CHAPTER 1

Knowledge and Social Transformations in Africa

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Introduction

In exploring Africa’s Radicalisms and Conservatisms, Africa is sometimes a topic, often a point of departure, and always a source of perspective.1 In all three aspects, the attention to Africa is vital for sociology and sociology is important for Africa. The continent is not simply a source of more data, or more sociologists, but of different knowledge. Its neglect has both skewed and impoverished sociology from its early European origins to contemporary research. Conversely, though less consistently, attention to Africa has brought new dimensions and indeed new theories to sociology.

It was long past due, then, for the International Institute of Sociology to meet on the Continent. The editors of these volumes and colleagues in Johannesburg took the lead in organizing an outstanding event. They and I are grateful for support from the Mastercard Foundation, itself an institution from the global north that has made a primary commitment to Africa. The congress benefitted from the hospitality of the University of the Witwatersrand, and also from the inspiration of its leadership in undertaking self-transformation and renewal to match the transformation of society more widely.

More important than just the location of the conference was participation from across the continent. It included researchers often prevented from attending conferences in the global north by costs, visa regulations, and other obstacles. They were able to enter into lively exchanges with each other across divides of country, region, and primary language. They took up a wide range of issues that take on different character in different contexts – though sometimes similarities across those otherwise different contexts were as striking. These books continue the conversation, advancing intellectual exchanges vital to advancing sociology, not just as one discipline, but as a much broader interdisciplinary concern. And they address issues important to social change itself.

1 See also volume 1, also edited by Edwin Etieyibo, Obvious Katsaura, and Mucha Musemwa (2001, Brill).
There is no singular African perspective. To say ‘Africa’ is to address a large continent, with highly diverse human experience and social formations. It is not just that there are many different parts to Africa or locations in the space of Africa. There are indeed different countries, cultures, ecologies, economies, religions and different relations beyond the continent. Every topic of inquiry also offers a different perspective on each of these: migration, health, environment, gender, politics, movements, or institutions. Different positions in varied hierarchies of domination, exploitation, and oppression and projects of resistance and liberation are fundamental to understanding inequalities of wealth, power, and social participation. There are different ways of thinking the whole, and of thinking the relationship among past, present, and future.

At the same time, Africa and Africans participate in relationships that transcend the continent. Most brutally, Europeans made Africa part of the modern world-system by slavery, colonial domination and exploitation. But Africa was already being shaped by migrations, by long-distance trade, and by the spread of religions – most famously Islam but before it both Judaism and Christianity. In each case, Africa was part of something happening more widely, not just a recipient of external influence. Not least, Africans participated in the global relationship of humanity to the non-human environment. Africans related to ‘nature’ in ways much more benign than modern Europeans, and certainly more benignly than the projects of extracting minerals and other resources that came to connect Africa to the modern world-system.

It is appropriate to join many of these different topics, points of departure, and perspectives through an inquiry into the formation of distinctive radicalisms and conservatisms. Struggles over what it would mean to bring change from the roots - and what should be conserved or protected in such change - both reflect and shape the production of knowledge. Likewise, knowledge informs struggle. But as many of the great pan-African leaders of the mid-20th century realized, the relationship of knowledge to struggle cannot be mechanical, just a kind of textbook guidance or a purely factual report. Not only is that simplistic, it rips knowledge out of its necessary relationship to history and introduces a false divide between intellect and intuition and less formalized, tradition, and indigenous ideas of how

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2 The challenge of forging unity amid great diversity has been as basic a legacy for pan-Africanism as overcoming the colonial heritage, as true for pioneers like Kwame Nkrumah (see *Africa Must Unite*, International Publishers 1963) as for contemporary successors.

3 Walter Rodney’s 1972 account, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* is classic, and directly shaped the development of the very idea of a world-system by Immanuel Wallerstein and others.
to live in society and in the natural environment outside the realm of knowledge (that is, properly scientific knowledge). It thereby impoverishes struggles to make and remake societies and the world.

As Léopold Senghor argued, in order for Africans to be self-determining, they needed to achieve self-understanding. This demanded overcoming the damage of imposed European categories and evaluations. But as basically, it required overcoming false binaries embedded in much modern thought: mind/body, culture/nature, intellect/intuition. The philosophy of Negritude was neither a particularism nor a universalism in the old sense of both terms; it was a centering of the frameworks in which Africa was always marginal. This is why Senghor could embrace both Negritude and Francophonie – but equally it is why Léon-Gontran Damas could refuse any project of ‘reconciliation’ with the West.4

The African diaspora also played an important role in the Continent’s wider connections. Thinking from the diaspora was central not marginal to rethinking Africa in resistance to Eurocentrism.5 It was important both to embed thought in African history (and traditions, art, and community) and to embed Africa in broader projects, like languages and literatures that spanned continents and experiences like the diaspora with its new particularities and aspirations to the universal. To claim one against the other gets both wrong and is disempowering. It inhibits creatively making and remaking the postcolonial.

In a sense, Senghor harked back to the ancient idea of poesis, which means making, creativity, and culture. Success in building good African futures was a matter of poetry as well as politics. Through poetry we may see the importance both of art more generally. But to re-emphasize, it is not art as opposed to reason that is crucial but art and reason (and by the same token, social science) entwined. The stance of art and poesis is one of a world always in the making (or, disastrously, blocked from perennial remaking). Universality and identity can only be aspirations or anticipations. They are, for example, pursued in struggles for more solidary society. They are embedded in time, as Negritude embraced both histories and possible futures so that the present might be seen not as


5 The term ‘eurocentrism’ was introduced by the Egyptian economist-sociologist Samir Amin in the 1970s; see Eurocentrism, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1989). But the the project of challenging eurocentrism was as old as resistance to colonization and debates about imperialism and global political economy and geography. In addition to Rodney, crucial diasporic intellectuals from the Carribbean have ranged from C.L.R. James to O.C. Cox to Edouard Glissant and Orlando Patterson.
absolute facticity but as malleable reality. But the time is both continuous durée – prosaic time with its large reproductions and small changes – and occasionally the disruptive, poetic time of revolutions and radical reinventions.

The words radicalism and conservatism may initially evoke only politics, and indeed both are basic to contemporary politics. But political radicalism and conservatism cannot be understood within the realm of politics alone. They have deeper sources in social life. Frustrations with domination, inequality, and lack of opportunities appear in workplaces, communities, schools, and families. Radical politics responds to each of these. Likewise, the sense that change is taking away something good, or is simply too disruptive, can be rooted in fears for loss not only of political power but of stable social conditions. The political meanings of radical and conservative recurrently change as a result of social transformations.

Take gender. If radicalism means pursuing change and social reorganization from the roots, what are better examples than efforts to achieve equality between men and women? The implications of inequality shape every aspect of social life. Who works, in what field, and with what pay? Who is more likely to migrate for work? Who gets more education, especially in technical and privileged professional fields? Who is more often subject to gender-based violence? Women face insecure property rights, not least in relation to male relatives. Women take disproportionate responsibility for children. But men occupy more top positions in business corporations and governments – and speak more at academic conferences.

Conversely, if conservatism means trying to protect existing social structures, then it should be no surprise that protecting gender distinctions and hierarchies should be among its most basic forms. What radicals see as inequality, conservatives view as the necessary basis for family and community. What radicals see as oppression and repression, conservatives may see as mandates of religious purity or conditions for maintaining traditional ways of life. Defense of social solidarity may easily become confused with defense of privilege. Defense of the family quickly shades into attacks on differences and free choice in sexuality. Political radicals may be conservative on gender. Religious conservatives may be radical in opposition to existing states.

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9 On the ways in which taking gender seriously should transform social analysis, see Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama, and Fatou Sow, eds., Engendering African Social Sciences, CODESRIA, 2000.
Neither radicalisms nor conservatisms typically pursue master plans formulated in the abstract. To be sure, there are radicals moved by philosophical accounts of perfect justice. And conservatives have sacred texts and memories of ostensible golden ages. But as broader currents of thought and projects for action, both are always responses to social change. The drivers of change range from colonial rule to contemporary international relations, capitalist market economies to new technologies, new media to transnational religious movements. Social structure, solidarity, and identity are revealed to be in some part contingent – and thus either in need of defense or open to transformative improvement.

Perspectives on change always rely on understandings of what exists. Does one look at Africa with a map in mind, marked by the lines that demarcate different ostensible national states? Does one take up a struggle for national liberation? Is this at once a radical challenge to existing regimes of state power and a project of conserving and protecting a pre-existing identity and solidarity? Is it a project of transformation of the nation, liberation from its internal divisions and unfortunate habits as much as from external rule? Or is one’s view pan-African? And if so, is this the pan-Africanism of efforts to build post-colonial futures in solidarity? Or is this a market-driven pan-Africanism bringing smart phones, labor migration, and bank consolidation? Is it the diplomacy of the African Union, the perspective on pandemic of the African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or is it, despite all objections, race? How does the pan-African vision relate to the African diaspora?

These are fundamental questions for Africa. But they are also fundamental questions for all sociology and social science. For its own intellectual development, sociology needs to contend with these questions as African questions. They are not just about Africa; they are also African points of departure for a better general understanding. That better general understanding will not be simply universal, of processes that unfold everywhere. It will be an understanding of similarities and differences, connections and divisions, and how

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different intellectual perspectives as well as material interests diverge and interact.\textsuperscript{13}

For all the reasons that there is no one African perspective, there is no one global perspective. This does not mean that we can dispense with ideas of a larger human or planetary whole. These perspectives are demanded today by climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, deeply connected economies, and struggles over hegemony in the modern world-system. But, of course, there were other power struggles of global impact during the Cold War, which neither Africa nor the Bandung non-aligned movement could escape, and which still shape African politics and society.\textsuperscript{14} The making of this world was entwined with both colonialism and capitalism.\textsuperscript{15} Colonial heritage remained enduringly influential.\textsuperscript{16} Coupled with capitalism, it drew Africa in through the slave trade and mineral extraction, South America through mining gold and missionary conversions, China through the extraction of silver and production of dependency that culminated in the Opium Wars.\textsuperscript{17} The making of the common whole is still underway, drawing different peoples and places into new forms of capitalism, new flows of communication, new networks of illicit trade, and new migrations.

Social science not only makes this common whole an object of analysis; it participates in shaping and reshaping it. It does this through research in specific areas from health to education to industry. Such work informs both government policies and social movements opposed to those policies. Social science increases agency, enabling policymakers to anticipate not just react and to take more comprehensive views. It increases reflexivity, enabling policy makers and others to understand how choices influence outcomes.\textsuperscript{18} It does better at each when informed by examples from different parts of the world. As important, social science is crucial to understanding larger wholes – the

\textsuperscript{13} This was a key theme for all the great African diasporic intellectuals, including W.E.B. DuBois, \textit{The World and Africa}, orig. 1947; this ed. Oxford 2014.


\textsuperscript{17} Among many accounts, a particularly important perspective comes from Immanuel Wallerstein, \textit{The Modern World-System}, 4 vols., this ed. University of California Press; orig. 1973–2011. World-systems theory is shaped especially by reflection on Africa and originates from the unusually fertile meetings among intellectuals and pan-African activists in Dar-es-Salaam in the 1960s as well as from the influence of Braudel.

interconnections among regions, sectors and institutions that make a country, the global connections that influence each country and constitute a larger whole.

Any global whole – continental, national, urban or planetary – should be seen as complex, multidimensional, and commonly contradictory. No human whole is seamlessly integrated – which is partly why social actors have some leverage for change. Equally, the ‘seeing’ itself must include different perspectives and points of departure. The whole looks different to Africans and Americans – but also to Africans differently located on the continent or in the diaspora - to rich and the poor, to men and women, to old and young. We can see global integration as Marxists or as Neoliberals. We can recognize the continued centrality of race and empire or dismiss them. We can ignore the situation of humans amid the rest of life and nature, or we can make that a central theme.

3 Place Matters

‘Wholes’ are provisional and partial, then, and we see them from different perspectives. We should neither reify them nor ignore them. Conversely, we should not ignore more local place. We should not let this be erased in order to think nations, or continents, or the world. The places we inhabit connect us to nature, not just as a global abstraction but as this river, this mountain, this desert. The places anchor us to humanly created second nature - these farms, these mines, these factories – and the habits we form to live in them that help to make us who we are. Place-based communities from villages to cities locate us in many of our most important relationships.

Conservatisms and radicalisms have each been shaped deeply by particular connections to place. Attachment to local community has been more famously a theme for conservatisms, from Edmund Burke’s ‘little platoon’ to any number of parents trying to get their children to come home after university and telling them who they should and should not marry.

Kinship and descent are conservative modes of social organization. Not least, they commonly embed traditional gender roles in ways antithetical to women’s (and men’s) rights and freedom. But like local attachments, they have also been basic to radicalisms seeking to overturn external rule or limit the

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disruptions that marketization and capital have brought to societies previously organized in different relations to land, labor, and money.

Some radicalisms center on rationalistic plans for building better futures with less regard for the incremental paths by which current attachments are transformed. They seek modernization or liberation in freedom from old restrictions. But both ideals and incremental progress are developed not just in relation to an abstract placelessness; they envision transformations in specific places. This is true of both national projects of liberation or transformation and pan-African projects of saying the ‘real’ place is the whole and national divisions are artificial and often relics of colonial rule. It is liberalism not radicalism to imagine a world made up of individuals without social and material context.

Likewise, as pressing as climate change is, its global urgency cannot supplant the local urgencies of those displaced or harmed by particular paths of development. The challenges rising oceans bring to the Maldives and to coastal areas all around Africa must be addressed in their social, political, and economic specificity. Local attachments are also basic to struggles for environmental justice. These address specific people in relation to specific places or resources. Who has access to water? Who faces disease from toxic waste? Who owns oil or mineral wealth?21

Moreover, it is not only localism that has specific relations to place. Pastoralists not settled in one local place inhabit the routes along which they move. State builders have typically seen them as problematic, tried forcibly to settle them, in what can only be understood as one kind of radicalism – though it also occasionally drove the pastoralists to other radicalisms. Long-distance trade routes created ‘place’ across West Africa. Flows of both gold and religion make them also prefigure later political struggles.

The link between conservatism and conservation is more than linguistic coincidence. Plants, animals, and landscapes are conserved partly for themselves, partly to provide a continuity to human existence, and partly because life is interdependent beyond the species. The last was clear for millennia in ‘traditional’ African societies. In Africa as well as globally, the balance is upset

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by states and markets. It is new kinds of poaching for markets, not traditional hunting that are radically disruptive.22

Historical artifacts may also be objects of both conservation and conserva-
tivism. In part, this protects what is familiar, the important landmarks of city and coun-
tryside. It also involves claims to continuity between past and present, suggestions that the past is important to the present because it is part of who we are now, perhaps even with intimations of who we can become. This is com-
plicated when the heritage being preserved is the product of colonialism like government buildings and urban plazas. Architectural conservation can be an act of identification, like embracing state boundaries drawn by colonial pow-
ers. But even structures associated with the great leaders of national independ-
ence and pan-African struggle may become controversial. Kwame Nkrumah is celebrated in contemporary Ghana, but sometimes ambivalently, with his messages often kept at arm’s length even by those who ostensibly venerate him.

4 Finding and Making National Histories

Colonialism and independence (organized in the new framework of national states) were not the only ruptures in African history. The pyramids of ancient Egypt are relics of a civilization very different from the present. The figures painted on their walls do not resemble modern Egyptians in the same way sol-
diers made in roughly the same period and unearthed in Xian seem imme-
diately recognizable as Chinese. And yet they locate Egypt in the world and give it a claim to ancient importance. Their conservation is an important state project, and not just for tourism. But it is not preservation of a simple contin-
uity. Since the pharaohs, Egypt has been brought into the Hellenistic world by Alexander, ruled from Rome, converted partially to Christianity and then more fully to Islam, conquered by the Ottoman Empire and very briefly by Napoleon, quasi-autonomous as a tributary state, and then part of the British Empire. Its history as a nation-state is relatively new.

Egypt is extreme within Africa, but not alone. One of the greatest of Euro-
pean calumnies against Africans, as to some extent against other peoples around the world, has been the suggestion that before the Europeans arrived,

they had no real histories. In fact, cultures, societies, and living conditions around the continent were shaped and reshaped by migrations, technologies, the building of cities, religious conversions, empires – and poets, musicians, and thoughtful elders. But the challenge of making integrating these histories into the political economy and culture of nation-states is marked by both often pernicious colonial influence and more positive choices of the builders of post-colonial societies.

Trade routes long crossed the Sahel in patterns that endured as kingdoms and empires rose and fell. They helped make possible those states, some of which included remarkable cultural centers, with historical memories partially incorporated into new national identities. They also merged historically into the international slave trade and today into trafficking of weapons and people. Trade routes shaped the spread of Islam and then facilitated the movements of pilgrims seeking to complete the Haj. They left enduring relationships both among and across nation-states.

The mausoleums, mosques, and monuments of Timbuktu were part of this rich history of trade, religion, and culture. They recall the earlier era when the city housed one of Islam’s great universities. Since 1960, they have been claimed by the government of Mali, first in a federation with Senegal then independently. And a decade ago they were largely destroyed by rebels embracing Islam in a radical new way – but also demanding the liberation of the region as Azawad, a new state of mainly Tuareg identity.

Narrating a national history is a common complement to more materialist state projects. Egypt balances its claims to Pharaonic history with projects of modernization, economic development, and state power. These have remade landscapes and habitations, not least the Aswan dam and the flooding that created Lake Nasser. They have remade Tahrir Square to be less accessible to protest. And Egypt is certainly not the only country on the continent to have moved its capital for reasons of security as well as symbol and splendor. As a new dam on the Nile reminds us today, such massive engineering projects remain parts of state agendas for economic growth. They transform ter-

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23 Though Africa is not its major focus, the classic work remains Eric Wolf, Europe and the Peoples without History, rev ed., California 2010.
24 Postcolonial African societies were built and rebuilt socially, as well as inherited (a key theme for pan-African thinkers). They were also built physically; see Daniel E. Coslett, ed.: Neocolonialism and Built Heritage, Routledge 2009.
25 Rosa De Jorio emphasizes the impact of global political economic on the events in Mali. See Cultural Heritage in Mali in the Neoliberal Era, Illinois 2016. Of course, there was a politics to preservation even before the recent crisis and destruction; see Charlotte Joy, The Politics of Heritage Management in Mali, Routledge 2012.
26 James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State, Yale 1999, continues to provide crucial perspective.
ritories within states, ecologies that cross state borders, and relations among states. They generate power, including both the electricity that lights cities and drives industry, and also control over water supplies. They are symbols deployed to demonstrate governmental power, as much to convince citizens as neighbors and the world.

Arguably, the other side of the coin is failure of state integration. The project of independence always required state-making as well as liberation from empire. Flourishing has been frustrated by weakness of new states. Contentious politics and civil wars also accompanied state-building in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. In Africa problematic colonial designs including arbitrary borders added to the challenges. Neither the history nor the current difficulties of Darfur can be understood, for example, if it is imagined only as inside the new state of Sudan, ignoring its long connections to what are now Chad, the Central African Republic, and Libya. Likewise Darfur is shaped by histories and renewals of Islam. Yet its upheavals over recent decades are also inseparable from Sudanese state projects, self-serving central administrations, ambitions of local leaders, entanglement with transnational markets, and both local and wider Islam, shifting markets, and both local and wider ecological crises. Combat displacement, and humanitarian engagements have ironically spurred urbanization. At the same time, fighting in Darfur gave but also given combat experience to Sudanese troops (including former militias) who now defend the country’s Ethiopian border while Ethiopia joins with its erstwhile secessionist province then national enemy Eritrea to prosecute a war with its Tigray and former members of the national government.

Ethiopia, the African country that most escaped European rule, was itself an empire that expanded to incorporate an exceptional diversity of peoples, languages, religions, and ecologies. Efforts to transform it into a nation-state have been beset by conflict up to the present. This is only one of many reminders that the doubling and dialectical relationships explored by Du Bois and then the philosophers of Negritude is an issue not just between Africa and colonialism but at multiple scales inside Africa. No nation-state is unitary and integral, yet none exists without some aspiration to greater universality. Cooperation among states faces similar issues as it ebbs and flows in the African Union, regional associations, particular treaties of cooperation.

28 In addition to the incorporation of formerly subject populations in states derived from empires, there are of course long-term minorities linked to migration. See Mahmoud Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*, Harvard 2020.
Radicalism and conservatism may seem polar opposites, but they can mix and inform each other. There can be radicalisms and conservatisms on each side of struggles over recognition and rights in multinational countries. And most African countries are at least multi-ethnic and arguably multinational. This informs basic questions about what is the real unit of society – and who controls society and resources at what scale? What is conservative, what is radical? About what? For whom?

5 Social Cohesion

Government is important to how society is structured. But societies are unstable – and often oppressive - when different peoples, regions, cultures, or religions are held together mainly by government. Arbitrary colonial borders are a challenge for national integration. So are underdeveloped infrastructures. And so is inadequate development of political community based on common citizenship.\(^2^9\)

Shared language and culture provide frameworks for interconnection, though by themselves seldom sufficient. Language connects but also divides, and the divisions are barriers to participation in education, employment, and public life. Not surprisingly, they become fault lines of conflict and struggle.\(^3^0\)

In large, complex, and internally diverse societies it is important to ask about the cultures of subnational groups and their opportunities for development, and for some years these have been a central concern for sociology. But it is also important to ask what culture is shared across important lines of ethnic or other difference? Is it the popular culture of music and football? The political culture of contending parties, accusations of corruption, or proclamation of ideals? Common narratives help establish solidarity and are especially important to nation-states. Do these adequately bridge deeply rooted ethnic cultures? Do they effectively cross class divisions?

Government and culture, power and narratives, must be complemented by more material social integration. Our images of social connection are heavily influenced by face-to-face interaction and the direct relationships of family and local community. But society is structured also by indirect relations at ever-larger scale. These are driven sometimes by markets, in which buyers and sellers never know each other personally and prices are set by aggregate


As societies grow larger and more complex, government typically plays a larger role. \textit{It is not just an apparatus of rule but a complex of institutions addressing a range of ‘functional’ imperatives: raising revenue, conducting national defense and domestic policing, building infrastructure, providing education, securing public health, and so forth. Governments may do these things better or worse, with more corruption and venality or less, more justice and equality among citizens or less. Non-governmental institutions may play larger or smaller roles. But in all cases, this involves what Foucault called governmentality as well as}
Conservatisms and radicalisms are not limited to how much or how little government should dominate, nor even to who should control it. They are oriented to (and embedded in) the production, reproduction, and transformation of society itself. How society is organized, and how much society is achieved, are both important. They shape daily life within relatively durable patterns, and they determine the solidarity on which movements for transformative change can draw. Radical projects that seek to redistribute wealth or power, or change basic patterns of social relations, must draw on relationships established in existing social conditions.

Sociology was born trying to figure out the meaning of transitions in social organization that shifted the relationship of people to places, each other, states, and modes of economic production and exchange. Social change reduced the role of families and increased the role of various kinds of formal organizations. The rise of both markets and state institutions extended the reach of social relations and often eroded previous modes of connecting people and meeting their needs and demands. But this didn’t happen in a gradual, linear process. It happened in recurrent disruptions.

In Karl Polanyi’s phrase, there was always ‘double movement’. As old ways of living were disrupted, people tried to save them. This became a basis for conservatism, which grows not out of a simple maintenance of the status quo but out of efforts to resist patterns of change. Socialism often grew out of the same struggles, but with the conviction that the old could not be saved and society would need to be remade.

But of course not all projects of state making or even remaking were radical. Many were pragmatically centrist or based more on ad hoc compromises that ideology. Too often, rulers focused on personal gain and their supporters on what benefits they might receive. Nonetheless, as independent African states took over apparatuses inherited from colonial rulers, there were both ideological struggles over programs and power struggles. Communists, nationalists, African socialists, religious parties, and liberal democrats all competed. But state-building was also a matter of institutions, both inside the state apparatus and outside: trade unions, political parties, business firms, hospitals. Conservatism was often transformed from a defense of the older ways of life to the maintenance

of power structures built into these new organizations. Radicalisms were often
agendas for transforming these organizations in order to continue the process of
remarking society, in the pursuit of more justice, or autonomy, or productivity.

But between the older more ‘communal’ social organization and the new
formal structures grew new kinds of social organization, often less formal and
more fluid. For example, mine workers organized their lives in ways neither
completely controlled by their employers nor completely reflective of their
original communities. Networks could be incipient social structure, but they
could also remain effective without becoming formal organizations. The socio-
logical field of ‘network analysis’ was developed in part to understand such
structures of interpersonal relations. It built on older studies of how kinship
worked in more ‘traditional’ societies. But it took shape importantly to under-
stand the new kinds of organization built in new settings. Studies from Zambia
and the Central African copper belt were especially influential. But the same
factors were at work for miners in South Africa and Zimbabwe.36

It was not just among miners but everywhere that building new relation-
ships was crucial. Older kin structures were often the basis of these, but their
meaning shifted at larger scale. The old was transformed as the new was
invented – and radicalisms and conservatisms were remade in the process. Net-
work studies among mine workers and in growing cities were part of a larger
program associated with the ‘Manchester School’ of social anthropologists and
sociologists.37 A key theme, introduced by Max Gluckman (like Mitchell, born
a South African), was to reject the common notion of traditional society fading
with modernization. Rather, Gluckman and colleagues suggested, there was a
process of contentious invention of new social forms and reinvention of old
ones. The notion of ‘tribe’ for example was shaped by both colonial governing
strategies and postcolonial claims to group identity; it was a mistake (too com-
monly made) to see it as simply traditional.38

Informal networks could be the basis for bargaining with employers or man-
egaging competition among workers – for example, disciplining ‘rate-busters’
who drive down piece rates or push up quotas. They provided mutual support
alongside or even in the absence of formally organized trade unions. And they
organized business outside the written records and taxes of formal markets.
In research on labor migrants in Ghana, Keith Hart named this the ‘informal

36 J. Clyde Mitchell, ed., Social Networks in Urban Situations: Analyses of Personal Relations-
37 T. M. S. Evens and Don Handelman, eds. 2006. The Manchester School: Practice and Ethno-
38 Bruce Kapferer, “Introduction” in Lotte Meinert and Bruce Kapferer, eds., In the Event-
Toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments, Berghan 2015.
This filled economic niches inadequately served by the growing formally organized economy. Throughout West Africa, for example, women organized markets that neither required nor produced large capital but provided subsistence and sometimes a bit more for millions. Migrants mediated between home villages and urban life. They sent remittances home, but they also received support from their families and communities of origin.

This is still the pattern for the long-distance and often treacherous migrations of the contemporary era. International migration is precisely a confrontation of informal and formal. It takes money to pay traffickers or buy plane tickets, to negotiate border crossings. Support from home is vital to paying the costs of heading somewhere else for opportunity. This is paid back by Senegalese street vendors in New York, Ivorian taxi drivers in Paris, and Nigerian businessmen (and women) in London who all send home remittances. So do migrants from other parts of sub-Saharan Africa who head for South Africa seeking opportunities. They pay for the schooling of children or nieces and nephews, the hospital costs of aging parents. They invest in houses or small businesses in the countries to which they may return. Their absence, their connections, and their potential return all shape the life of African cities.

Some migrants accumulate the skills or capital to enter the formal economy. Some countries have mechanisms for bringing remittance flows into the official bank-based economy. But often, cash from migrants is infused into the informal economy. Governments and international aid agencies have tended to view informal economies as problems that need fixing. And to be sure, they are problems for tax collectors. But to see the informal sector as just something old and traditional that needs to be modernized and formalized misses the extent to which it is not a carryover but a creative response to urbanization and social change. Informality does not simply reflect traditional social organization, though it is certainly influenced by kinship and ethnic identities. Nor is it an index of disorganization. ‘Seeing like a state’, in James C. Scott’s phrase, leads to missing the extent to which informal economies are needed because

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of limits to what formal economies offer – and sometimes contradictions in formal economies and discriminatory or corrupt practices of the state.42

Though Africa provided the examples of informal economies that informed creation of the concept, and informal economies are very important to Africa, they are not limited to the continent. There is no country where states and formal economies in fact provide for all human needs. Indeed, the specific patterns of growth in formal economies may be immiserating for many citizens.43

Moreover, informal economies are crucial to enabling people to survive in moments of crisis and rupture. Constantly evident in much of Africa, this was demonstrated globally in the wake of the 2008–2009 financial crisis. Even in rich countries, tens or hundreds of thousands of people were without paid employment. Some received government social support. But just to survive, the mutual support of families and neighbors was crucial. If one member of an extended family worked, if two had good social benefits, they shared these with the rest. This was as visible in Barcelona, Montreal, and Los Angeles, as in Lagos and Pretoria.44 More recently, the economic recession linked to the Covid-19 pandemic has produced widespread job losses in the formal sector. But in many settings, restrictions on in-person interaction have also introduced a crisis in the informal sector.

The pervasive webs of informal relations are often refractory both to conservatisms focused on communal, kin, ethnic and religious organization and to radical projects for building a better society through better social institutions or a better regulated and administered economy. Informal ties are often crucial to building movements for social change – or resistance. But they are not fully incorporable into state politics crucial to building movements for social change – or resistance. But they are not fully incorporable into state politics or the ‘official’ economy. Indeed, they commonly generate what Dilip Gaonkar calls a ‘politics of the street’ that is expressive of frustration more than organized into specific instrumental goals. An indication of the limits as well as the importance of democracy, this politics may win concessions, but not build a cumulative movement.45

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Among other things, successful projects of social transformation depend on knowledge. Even the notion that such transformations can succeed requires a kind of ‘cognitive liberation’ from assumptions of inevitable continuity or incapacity. Moreover, transformations involve both the accumulation of small changes and sharper, more disruptive changes. They involve dimensions that are not consciously chosen in tandem with others that are. Not least transformations play out in relation to institutions, not as their polar opposite.

Indeed, institutions cannot be important to transformative social movements. Think of the role universities played in the era of anti-colonial struggles and post-colonial pan-Africanism. Beyond their manifest education role, they were hubs of social networks. Paradoxically, a few of the great older universities, despite their colonial provenance, became places where African intellectuals and political activists from different countries met each other.

In the 1960s, Dar es Salaam was one of the continent’s centers for both social movements and intellectual creativity. Dar was a hub for pan-African activists who connected to academic intellectuals from several countries, both on the Continent and elsewhere. The Guyanese Walter Rodney was pivotal, alongside Samir Amin (from Egypt), Giovanni Arrighi (Italy), Andre Gunder Frank (Germany), and Immanuel Wallerstein (USA). Important and innovative university-based theory and research grew out of solidarity with pan-African and other social movements.

Ironically, projects of post-independence nation-building undermined both solidarities of this kind and international connections. Universities were integrated into national ‘manpower plans’ but lost much of their capacity to integrate across national borders. They were also sometimes neglected by governments. Resources were scarce and elementary education seemed more pressing. But also, governments were ambivalent about their own countries’ intellectuals. These commonly articulated ideals that governments in power failed to meet. Even conservatives criticized corruption. Radicals presented the risk of insurrection.

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46 The concept of ‘cognitive liberation’ was introduced by Doug McAdam in Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–70, Chicago 1982.


Recently, the internationalization of African higher education has been renewed. This reflects greater recognition of the value of higher education to African economic futures. A few universities are magnets for students from many countries; others are developing stronger transnational networks. So far most of these focus on the creation of a business and technological elite. It is important that this be complemented with social science and humanistic inquiry. This is so partly because Africa’s challenge is to determine what kinds of societies and human lives will flourish, not only what the material conditions will be. Transnational academic engagements provide leadership today, as they did in the pan-African movements of the mid-20th century.

The Swahili word ‘ujamaa’ was adapted by Julius Nyerere to mean some combination of cooperative economics and development from the local level up and out, a form of African socialism. But the underlying meaning of family or brotherhood was also important. Ideals of brotherhood – or in less sexist terms, solidarity - have been as important to African struggles as to the French Revolution. The slogan of liberté, égalité, fraternité offered a reminder that without social solidarity, individual freedom and equality among persons could not be enough basis for building the desired new society. Struggles for better African futures are also necessarily struggles to shape society as such. This is one reason why robust sociology is important: challenges and struggles are not only political and economic as though these could be separate ‘value spheres’. They are inextricably social, societal.

As part of these struggles, it is important to create a socially productive and valuable intellectual elite. The term ‘elite’ can be alienating, can imply that strong intellectuals must be focused only on their personal gain and privileged position. But this need not be so – or at least not always. Societies can have better or worse elites. Intellectual work can be important work for society. It need not be done in ‘ivory tower’ separation but can also be in close relationship to movements for a better society.

There are innumerable issues to confront. International relations among African societies are significant. The peacekeeping role of the African Union is vital. But so is the work of the more recently launched African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This is obvious in regard to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The knowledge required is not just biomedical but social:

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49 Internationalization intersects with other changes from the growth of private universities to the growth of explicitly multinational universities. This is too big a topic to survey here, but for one recent account see Harris Andoh and Jamil Sulmi, “The Internationalization Agenda of African Universities in the Next Decade,” International Higher Education (2019): 21–23.
epidemiology, demography, network analysis, studies of institutional capacity, studies of trucking routes and other paths for both economic activity and infection, knowledge of the factors that shape vaccination rates. The same goes for understanding and handling migration, for ensuring that the growth of new financial practices is inclusive rather than a new class barrier, and for managing and meeting design demands of rapidly growing cities.

Confronting these many issues demands commitment not only to accurately observing what is, but to situating it in relation to paths from pasts to possible futures. It requires commitment to the public good at many overlapping and sometimes competing scales. These are sources for both radicalisms and conservatisms. And these are constitutive for African societies.

7 Conclusion

Hopefully the 118 and books like the present volumes can be helpful in pursuit of better knowledge in Africa, of Africa, and of Africa’s place in the broader world. As hinted at the outset, it was basic to the undertaking that it be organized for conversations among African intellectuals and researchers – which is very different from simply inviting Africans into Northern conversations. It is also important that there be transregional, global intellectual solidarity. But this depends on nurturing the strength and vitality of transnational conversations within Africa and connecting them to the global discussions – not simply on privileging a few participants in the wider conversations.

To achieve this, it is important for African scholars and researchers to forge ties and develop conversations around the continent. This is supported by organizations like CODESRIA. It is supported by informal networks. It is sometimes supported by foundations, African-based corporations, and international funders. But there is no escaping the need for both economic and organizational supports for intellectual work. Africa’s current wave of transnational academic networks centers on technology and business because of the engagements of private funders and the hopes of government for jobs and economic development.

As I suggested at the beginning, the founders of modern sociology did not know enough about Africa and struggled to look at the world and issues from African perspectives. Emile Durkheim and the founders of the 118 looked at ‘society’ from Paris, Berlin, London and Chicago. They looked almost entirely from the perspective of men, mostly white men, mostly middle or upper class. They looked at ‘society’ from the perspective of specifically European social transformations: the dissolution of feudalism and rise of the modern state,
industrial revolution, urbanization, transformations of family and gender. Empire was central to the world yet often neglected by sociological analyses that focused on the ‘domestic’ organization of nation-states. In the USA, ‘mainstream’ sociologists looked at distinctive patterns of immigration, race, and racism – but often from the vantage point of middle class reformers. They looked at ‘race relations’ more than the structuring global role of race and the political economy that drove enslavement.

There were early sociologists who did not fit the mold – and these have been inadequately recognized in disciplinary histories. W.E.B. Du Bois is perhaps the most important, though he was not alone. A pioneering African-American intellectual, Du Bois studied the challenges of racism and economic change in the US, but was also influential in the Pan-African movement both as an organizer and as a visionary theorist. He, and lived his last years as a citizen of Ghana. It is important to recover and fully recognize the insights of Du Bois and others marginalized by dominant approaches to sociology. This includes political economists and cultural analysts who were not disciplinary sociologists like C.L.R. James and Walter Rodney.

Women have also been made more marginal until recently to sociology’s narrative about itself than they were to its actual history. Despite biases against them, women did produce important social knowledge, both within the academic discipline and often outside it. Women are much more prominent in contemporary social science. But there is still work to be done ensuring that women’s perspectives flourish in African research and scholarship. This is not just a matter of studying women or gender, but of seeing social life better in all its dimensions.

Honoring neglected pioneers and ensuring wide and equitable participation are worthy as matters of justice, but also crucial to advancing social knowledge. The project must be to remake sociology in ways that better grasp social transformations and continuities, fraught geographies, contested histories, and power relations.


African social scientists will learn from and offer knowledge to Latin-American thinkers engaged in decolonizing knowledge. Neither colonial experience nor the history of politics, economy, and society since are identical on the two continents. But there are both old connections like those between West Africa and Brazil and new partnerships like campaigns for greater equity in vaccines and global pharmaceuticals generally. Likewise, Asia and Africa are connected across the Indian Ocean and around the Mediterranean, in political economy, and even language as Swahili attests. And they are linked in finance and construction of new infrastructure; in call centers and software engineering. Nollywood is linked to Bollywood.

The achievements of earlier sociology from West and North were many, but came with combinations of neglect of important parts of the world and distortion of the significance of empire, enslavement, and capitalism. Understanding the past better is important to grasping new and changing realities, the results of cultural creativity, economic innovation, and political struggles.

This project does not marginalize the importance of sociology, it brings a renewal. But it is a renewal of sociology in relation to intellectual and practical agendas that transcend disciplines, countries, and even regions. Whatever their biases, most of sociology’s founders – including the founders of the IISS – pursued sociology not as a narrow academic discipline but as a broader undertaking. They forged links to anthropology, economics, political science, and history. They engaged urban planners, educators, and pioneers in public health. And they engaged social movements and public debates.

Pursuing sociology broadly understood has been basic to the IISS, and I am pleased to see that it is basic to the scholarship presented in these volumes. The goal cannot be simply one academic discipline among many, given shape as much by what it excludes as what it includes, and by a hierarchy in which real contributions and imagined prestige are entwined. It must be the struggle to understand social life in all its plurality and contradictions and different aspects - in order that we may live it better and change the ways in which it is lived to make them better for others.

For this, knowledge must be rethought and produced anew in each generation. It must be respected, and this depends partly on institutions able to ensure its quality. It must be shared, publicly available and openly debated. Sociology can then contribute to building, renewing, sometimes conserving and sometimes radically transforming society.
References


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