schemes and the SAPSE-data base (“South African Post-Secondary Education”) of recognized

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journals in 1997, sociologists don't get credit from the "National Research Foundation" for publishing in the Bulletin. Nevertheless, they read it, cite it regularly in their writings, recommend it as literature to their students and publish their research results regularly. The editorial board of the Bulletin reflects the constitution of the "intellectual formation" as a cross-sectoral one.

### **From applying theory to theoretical relevance**

In their search for social relevance through public and policy sociology, closely interacting with local non-university actors and institutions in their struggle for democracy, the orientation towards the global centre gradually lost importance, a feature indicative of the first phase of counter hegemonic currents. This becomes quite obvious when comparing the books that were considered of major importance by the interviewed. Webster's "Cast in a racial mould" (1985) is broadly considered to be the first book in South African labour studies and representative of the first generation. Webster, like many of his contemporaries, had studied in Britain at the end of the 1960s, beginning of the 1970s and was deeply influenced by post-1968 neomarxism. "Cast in a racial mould", based on his PhD thesis, is basically a case study applying Braverman's labour process theory to the case of the South African foundries, referring especially to the developments of one white craft union from the 1930s to the 1970s on the one hand, and to the attempts and achievements of unionization by black workers after 1973 on the other hand. The conceptual framework and research hypothesis are drawn from Marx's "Capital" and Braverman's "Labour and monopoly capital", the two most cited books in Webster's work. Nevertheless, the author comes across several problems where their concepts fail to explain the observed realities – i.e. the intersection of race and class or the role of the apartheid state and of industrial relations legislation. Webster does not develop these points much further.

Despite his failure to extend the received approaches or to think of innovative ways to account for these divergent local realities, "Cast in a racial mould" as the first big study in the subdiscipline indicates already that imported approaches had to be adapted, transformed or supplemented by local developments in social science to come to grips with South African realities. Several important concepts emerged as the result of this. The early efforts of the Communist Party in the 1950s and '60s and the concept of "colonialism of a special type" had been a first attempt to indigenize Marxism. Their writings were integrated into the newly emerging labour studies, as the publication of "Essays in Southern African labour history" (Webster 1978) shows. Furthermore, the heated debate, not only on a scholarly but also on a political level, intensified with the emergence of the "Black Consciousness Movement" after the Soweto-uprising of 1976 (Webster 1974). The question of the primacy of class or race as an explanatory category in South African economy and society gained momentum and was to deeply influence the further development of South African labour studies, making for their local particularity. Later on, the concept of "social movement unionism" was decisively shaped, applied and refined in South Africa. A recent debate to which the local scientific community contributed was the debate on transition theory (see below).

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Gradually, out of the social relevance of the research area, theoretically relevant approaches emerged. The two most recent works analysed for the purpose of this study strongly underline this argument and can be considered as indicative of the second phase of counter hegemony. Buhlungu's PhD thesis, "Democracy and modernization" (Buhlungu, 2001) looks at internal dynamics within the post-1973 unions and more particularly at the transition from organizations with strong shop floor representation under a repressive regime to the post-apartheid period with its pressures for efficiency and organizational modernization. In addition to that, the effects of changing class structures with union leaders being drawn into government and business affected the unions. Buhlungu had worked as a union official himself before he became a researcher in SWOP. His main concept, the "dilemma of leadership", apprehends the ambiguous pressures – between workers' control of union affairs on the one hand, administrative efficiency on the other hand – to which union officials have to respond. The thesis is based on an empirical study among union members and officials that Buhlungu and others realized for the "Council of South African Trade Unions" (COSATU) "September Commission", in order to provide input for the formulation of the confederation's post-apartheid policies. In this sense, Buhlungu combined social and theoretical relevance. While referring to standard sociological literature, he proceeded in a mainly evidence-led way, and no major theoretical influence is discernible in his citation practice. Also, this monograph formulates an explicit critique of Eurocentrism in sociological theory.

The most recent publication analyzed in the framework of this study, Karl von Holdt's "Transition from below" (2003) makes an important theoretical contribution to the debate on transition theories. Von Holdt had himself been active as a chief editor of the "Labour Bulletin" and as a SWOP-researcher and was employed by the "National Labour and Economic Development Institute", the COSATU research-entity, at the point of time of this study. "Transition from below" is based on von Holdt's PhD thesis and consists of an ethnographic study of workplace change in one steelworks' factory throughout the transition period. As Webster was von Holdt's supervisor, it can be considered as a direct successor of Webster's "Cast in a racial mould".

"Transition from below" provides a challenging perspective on the transition process at the workplace and makes a major contribution to transition theory. The debate around transitions from authoritarian regimes to political democracies in Eastern Europe and the global South envisaged a "double transition" – the political transition to democracy and the economic transition to liberalization and globalization. Von Holdt adds a third dimension, indispensable for the understanding of recent South African history: the social transition from colonial to post-colonial society, which he impressively illustrates through observations and interpretations on the realities of steel workers at the workplace and in their communities. His book is of theoretical relevance to the discipline as a whole and has already been recognized as such by some of the leading scholars in the domain, as the following appreciation by Burawoy illustrates: „Karl von Holdt has delivered a *tour-de-force* on the dilemmas of challenging the old South Africa and building the new. I have not read such a powerful analysis of post-apartheid reconstruction, seen from below through the eyes of trade unionists, nor such an exemplary use of extended case method to turn the transition literature on its head" (Burawoy, 2003: 11).

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Recently, another challenging contribution to general sociology has emerged out of the South African labour studies community. Sitas, one of the founding members of labour studies in Durban, has been especially active in the cultural and creative domain – workers’ theatre, and poetry. His most recent book, “Voices that reason – theoretical parables” (2004) illustrates another feature of the importance of engaged research in the development of original sociologies on the periphery: through his political and cultural activities in cooperation with workers, students and community members, he realized that their “cultural formations”, their collective memories and experience contained theoretically relevant knowledge on South African society. His parables-project builds on this insight. It contains a series of parables, created on the basis of and presented in the form of popular stories, current in the oral cultures of the KwaZulu-Natal region. He thus places himself into the tradition inaugurated by Akiwowo’s indigenization project, namely the use of oral texts for the generation of sociology. These parables were used to provoke and animate discussion in university as well as community seminars, in order to discover the perspectives of ordinary people on their lived realities. After this first part follow Sitas’ theoretical interpretations through the parables and through the discussion they provoked. Here the author aspires at nothing less than a sociology that is “universally comprehensible but arrogantly local (...) neither pre-modern, modern nor post-modern. It could be all of them at once and at once communally accessible” (Sitas, 2004:23).

Its contents are manifold, take on general sociological assumptions, discuss and contradict different theoretical approaches and propose own concepts. The main theme is a modernity that didn’t come with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but with colonialism. The intention of many of the parables is to show that modern institutions – factory, prison, university – discipline people, and often provoke a collapse of their cognition, language and interaction. He apprehends these processes as “disoralia”, “disvaluation” and “degendering”. But despite the pressures, there’s always a certain degree of dissonance, resistance and digression between the “cultural formations” or the individual and the institution. In this sense, Sitas takes up several central conceptualizations of our discipline.

Interesting for the purpose of this paper is the fact that, as a result of his activities as a critically engaged sociologist, something happened in his appreciation and application of received theories and concepts. The parables project reduces the distance between the sociologist and his “object” in order to animate a common process of reflection. This idea was born out of his activities as a political and cultural activist: „We have been convinced that the ‚researched’ is different from a piece of chalk. (...) The ‚researched’ talked back, argued, resisted the classifications and pointed out that the researcher, professor sir or madam, was also part of the field (...)“ (Sitas, 2004:41).

Public sociology in the South is not only important to reduce the orientation towards the centre, to lessen the importance of mainstream-sociology and to constitute an integrated local scholarly community. And policy sociology not only assures a solid empirical basis of facts on one’s own social environment. The interaction with ordinary people also enhances the willingness to abandon received concepts and assumptions, to adapt, transform, “indigenize” them, or to create new ones in order to account adequately for the observed realities.

Keim, Wiebke (2011): Counter hegemonic currents and internationalization of sociology. Theoretical reflections and one empirical example. In: *International Sociology* 26 (1), S. 123–145.

At this point of the argument, the meaning of engagement comes into play. In the first place, it seemed difficult to integrate the dimension of “critical engagement” with the labour movement, which many of the interviewees mentioned as decisive for the development of their subdiscipline, into a theoretical argument around the development of South African labour studies as a counter hegemonic current. But Sitas in the above citation makes the significance of this dimension of his sociological practice quite clear: engagement means to take the people seriously, to take up responsibility in one’s public political engagement or in commissioned, policy research which may serve as an orientation for political action by non-academics. Engagement thus means to stay closer to social realities than to abstract general sociological assumptions and to be willing to do justice to ordinary people in one’s sociological work. This encourages the self-confidence of scholars, their openness to evidence – a lot of the interviewees stated that in general they work “evidence-led” rather than deductively – and their readiness to develop own ideas rather than to distort realities by applying irrelevant categories or theories. Thus, the mode of existence, activities and challenging research output of South African labour studies, within and despite the peripheral position in the international scientific system, can be characterized as counter hegemonic.

At the same time, the quantity and importance of South African references in these more recent publications has grown considerably, if compared with the two older books. Simultaneously, conceptual dependency on imported approaches has lessened, compared with Webster’s piece. This means that a critical corpus of local writings had been constituted in the course of the last roughly thirty years, that allowed the more recent generation of scholars to build their work “on the shoulders” of their predecessors – the current production appears as a result of growingly autonomous, cumulative reflections on South African society, without however completely ignoring international debates. The building of an autonomous tradition (S.H. Alatas. 2006) has thus been initiated.

Several elements indicate that labour studies are becoming increasingly professionalized in recent years: Institutional differentiation with the emergence of internal union research entities and more labour-friendly representatives in government since 1994, the “ideological crisis” provoked by the end of Apartheid, but also recent research funding policies applying an individual evaluation push for the professionalization of the field, a development that is firmly criticized by many representatives of the engaged sociology of the 1970s and 80s<sup>ix</sup>.

### **Tendencies of internationalisation**

South African labour studies are now getting integrated at the international level – this corresponds to the third phase. An analysis of the activities of Research Committee 44 (RC44) on “Labour Movements” of the International Sociological Association clearly reveals how quickly South African labour sociologists became globalized after the end of the academic boycott and the opening of the country at the beginning of the 1990s (see RC44 Newsletters). From 2002 onwards, Eddie Webster has been acting as the president of the committee, and Buhlungu as editor of the newsletter which is issued at Johannesburg. Webster strongly argues for a shift in South-North relationships: „The sociology of labour movements has not, in the

Keim, Wiebke (2011): Counter hegemonic currents and internationalization of sociology. Theoretical reflections and one empirical example. In: *International Sociology* 26 (1), S. 123–145.

past, reflected the innovative labour movements emerging in the South. Nor has it recognised the new labour studies, which have developed in isolation from the mainstream sociology of labour movements. (...) Will Third World workers, once relegated by labour studies to the status of exceptions to the rule, now provide models of how the North can revitalise welfare-state era unions? Will the issues that separated North and South, bring them together, as labour worldwide faces the challenge of an increasingly internationally integrated world? Could it be that theories of labour and strategies of labour action will now travel in the other direction – from South to North? (...) Clearly, the twin issues of creating new forms of international labour solidarity, and creating new forms of ‘knowledge transfer’ are coming on the agenda” (Webster/Lipsig-Mummé, 2002:261/62). In how far this move towards international communication on a more equal footing will consolidate into more equal South-North-structures in the long run remains to be seen.

## Conclusion

This article has elaborated the concept of counter hegemonic currents in international sociology and has given one empirical example to illustrate the argument.

Obviously, it would be necessary to detect more such examples and to proceed to comparative studies on their conditions of existence, their cross-national reception and their potential within the international community. This is but a first attempt to look for a change of perspective and to valorise what is already there and has not sufficiently been taken into account neither in calls for “catching-up” nor in current critiques of North-Atlantic domination of the field, however justified they are at a more general level. The vision would be a gradual inclusion into and confrontation with North-Atlantic sociology in order to achieve a real internationalization, i.e. a real debate among equals around the levels of generalization of sociological theory as well as around the epistemological foundations of our discipline.

To conclude on a more critical tone, it needs to be pointed out that recent developments in science and research policy do not seem adequate at all for the promotion of this kind of development. Especially the tendency towards individual evaluation and “publish internationally or perish”, once more pushes sociologists at the periphery to turn their back towards non-academic actors and to their own local scholarly communities and to publish according to the rules and preferences of a so-called “international audience”. If this account of counter hegemony within sociology could thus serve as a hint not only to academics but also to policy makers, this could enhance the social relevance of that kind of theoretical reflection.

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<sup>i</sup> A notable exception is Alatas (2006a) who provides several examples of autonomous sociological production from the Arab world and Asia (see, in particular, pp. 112-122).

<sup>ii</sup> The following is a brief summary of detailed empirical, mainly statistical findings (p.ex. bibliometric analysis) that I expose at length in Keim, 2008.

<sup>iii</sup> Shinn, in his analysis of French science, talks about „arenas of diffusion“ or „arenas of competition“ referring to „traditional arena“ on the one hand – specialized journals, scientific conferences etc. – and alternative arena like the “industrial arena of diffusion”, i.e. the diffusion of scientific knowledge into industry (Cf. Shinn 2002). I adopt his concept of „arena“, which allows an appropriate distinction between orientations and priorities in social scientific production and communication at a local, regional and international level, between scholars and non-academic actors and audiences.

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<sup>iv</sup> The South African case was chosen out of convenience, as prior contacts existed between Freiburg University and University of KwaZuluNatal and the case of labour studies sounded promising from the outset. A second case study on Mexican migration studies has been initiated. If systematic analysis of the Mexican material could not be realized until now, the impressions during my research visit certainly helped to sharpen my conceptualization of counter hegemony. The choice of this second example was based on the assumption that there must be a relevant sociological production in the area of migration, as this is a major issue for Mexican geography, economy, politics and society today.

<sup>v</sup> I realized this case study as part of my PhD project during the months of February to April 2004 at the three main centres of labour studies in South Africa, the “Sociology of Work Unit” (formerly “Sociology of Work Programme”, SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand; the “Industrial, Organizational and Labour Studies”-Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal; and Industrial Sociology at the University of Cape Town. It includes empirical data on three broad questions: personal careers and networks of South African labour specialists; theoretical developments; funding of research. The funding questions were covered by interviews with the heads of the departments as well as by information on budgets contained in the annual research reports and interviews with representatives of the “National Research Foundation” and “Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung”. On the networks of labour studies specialists the following material was collected: interviews with 24 sociologists on their personal careers, contacts to local colleagues, non-university actors as well as to the international scholarly community; interviews with eight trade unionists, political party members, government departments, journalists and NGO members active in the domain of labour, on their relationship with university-based labour-specialists; research reports of the visited departments from the beginning of labour studies to 2003; demographics of the visited departments; material on university-based “Labour Service Organizations”; material on the editorial board of the “South African Labour Bulletin”. Theoretical developments were traced through: interviews with labour sociologists; content analysis of the “South African Labour Bulletin”; the focus of research projects as indicated in the annual research reports; an analysis of four books considered to be the most important books by the interviewees.

<sup>vi</sup> It is interesting to note that Burawoy (s.d.) himself referred to the South African example as the ideal of a strongly public sociology, an argument that led to heated discussion within the South African scholarly community. Much of the debate was oral (personal communication Shireen Ally and Ari Sitas, August 2007). Written pieces include Adésinà’s speech as SASA- president (Adésinà, 2006) as well as Uys (2005; 2006), Jubber (2007).

<sup>vii</sup> Interviews with Johann Maree 3.3.2004 and Jay Govender 12.2.2004.

<sup>viii</sup> Interview Ari Sitas 23.2.2004.

<sup>ix</sup> This became clear in many of the interviews. Jonathan Grossman, 4.3.2004, put it most clearly. See also Sitas (1997).

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