
Changing Society, Changing Sociology

Craig Calhoun

In these two volumes, Africa is sometimes a topic, often a point of departure, and always a source of perspective. 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. We 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.

There is no single African perspective.

Of course, 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, 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.

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 - always both reflect and shape different intellectual perspectives.

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 change partly for social reasons.

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.

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 ostensibly 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?

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 different intellectual perspectives as well as material interests diverge and interact.

For all the reasons that there is no one African perspective, there is no one global perspective. This doesn’t mean that we can dispense with ideas of a larger human or planetary whole. These are demanded today by climate change, the Covid 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. The making of this world was entwined with both colonialism and 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. 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 policymakers and others to understand how choices influence outcomes. It does better at each when informed by examples from other countries. And as important, social science is crucial to understanding larger wholes – the interconnections among regions, sectors and institutions that make a country, and the global connections that influence each country and constitute a larger whole.
Any global whole – like any continental whole or national whole or even a city – 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, 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 ignore the situation of humans amid the rest of life and nature or we can make that a central theme.

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 shouldn’t 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 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?

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.

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

Historical artifacts may also be objects of both conservation and conservatism. In part, this protects what is familiar, the important landmarks of city and countryside. 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 complicated 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 powers. But even structures associated with the great leaders of national independence 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.

Finding and making national histories

Colonialism and independence 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 soldiers made in roughly the same period and unearthed in Xian seem immediately 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 continuity. 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 party 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 European 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 part of state agendas for economic growth. They transform territories 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. Neither the history nor the current difficulties of Darfur can be understood if it is imagined as somehow ‘just’ inside, Sudan and its connections to what are now Chad, the Central African Republic, and Libya are ignored. Yet its upheavals over recent decades are also inseparable from Sudanese state projects, Islam, shifting markets, and ecological crisis. Combat and humanitarian crisis have ironically spurred urbanization – but also given combat experience to Sudanese troops (including former militias) now defending its Ethiopian border while Ethiopia joins with its erstwhile enemy Eritrea to prosecutes a war with its former leading province of Tigray.
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.

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 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?

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. 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.

In large, complex, and internally diverse societies it may be better 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 supply and demand not interpersonal negotiations. Not only markets, but formal organizations and a variety of institutions are also key to social organization at larger scales.

The conservative notion of minimal government intervention is grounded in an idea of maximal social self-organization – biased towards traditional authority structures. Some have argued that stateless African societies historically approached the ideal, pointing to the combination of consultative decision-making with kinship, the authority of elders, and cross-cutting ties like clans. In modern political theory, communitarianism has emphasized nurturing capacities for social self-organization in part by prioritizing the local over the large-scale.
Radical anarchist and libertarian projects similarly claim capacity for social self-organization – but often suggest that social transformation is needed to achieve the conditions for this. Relative equality is basic to both anarchism and to Adam Smith’s ideal of self-regulating markets. Libertarian ideas are more often coupled with a defense of inequality in the name of the liberty of private property.

As societies grow larger and more complex, government typically plays a larger role. 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 discipline: enlisting, but shaping, voluntary participation. Institutions build and maintain society.

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 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 seek 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. Radicalism 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. The making of modern nation-states has coincided with the remaking of older kinds of social organization.

This was often a matter of building formal organizations: 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 networks. 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 sociological 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 understand 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.

And of course, it was not just among miners but everywhere that building new relationships was crucial. Older kin structures were often the basis of these, but their meaning shifted at larger scale. They could be the basis for bargaining with employers or managing competition among workers – for example, disciplining ‘rate-busters’ who drive down piece rates or push up quotas. They provided mutual support. 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 economy’. This filled economic niches inadequately served by the growing formally organized economy. Throughout West Africa, for example, women organize markets that neither require nor produce large capital but provide 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.

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 response to urbanization and social change. It does not simply reflect traditional social organization, though it is certainly influenced by kinship and ethnic identities. ‘Seeing like a state’, in James C. Scott’s phrase, leads to missing the extent to which informal
economies are needed because of limits to what formal economies offer – and sometimes discriminatory or corrupt practices of the state.

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.

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. More recently, the economic recession linked to the Covid 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 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. It may win concessions, but not build a cumulative movement.

Knowledge

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.

This doesn’t mean that institutions cannot be important to transformative social movements. It is a mistake to make too sharp an opposition. 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.

Ironically, projects of post-independence nation-building undermined this. 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.

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.

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 is not 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.

In the 1960s, Dar es Salaam was one of the continent’s centers for both social movements and intellectual creativity. What is now globally influential as ‘world-systems analysis’, grew largely out of the confluence in Dar of social movements and academic intellectual pursuits. Important and innovative university-based theory and research grew out of solidarity with pan-African and other social movements.

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 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.

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.
There is no disputing these material demands. But there are also other issues for societies 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. The knowledge required is not just biomedical but social science: epidemiology, demography, network analysis, studies of institutional capacity, studies of trucking routes and other paths for both economic activity and infection. 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, for managing and meeting design demands of rapidly growing cities.

Hopefully the IIS and books like the present volumes can be helpful. 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.

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 IIS looked at ‘society’ from Paris, Berlin, London and Chicago. They looked from 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. In the US, they looked at distinctive patterns of immigration, race, and racism – but often from the vantage point of middle class reformers.

There were early sociologists who didn’t fit the mold – and these have been inadequately recognized in disciplinary histories. W.E.B. DuBois is perhaps the most important, a pioneering African-American intellectual, who studied the challenges of racism and economic change in the US, but also organized a series of pan-African congresses, and ended his life as a citizen of Ghana. Women have also been made more marginal until recently to sociology’s narrative about itself than they were to its actual history. Whatever their race or gender, some sociologists have systematically sought to decenter the standard European and American story.

Whatever their biases, most of sociology’s founders – including the founders of the IIS – 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.

Pursuing sociology broadly understood has been basic to the IIS, 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. They bring contributions from sociology, very broadly understood, to building, renewing, sometimes conserving and sometimes transforming society.