

Public sociology and the social crisis

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At the core of the crisis of social relations in contemporary South Africa is a privatisation of the public sphere which is forcing individuals to seek private remedies to socially produced problems. The way access to clean and adequate water is threatened by both privatisation and pollution illustrates this process. The article argues that resistance to these processes has the potential to 'resocialise' the crisis, and could be strengthened by the involvement of sociologists.

Keywords: Crisis, privatisation, water, pollution, resistance, public sociology

Introduction

The central argument of this paper is that the social crisis in contemporary South Africa presents a challenge to us as sociologists. The argument is presented in four parts; firstly it is asserted that there is a crisis of social relations at the core of which is what Zygmunt Baumann has called 'the privatisation of the public sphere'. What that means is that individuals are being forced to seek private remedies for socially produced problems. This process of the privatisation of the public sphere is illustrated in a crucial area involving a right in terms of our post-apartheid constitution: access to clean and adequate water. Thirdly collective resistance to the privatisation and pollution of water is discussed to flag the potential of the 'new' social movements to 'resocialise' the crisis. Lastly it is argued that C. Wright Mills' distinction between private troubles and social issues, which for him defined the sociological imagination, linked to his notion of 'public sociology' (though he never used the term) is especially relevant today.

A social crisis

The public recognition of the social crisis dates back to 2000 when it was named by Minister Zola Skweyiya in a half page advertisement in *The Sunday Times*. He warned that 'South Africa is sitting on a time bomb of poverty and social disintegration' and appealed for 'a full understanding of the nature and extent of the social crisis that we face' because it 'has the potential to reverse the democratic gains made since 1994' (*The Sunday Times* 16.1.2000). Since that time there have been frequent references by labour leaders to the 'crisis' in unemployment levels, to the aids crisis and by Tutu and others to the 'time bomb of poverty'.

The clearest manifestation of this social crisis is the growing gap between the dis-

course of rights and the reality of unmet needs. This – and not Lindiwe Sisulu's notion of 'political opportunists' (cited in *The Star* 1/6/2005) – is what lies behind all the recent protests around service delivery. In addition to unemployment, AIDS and poverty the material dimensions of this crisis relate to the 22 million South Africans who still lack the means to satisfy basic needs including adequate housing, health care, proper sanitation and adequate water. The indicators of social disintegration that are usually cited also include criminal violence, substance abuse, vehicle accidents, one of the highest rates of rape in the world and other forms of gender-based violence such as femicide, with South Africa having the worst rate of intimate femicide in the world. This is a dramatic expression of an erosion of social relations of caring and responsibility in many different areas of life.

This erosion is taking many different forms. It is manifested not only in the evidence of corruption in relation to the rearmament programme (and here we need to remember that corruption is a transaction that involves both bribe givers as well as takers) but also in media reports of the nurse whose patient dies while she chats to the driver in the front of the ambulance, the builder who erects sub-standard RDP housing, irregularities in tendering procedures, the policeman who takes bribes, the currency speculator whose concern for profit obliterates any concern for the well being of fellow citizens, the public servant falsifying pension claims, the teacher who abuses or neglects his pupils as well as the owners and drivers of minibus taxis who are indifferent to the safety of their passengers. There are high levels of anxiety, insecurity, and confusion in relation to means and ends as atomised individuals struggle to survive.

The privatisation of the public sphere

The main cause of the crisis in social relations is the privatisation of the public sphere, which is part of neo-liberal restructuring linked to the individualism which is central to neo-liberal ideology. Writing of what they call 'a crisis of social reproduction', Webster and Von Holdt argue that the sphere of the public is being rolled back and 'Instead of extending social rights to all citizens, restructuring in South Africa is transferring the responsibility of social protection to the household and to the poor, threatening the very sustainability of communities and the reproduction of society' (Webster & Von Holdt, 2005:35). Given that women generally administer household consumption, providing care for children, the sick and the elderly, cooking, cleaning, and generally performing all the work necessary for social reproduction both on a daily and generational basis, they are the shock absorbers of this process.

Writing of this as a global trend Bauman has argued that the failure of the state means that individuals have to seek private remedies for socially produced problems. It implies that 'the meaning of citizenship has been emptied of much of its past contents' (Bauman, 2004:45). This is particularly serious for us in our struggle to create a shared, national sense of rights and responsibilities as citizens in an aspirant democracy. The consolidation of that democracy depends very largely on the capacity of the state to deliver 'social citizenship'. This is defined by Webster as 'the right to income security and other forms of welfare such as education and health, a right to share in the full in one's social heritage and the right to live in a safe, healthy and peaceful environment'. (Webster, 2002:2) Instead the

opposite process is underway.

This process whereby the privatisation of the public sphere is forcing individuals to seek private remedies for socially produced problems may be illustrated with reference to a crucial human need, access to adequate water.

Access to adequate water

The privatisation of basic services such as access to water has commoditised fundamental human needs and – in many places – eroded social solidarity. Since 1994 inequality is deepening with the state's move to the neo-liberal policies of cost recovery and privatisation. South Africa is a water scarce country but water is a basic need, framed as a right by the post-apartheid constitution. The introduction of a small amount of free water contained in section 10 (l) of the Water Services Act of 1977 points to a minor turn away from the demand driven, full-cost recovery approach. However the amount of free water, six thousand litres, only amounts to two toilet flushes per head for a household of eight people. It is a far cry from the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme's promise of 25 litres per person per day and over 5 years 50 to 60 litres per capita per day of clean water. The outcome is that the privatisation of water underway in South Africa is deeply threatening to the poor.

This process of privatisation is occurring throughout the South African economy but, as McDonald points out, 'is being done in an ad hoc, creeping manner, and therefore for many people it remains relatively abstract' (McDonald, 2002:22). Furthermore the notion of privatisation is contested. Cosatu defines privatisation more broadly than the alienation of state assets; privatisation is 'any restructuring that involves the sale or outsourcing of assets or functions to the private sector, the replacement of social objectives with profitability by state-owned agencies, and the opening of historically state-controlled industries to private competition' (Cited by Kassrils, 2002:3). The organisation opposes privatisation because it is associated with job losses and because poor households cannot afford the higher prices for basic goods and services that privatisation involves. According to Cosatu General Secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi '... getting water to poor communities at prices they can afford is not profitable ... In short working people simply cannot afford privatisation' (Vavi, 2002:8).

For this reason many South Africans oppose it. McDonald, cites a national, statistically representative survey of 2,530 people conducted for the Municipal Services Project by the Human Sciences Research Council in 2001 which found that close to two-thirds, 62% of respondents, were opposed to having municipal services such as water and electricity provided by a private company (McDonald, 2002).

However, in that year, Johannesburg City Council set up a public-private partnership with the British firm Northumbrian Water and its French parent, Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux which began installing pre-paid water meters in this area. As McDonald and Ruiters have stressed such 'public-private partnerships' whereby the state continues to own the assets and is involved in the monitoring and decision making of the service delivery but the actual operations are undertaken by a private entity 'must be seen as a form of privatisation: a transfer of ownership and or control that changes the operational calculus of a service

from 'public good' to 'private profit' (McDonald and Ruiters, 2005:3).

According to a 2003 Anti Privatisation Forum pamphlet Johannesburg City Council is paying Suez through its local subsidiary, Johannesburg Water, R25 million over 5 years to 'manage' water consumption in the city. This is in addition to the R20 million management fee it will receive every 5 years for the 30 year duration of the contract. That is R145 million guaranteed to Suez. This was done despite the British experience in 1998 when pre-paid meters were ruled illegal on the grounds that they deprived the poor of their most important resource.

These pre-paid meters are water pumps activated by a pre-paid card or token, ensuring that people pay in advance for what they use. They have many advantages for water companies, as Ebrahim Harvey has pointed out. 'Among them are: a steady stream of cash because payments are made before consumption; there are no administrative costs for billing and credit action and they dispense with the risk of incurring the wrath of households affected by disconnections' (Harvey, 2003).

These advantages motivated Johannesburg Water (JW) who first introduced pre-paid meters in Orange Farm to 'test' the response of poor communities to the introduction of this 'self-disconnection' water technology (under the guise of self-ownership and management of water consumption). The process involved inadequate consultation and a good deal of confusion. For example some Orange Farm residents failed to resist the installation of pre-paid water meters because they understood that they were getting improved sanitation. The bucket system is widely hated. It involves buckets of human excrement being kept by householders and then loaded onto trucks for collection and disposal. One resident said, 'We asked the government for flush toilets because we did not like the pit toilets. We did not ask for pre-pays' (Interview, 2003). The meters are linked to a shallow condominium sewer system which requires residents to physically unblock sewer pipes every three months. Blockages are likely to occur because most residents cannot afford the toilet paper the system requires, using newspaper instead. The unblocking requires physical strength and no equipment is provided so residents have to use their bare hands. Public health problems such as mass outbreaks of diarrhoea and even cholera could result.

In Phiri, one of the oldest and poorest areas of Soweto, the meters were installed in 2003 under police protection, with periodic eruptions of violence. At the launch of this Operation Gcin'amanzi (a Zulu term for 'conserving water') the mayor of Johannesburg stated, 'Water is a strategic resource and we cannot afford to lose a drop'. Ebrahim Harvey points out that nothing was said about corporate bulk water users or 'mainly white hedonistic users in mansions who use many thousands of litres of water just for their large lawns and swimming pools' (Harvey, 2003:7).

Recently JW claimed that Soweto residents were saving about R110 a month on water bills since the launch of Operation Gcin'amanzi. They claim that the average monthly cost for water and sanitation is now R39,58 against the previous flat rate charge of R149,05, and that water supplied to each stand has dropped from 67,000 litres to about 10,200 litres per month. (JW spokesman, Jameel Chand cited in *The Star* 8.3.2006). But these figures ignore the very real hardships that the installation of pre-paid meters have imposed on poor people.

The impact of pre-paid water meters

Research has demonstrated how the installation of pre-paid water meters as part of the post apartheid state's policy of cost-recovery has had devastating impacts on poor communities. It has negatively affected social relations, eroded relations of trust and reciprocity in the community, increased social tensions, domestic conflict and violence against women, and negatively impacted on health levels in terms of poor people's ability to maintain clean bodies and households. It has impacted on food production as people have stopped tending domestic vegetable gardens, increased environmental pollution from uncontrolled effluent discharges and resulted in health problems including cholera.

The 2002 cholera outbreak in rural KwaZulu-Natal was directly linked to the installation of pre-paid water meters. When very poor women could not afford to recharge the meters, they desperately turned to the contaminated rivers nearby. More than 200 people died and more than 100,000 became ill with cholera.

Research conducted by the Coalition Against Water Privatisation in Phiri in 2003 involved 174 households, and found that the majority relied on pensions of R740 a month as their main source of income. This level of poverty generates high levels of stress and in almost half the households respondents reported that one or more members of their households were sick, with 34% reporting high blood pressure and 16% diabetes. Many residents who did not have the money to buy water beyond the 6,000 litres reported how they were having to re-use the same amount of water for different functions and were bathing and washing less often (Coalition *et al*, 2004). During the apartheid era water supplies were not cut in black townships for non-payment. The practice was to charge a flat rate equal to 20 kl of water regardless of consumption. One 78 year old Phiri informant told researcher Ebrahim Harvey, 'Cooking, cleaning and especially washing clothing uses a lot of water. I'm tired of this government. The whites were better. They never cut our water even when we did not pay for it' (Cited by Harvey, 2003:5).

According to Ebrahim Harvey the introduction of these pre-paid water meters 'privatizes misery in the homes of the poor, contributes to social individualization and social decay. It forms part of a new locus of the neoliberal politics of consumption' (Harvey, 2005:127). At a workshop in Phiri organised by Harvey in 2006, residents expressed a range of emotions from indignation to depression as they described how they had been forced to discontinue vegetable gardens and how their sense of personal dignity and *ubuntu* had been eroded.

The introduction of pre-paid water meters in Orange Farm also had devastating health and social impacts on poor households, disrupting social relations and generating new tensions and conflicts. A research report from the Coalition against Water Privatisation which covered 192 households demonstrated these impacts. Hygiene levels have been negatively affected in the households surveyed. A large proportion, 66% said they bath less; 67% said they wash dishes less; 57% said they drink less and 66% said they clean less. Nutrition is affected as people cannot afford to water vegetable gardens. The introduction of pre-paid meters has exacerbated divisions and generated social tensions in the household as well as in the community. Relations of trust and reciprocity among neighbours have been affected. 'Begging and borrowing produce unequal relations of power between

those who have water and those who don't' (Coalition, 2004:20). A large number (62% of informants) said that problems with water increased domestic violence and 60% said pre-pays increased work for women. Research by the Coalition Against Water Privatisation described how limited water makes the communal celebrations which deepen social solidarity in township life such as weddings and funerals

difficult. Limitation of water use creates tensions amongst residents and within households as the relationship to water is individualised. It is no longer possible to walk into a neighbour's house and ask for a glass of water freely. Researchers themselves were asked to pay 20c for a glass of water by residents ... (Coalition Against Water Privatisation, et al., 2004: 20).

The research report concludes that 'In general terms prepaid meters place untold pressures on social relations' (Coalition, 2004:20).

This introduction of pre-paid meters is part of a wider process, the increasing commodification of natural resources. As McDonald and Ruiters point out, at work are 'the broad forces of commodification: the transformation of all social relations to economic relations, subsumed by the logic of the market and reduced to the crude calculus of profit' (McDonald and Ruiters, 2005:3). Or as Hardt and Negri write, the frightening reality is 'not that humans are changing nature but that nature is ceasing to be common. That it is becoming private property and exclusively controlled by its new owners' (Hardt and Negri, 2004:72). Increasingly the 'new owners' are powerful, multinational corporations, concerned largely with profit.

Access to clean water

Another example of the failure of the state resulting in individuals having to seek private remedies for socially produced problems in relation to water access is the Steel Valley struggle¹. In this case the failure of the state to provide municipal water to smallholdings around Vanderbjlpark meant that they were reliant on groundwater which was contaminated by the steel mill. Furthermore the state failed to protect the inhabitants from this pollution which has resulted in the social disintegration of the area, loss of livelihoods and serious health problems ranging from kidney disease to cancer for thousands of people. One of them was an elderly man, now 74, a practising priest and *sangoma*, Strike Matsepo, whose smallholding adjoins the ISCOR slag heap which dominates the sky line.

Strike Matsepo worked as a mechanic at the Coca Cola factory in Vanderbjlpark and cashed his pension to buy a smallholding in the area in 1990. 'This was at the time of Mandela when people could buy where they liked,' he said. He brought his large extended family, including his beloved sister Alinah, to live with him in his new home and states proudly, 'a big sack of mealie meal was finished in two weeks.' He says, 'It used to be a good place.' But in the past 15 years several of his animals were born with birth defects and many have died from what he claims is contaminated water. 'In all 30 cows, 9 calves, 5

1. This material draws on a research project conducted with my colleague and friend Victor Munnik 'Throwing stones at a giant: an account of the Steel Valley struggle' available at www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs under the listed 2004 funded research reports.

sheep, 6 goats, 3 tortoises, 7 dogs, 2 cats, 1 pig and 20 chickens have died.' Matsepo himself recently spent 6 weeks in hospital with kidney failure and currently suffers from tiredness and lack of concentration. His sister Alinah has just died and Strike asserts, angrily, 'My sister would be alive now without ISCOR.' She had high levels of cadmium in her blood and scientific evidence has confirmed the presence of a number of other dangerous and carcinogenic substances in the groundwater. Other family members are also sick and report that they stay inside the house because the dust and air pollution in the area is so bad. Recently having suffered a stroke and then facing the threat of the sheriff of the court impounding all his possessions to pay legal costs from a failed court challenge, he says, 'My body is full of pain.'

Other informants like Matsepo described the area around the ISCOR plant as a 'good place to live'. The Steel Valley area used to be a vibrant, productive community of over 500 smallholdings. Many of the people living in the area were subsistence farmers and grew a variety of vegetables such as pumpkins, spinach, beans and maize for their own consumption. Several kept livestock and some sold vegetables in nearby towns such as Sebokeng and Vanderbijlpark, earning as much as R800 a week. It was a strong, stable community with a developed infrastructure in the form of shops, schools, churches and bus services, which have all now collapsed.

For a long time the Steel Valley community was ignorant of the hidden and lethal pollution of the ground and canal water. As in the case of Love Canal in the USA where a working class community confronted contamination by a multinational corporation, 'there were no walls of water, no bolts of lightning, no reports of multiple deaths and brave rescues' (Levine, 1982: 179). The situation was neither cataclysmic or dramatic, but as people sickened, animals died and crops failed, those who could afford it moved away from the area. Others bought water from urban dwellers, but the poorer black residents felt trapped with no viable alternatives, 'ruined and helpless' as Matsepo expressed it.

The Steel Valley area is now a wasteland. Only 22 houses out of 500 remain in this poisoned landscape. ISCOR is now part of Mittal steel, the largest steel producing company in the world, operating in 14 different countries, employing some 220,000 people and generating billions of dollars. The chairperson, Lakshmi Mittal, is estimated to be the third richest man in the world. (*International Herald Tribune* 4.2.2006)

Resocialisation of the crisis.

While the working class and the unemployed, the social category Ashwin Desai describes as 'the poors' are the shock absorbers of the social crisis, they are not passive victims. The growing contradiction between the discourse of rights and the experience of unmet social needs that is so dramatically evident in the case of water, is generating significant new patterns of grassroots mobilisation, generally described very loosely and ambiguously as the so-called 'new' social movements. The energy of these movements generally comes from the crises experienced by poor, vulnerable communities without access to jobs, housing, land, clean water, anti-retrovirals and sanitation.

The potential of these new social movements which have recently emerged in response to the social crisis has been emphasised by Webster and Von Holdt.. They write,

'The significance of social movements located in the community is their potential to re-socialise this crisis – which is experienced as private crisis, distress and conflict in households and communities – by building social solidarity around it, projecting it into the public arena, mobilising support and action and influencing the state and public policy' (Webster and Von Holdt, 2005: 38).

Resistance to the privatisation of water

As women are the main administrators of household consumption, and the shock absorbers of 'pre-paids' it is not surprising that women are also the shock troops, leading opposition to the privatisation of water. The main participants are older women, 'the grannies' as Trevor Ngwane terms them. The impetus to the formation of the Coalition Against Water Privatisation in 2003 as part of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) was that these disconnections were occurring in a context where access to water is an explicit constitutional right (unlike electricity). It is claimed that the privatisation of water through technological tools such as pre-paid meters violates that constitutional right. In July 2006 a group of Soweto residents filed papers in the Witwatersrand High Court against the City of Johannesburg and the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry asking that prepaid water meters be declared unconstitutional (*Mail and Guardian* July 21 to 27 2006).

Formed in 2003, the Coalition against Water Privatisation illustrates what Greenstein (2003) terms the 'legal-activist' route to social mobilisation. The Coalition uses a rights discourse to challenge the state's commitment to cost recovery in basic service delivery. The challenge involves both litigation and direct action, both being understood as means of grassroots mobilisation. The main demand is for decommodification of water which makes this a Polanyian type struggle (those defined by need opposing commodification in the market) as opposed to Marxist type struggles against exploitation in production (Burawoy, 2003).

The Coalition is extending its international linkages, and an international solidarity campaign is growing as around the world water is being privatised (Barlow and Clarke, 2002; Holland, 2005). Solidarity is a strong theme in the Coalition and involves support to comrades charged in court, such as providing legal aid and raising bail money for the 'water warriors'. In this respect it acts as an important source of resources which deepens strong social bonds.

'We were an angry red tide,' a Phiri householder said as people wearing red Anti-Privatisation Forum t-shirts protested. The Coalition involves both legal and illegal strategies; rights talk is used by activists to give legitimacy to their demands but there are also militant activities such as re-connecting households to water, and – on occasion – disconnecting councillors' water and electricity supplies. Other coalition strategies involve community education through workshops, the distribution of leaflets, painting slogans in public places (graffiti in Orange Farm states, 'Fuck the meters, enjoy the water'), marches, and mass meetings at which anyone can speak and everyone listens.

Some violent confrontation has resulted from this struggle. The post-apartheid state's response to coalition activities has largely been criminalisation, leading one activist to say, 'It is not easy to stand up for your rights today.' Ironically, the language of rights is also used

by Johannesburg Water and linked to an appeal to modernity. It tries to sell the pre-payment system as modern, post-apartheid and enabling consumers to exercise choice.

There are widely divergent understandings of the water issue. On the ground the emphasis is on water as necessary to life, as a survival issue. As an Orange Farm resident said, 'we can cope with pre-paid electricity meters, because we can use other sources like coal stoves and primuses for cooking, but we can't cope without water.' For some activists in the coalition the issue is embedded in the wider struggle against neo-liberalism. According to social justice activist George Dor, 'We are contextualising the pre-paid water issue in terms of the struggle against neo-liberalism.' Dale T. McKinley on behalf of the APF issued a statement that

We want to emphasise that the ongoing struggles in Phiri are but part of a much larger struggle that is taking place across South Africa against the neo-liberal policies of the ANC government – over land, education, health-care, water, electricity and housing. The repression and arrogance being meted out by the ANC government and Johannesburg Water have not, and will not, halt the struggle for basic human dignity and rights of the poor in Phiri and indeed, in innumerable poor communities across the breadth of South Africa. The collective resistance of the poor is not ephemeral – it is both necessary and never-ending for as long as the barbarism of capitalism exists (APF September 2003 statement).

There has been some resistance to APC activities from ANC loyalists. For example in February 2004 several activists of the Orange Farm Water Crisis Committee (OFWV) were stopped from distributing pamphlets mobilising against the privatisation of basic services by a group of local ANC members. The activists were told they were 'in ANC territory', that the OFWCC, an affiliate of the APF, was 'the enemy' and that the ANC 'does not want to see your red T-shirts here'. There are reports that the ANC members physically attacked the activists and forcibly took all the remaining pamphlets. One activist was marched to the office of the local ANC councillor, Alena Mahlangu, who threatened him with 'expulsion from the community' if he continued with OFWCC/APF activities (The Citizen 13.2.2004) The APF leader, Dale Mckinley, took this as evidence of the ANC's 'political intolerance, authoritarianism and hypocrisy' (The Citizen 13.2.2004).

Resistance to the pre-paid meters generally takes the form of a demand for 'decommodification', a demand for a flat rate applicable to all consumers, or no payment at all. For example, 91% of the Orange Farm respondents stated that they believed that water should be free.. The notion of linking payment to consumption is not popular. In other words, access to water is not construed as an environmental issue, despite the reality that South Africa is a water-scarce country. But it is frequently claimed that 'I want to take responsibility for the rights I enjoy'. Another Phiri resident commented, 'We don't want things for free, we are loyal to our government, but the problem is affordability.'

Clearly this demand for decommodification can potentially broaden people's direct and immediate concerns with access to basic services, to a new understanding that rejects the post-apartheid state's policies of neo-liberalism. Some go further to claim that the demand for decommodification could generate a diverse but united challenge to capitalism. For example, Bond and Guliwe maintain that 'Through growing direct links to similar

grassroots campaigns in places as diverse as Accra, Cochabamba, Narmada Valley and Porto Alegre, the struggle to decommodify life has enormous potential to grow from autonomous sites of struggle like Soweto into a full-fledged socialist movement' (Bond and Guliwe, 2003:23).

What is indisputable is that internationally the opposition to water privatisation is growing, through organisations such as the World Coalition against Water Privatisation and Commercialisation. The primary aims of the coalition are: to ensure the right to water for all; to preserve water for life and future generations, to fight against privatisation and commodification; to set up an innovative model of public utility on a world level. People from all over the world met in Delhi in January 2004 for the People's World Water Forum to build a common vision for action and to strategise how to effectively counter the global forces of destruction and privatisation and to promote alternatives for the wise management of our water systems.

As the Cochabamba Declaration against water privatisation states, '... water belongs to the earth and all species and is sacred to life. Therefore, the world's water must be conserved, reclaimed and protected for all future generations and its natural patterns respected' (Cited by Barlow and Clarke, 2002).

Resistance to water pollution

For 40 years the Steel Valley community was largely ignorant of the toxic chemicals in their ground water ... However, in 2001 a small group came together to form the Steel Valley Crisis Committee (SVCC) to mobilise the community and coordinate efforts to engage ISCOR, the courts and the state to deal with the pollution crisis. Actions included a protest march to ISCOR in 2001, picketing action at the WSSD conference and litigation. In a 2001 court case aimed at obtaining compensation for 16 households who had suffered from the water pollution, ISCOR denied responsibility, claiming there was no evidence of heavy metals in the borehole water. This denial is characteristic of corporate practices in more developed societies (Markowitz and Rosen, 2004). ISCOR further paid compensation to householders on condition they withdrew from legal action.

As this failed, and the pollution of the groundwater continues, the SVCC must be analysed as an example of a failed struggle against environmental injustice. The main reasons for this failure were the power of ISCOR and the atomisation of the community as those who could afford to moved away and others resorted to buying unpolluted water from adjacent areas. There was also the SVCC's reliance on a legalism which involved a dependence on external legal experts and displaced social mobilisation. But the collapse of the SVCC is part of the social disintegration of the entire Steel Valley community. Mr Matsepe was part of the SVCC, but, he says, 'there is nothing happening now. The people who organised the protests are no longer here. We are waiting for the people to unite again. We are now ruined and hopeless.'

Since Mr Matsepe expressed these sentiments in 2004, a new potential to challenge the globalised steel empire of Lakshimi Mittal has taken shape in the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance. This is an alliance of 15 organisations, ranging from small faith-based groups to the large Vaal Working Class Crisis Co-ordinating Committee. The social base

is black, poor, largely unemployed people united by their demands to end pollution in the Vaal triangle by Sasol and Samancor as well as Mittal Steel. Their emphasis is on overcoming a sense of powerlessness and community education workshops. These address issues such as the pollution chain so as to link scientific and experiential knowledge to strengthen local capacity to participate in policy forums.

Both these struggles – against the pollution and privatisation of water – involve translating private deprivation, anxiety and misery into public issues, mobilising communities, generating co-operation instead of competition, building relations of mutual support and solidarity, projecting issues into the media and formulating demands on the state. In other words, in the language of C. Wright Mills, they involve turning private troubles into social issues. All these struggles have the potential to strengthen social citizenship, and could be expanded by the deeper and more extensive involvement of sociologists.

Public sociology

This involvement involves any of the four types of sociology Michael Burawoy (2004) has distinguished – public, professional, critical and policy sociology – on the basis of the type of knowledge involved (instrumental or reflexive) and the intended audience (academic or non-academic). He emphasises the interdependence and necessity of collaboration between the four types. During his presidency the theme of the 2004 meeting of the powerful 13,000 member strong American Sociological Association (ASA) was ‘public sociologies’ which was intended to capture this variety. Public sociology is a form of both intellectual and political engagement. It is defined by a critical scholarly engagement with contemporary public issues.

The two examples of struggles around access to adequate water raise a number of sociological questions, with which some researchers have engaged but which require far more work, including:

1. What is the *power basis* of the corporations involved in these struggles, specifically Suez (one of the ten corporate ‘water lords’ who control the global water industry) and Mittal Steel which now controls ten percent of world steel production? How is their power mediated? What is the relation between the local and the global? Are Suez and Mittal Steel part of Hardt and Negri’s (2004) conception of ‘empire’ a ‘network power’ including the dominant nation states, supranational institutions like the World Bank as well as the major corporations?

An urgent sociological task is to develop a theoretical understanding of power in the new global order, and specifically to examine the relation between global forces and the nation state. Hardt and Negri stress that the powers and functions of nation-states are being transformed in a new global framework. Saskia Sassen calls this a process of ‘denationalization’. States continue to play a crucial role in determining and maintaining the legal and economic order, she argues, but their actions are increasingly oriented not toward national interests but rather toward the emerging global power structure. From this perspective there is no contradiction between the power of the national state and globalisation (Sassen, 2002).

2. This raises another series of questions about the *capacity of the state* to deliver basic

services, to control corporate power, to prevent pollution and obtain compensation for its victims. The independent left in South Africa has combined connecting with grassroots globalisation with making demands on the nation state to address the widening gap between basic human needs and rights.

3. What is the *social basis of resistance*? What are the social characteristics of the actors involved in the struggle against the lack of service delivery and pollution in terms of class, gender, race, ethnicity, age and other crucial social variables? Are the organisations representative of the broader community? Are they democratic and accountable? What is the sociological nature of the networks involved? How should this 'social multiplicity' be theorised? Does it have the capacity to challenge the globalisation of capital?

Notions of 'the multitude' point to an optimistic answer. Hardt and Negri define this as an open and expansive network, composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity, composed potentially of all the diverse figures of social production. It is a many-coloured like Joseph's coat, a social multiplicity that can communicate and act in common while remaining internally different. It is made up of all oppressed people and is not the working class (all waged workers), not an identity (like the people), or uniform (like the masses) 'It is working ... to create an alternative global society' (Hardt and Negri, 2001:xvii).

4. What are the social, economic and health *impacts* of the introduction of pre-paid water meters and the exposure to water pollution of poor communities? Obviously the 'community' is not a monolithic entity and requires a disaggregated analysis of the impacts on people with differential access to power, resources and knowledge.
5. How have reductionist and distorted conceptions of sciences (and scientists) been used to deny and distort an understanding of these impacts?
6. What are the definitions of the pollution issue? How can we promote a process of *social recognition*? As Beck (1992) has stressed, many of the environmental risks of modernity, the toxins and pollutants, are hidden from sensory perception. Mobilisation requires that the pollution achieves a level of social visibility.
7. What are the policy *alternatives*? There has to be a formulation of concrete alternatives at the local and national level. As debate at the World Social Forum is increasingly emphasising, we have to demonstrate that 'another world is possible'. Without such alternative social visions, we leave 'the mobilisation of passion' and 'hope' to right wing movements (Mouffe and Laclau in Zournazi, 2003:126).

Whether engaged in exposure, analysis or theorisation, whether describing social impacts, conceptualising power or formulating policy alternatives, the sociologist who is prepared to 'speak the language of everyday', as Fanon expressed it, and to do so in a spirit of humility, can contribute usefully to debates on strategy, tactics and analysis. Burawoy has suggested that involvement means a kind of 'organic public sociology' 'in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active and often counter-public' (Burawoy, 2005:269). The participation of sociologists in such struggles may link formal knowledge to informal, direct, experiential knowledge in ways that help to create an active citizenship and in this sense, deepen democracy. But democracy demands an

engagement with the state.

The state cannot be bypassed, as Burawoy (2004) seems to do. Many of our most progressive social thinkers do this in exaggerating the transformative capacity and emancipatory potential of 'grassroots globalization' or 'globalisation-from-below'. In much of this writing there is an implicit suspicion of the state as a threat, as a source of authoritarian, impersonal, bureaucratic power. *But we need to leverage the state to access resources and rights.* In Africa only the democratic state can meet the needs of the impoverished majority. As Vandana Shiva writes, we have to work at 'reclaiming the state to protect people's interests ...The real issue of our times is how to reinvent the state' (Shiva,2002:19).

This engagement with the state implies *a linking of public and policy sociology.* A vibrant public sociology needs to be strengthened by other kinds of sociology. Solutions to 'public issues' require the concrete, 'real utopias' of policy sociology. Burawoy points to the danger that 'policy sociology is always in danger of subordination to the client' (Burawoy, 2004:18). 'Policy sociology hires itself out to a client or is sponsored by a patron who defines a range of important problems, restricting the autonomous input of the sociologist' (Burawoy, 2004:17). But the 'client' could be *the vulnerable, the dispossessed, and the marginalised* who need the expert knowledge of policy sociology to help devise solutions and formulate demands to meet their needs. Adapting *their needs as priorities* may mean sociologists learning that VIPs mean 'ventilated, improved, pitlatrines'.

This kind of sociology is not always valued by academics. Furthermore the new social movements and their traditions of collective discipline sometimes jar on academics socialised into a competitive individualism. Participatory research published in forms that are accessible to grassroots communities under collective authorship do not fit with the conventional academic routes to publishing in peer-reviewed journals and promotion.

But in doing so we are connecting with significant traditions in our discipline. C. Wright Mills' notion of 'the sociological imagination' has a special potential for social mobilisation in the translation of private troubles, such as a lack of access to clean and adequate water, into public issues. This stress on the understanding of personal troubles as social or public issues has a special relevance in our 'world of rampant "individualization"' (Bauman, 2004:32).

The failure to do so presents dangers both for social order and individual well being. Bauman has pointed to the 'pent-up fear and anger' of people who blame themselves for their misery, making 'our time auspicious for scapegoats' (Bauman, 2001:106). He stresses that we need 'a populous and vibrant agora, where people meet daily to continue their joint effort of translating back and forth between the language of private concerns and public good' (Bauman, 2001:14). The argument of this paper is that such agora would be enriched by the presence of public sociologists.

At this moment of crisis we need a sociology capable of producing good research and analysis of the impacts of specific social policies on subordinate groups. Research is a significant form of social mobilisation. Collective, participatory research can be empowering; it can build analytical capacity, consolidate alliances, generate new forms of solidarity, and contribute to meaningful change.

At the same time the collaboration of professional, critical, policy and public sociology

is necessary to the postapartheid era which 'calls for a very different sociology ... It requires new research programmes ... that require sociologists to collaborate with each other and develop shared assumptions, questions and theories' (Burawoy, 2004:25). In this reorientation we have much to learn from Burawoy's warnings about the 'instrumentalization of sociology' in South Africa, as well as from C. Wright Mills, especially his writing on the fusion of personal and intellectual life (Wright Mills, 1970:222). As Mills expressed it some fifty years ago, 'What he (the social scientist) ought to do ... is to combat all those forces which are destroying genuine publics' (Wright Mills, 1970:206).

But – in this highly individualised moment – we must reject his call to 'stand for the primacy of the individual scholar' (Wright Mills, 1970(1959):246). Instead, at this moment, we should emphasise the importance of the collective. This means that individual scholars should stand in solidarity with the locally based, but globally connected social movements that are challenging the increasing social injustice and environmental degradation brought about by corporate globalisation.

But what does such solidarity involve? It could mean adopting the needs of the vulnerable and marginalised as our research priorities. It could involve participation in collective, participatory research and policy formulation together *with*, rather than *on* the new social movements. Practicing what Mills termed 'the politics of truth' could also involve struggling for robust, open and democratic debate *inside* those structures.

These questions are relevant to sociologist Ashwin Desai's call for a 'complete rethink in the way left academics presently relate to – and sometimes impose themselves on – grassroots organisations'. (Desai, 2006). In his 2006 lecture to memorialise another great sociologist, Harold Wolpe, Desai addressed some of the problems involved in the current practices of 'we outside academics' 'researching' the practices and analysing the politics of the poor'. He stresses that, 'the movements of the poor must be celebrated for being what they are: relatively small groupings of awakening antagonism in a sea of political apathy, nationalist ignorance and informal repression.' But they also represent a surge of social energy, a reclaiming of the traditions of struggle and public engagement that marked the anti-apartheid movement. The challenge is to debate how we – as African middle class sociologists – can, as Desai expressed it, 'meet the challenge of how to support movements of the Poor without becoming gatekeepers, vanguardists, losing the ability to be critical and using movements to advance our academic careers.'

This challenge has a special pertinency in the light of Mbeki's 2006 Mandela lecture where he bemoaned the failure of Mandela's quest for the 'RDP of the soul' and emphasised the need to infuse the values of 'ubuntu into our very being as a people' (Cited in *The Saturday Star* 16.8.2006). But the erosion of social relations of caring and mutual responsibility which 'ubuntu' represents and the RDP enshrined, are threatened by the current crisis. As Vukani Mde has observed, 'you cannot have a Gear economy and an RDP soul' (*The Weekender* 5-6 August, 2006).

This GEAR economy is part of the process of neoliberal re-structuring which is increasing social inequality and environmental degradation throughout our continent. For this reason we need to heed the call of a recent conference of the Council for Development and Social Research in Africa and Third World Network Africa which called upon

'scholars and activist intellectuals within Africa and in the diaspora, to join forces with social groups whose interests and needs are central to the development of Africa' (cited by Bond, 2006:158).

The immediate and urgent task is to build a 'new architecture for producing and sharing knowledge' between those critical voices who speak together with 'the poor, the vulnerable, the dispossessed and the marginalised', as well as new forms of dialogue between public intellectuals, activists and policy makers in different societies' (Appadurai, 2002:272). This is our challenge as South African sociologists.

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