ADDRESS AT THE FAREWELL DINNER OF THE 1ST CONGRESS OF THE AFRICAN SOCIOLOGY CONFERENCE

18 July 2007

Distinguished colleagues, officials of various organisations, all protocols observed!

Welcome to the Opening Dinner!

And through the privilege of this welcome, and as a person who has grown up in a particular social theoretical tradition and has a PhD in sociology, but who does not claim to be a sociologist, permit me a few comments and some observations on the context of this conference.

My assumption is that grounded in social theory and a methodological commitment to sensitive, critical and rigorous social analysis, the intellectual adventure of the sociologist is to investigate, through an impersonal, dispassionate, yet unquestionably moral scholarship, the mutual interpenetration of past and present, social structure and conjuncture, events and processes, and human action and agency.

My further assumption is that the sociologists concern is the hidden structures and the conditions which both frustrate human aspirations but also make possible struggles and the triumph of justice; a search, if you like, for the mechanisms of social reproduction and transformation.

Myself, I am not insistent that rational, critical and imaginative social inquiry must necessarily serve purposes beyond cognitive ends and human social understanding. I must confess, however, that personally I especially value such inquiry as a means to more effective political and social action in the service of social justice.

However, in as much as we may value and seek to promote knowledge for social justice, it will be agreed that this necessitates a passionate commitment to honest, critical and independent scholarship. Like the wise little Italian who perished prematurely in Mussolini's jail, we must insist that intellectual enquiry has to "produce knowledge for politics, without cutting itself off from the objective and scientific investigation of the world" (Buci-Gluckman, 1980:15). If this is not the case, we become trapped in a situation in which, as in the case of Stalinism, research "becomes a mere political instrument, never producing any knowledge for politics since it is already a political ideology" (Buci-Glucksmann, 1980:15).

With respect to the context of this conference, there are four observations I wish to make.

First, as a young first year Anthropology student 29 years ago I leant through a splendid article by Bernard Magubane that names and naming are seldom accidents of history but are intimately connected with intellectual traditions and social struggles. And so it is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this evening's dinner to the Nelson Mandela Hall, a tribute to a great African leader that had to await the triumph of democracy in South Africa. The residences attached to this hall – Ruth First, Victoria Mxenge and Helen Joseph bear testimony to the necessary processes that have begun at this University to engage previous intellectual traditions and history and honour those that were indomitable fighters for democracy and social justice.

Second, next month we will through a week-long commemorate the 25th anniversary of the assassination of the scholar, journalist and freedom-fighter Ruth First. And in September, there will be an extensive programme of events and activities, including a colloquium to celebrate the life and work of Steve Biko and commemorate the 30th anniversary of his brutal killing in 1997.

There is a poignant element of Biko's life that relates to this University. In 1967 Biko and black South Africans attending a student conference were refused accommodation by the University authorities in the residences that you are housed. This was one of the triggers that gave rise to the Black Consciousness movement and the important thinking and ideas that were associated with this movement, a movement that in my view made an important contribution to the eventual triumph of democracy in South Africa.

Thus, only a few decades ago such a conference would not have been possible in South Africa and many of you would have been barred accommodation in the residences of this University.

However, in as much as living spaces have been deracialised, it is necessary to pose whether intellectual spaces at South Africa universities, and universities in Africa more generally, have been deracialised, demasculanised and decolonised. It would be extremely short-sighted to measure the transformation of South African universities by simply the extent to which black and women students, academics and administrators predominate. Permit me to suggest that the fundamental measure must be the extent to which we succeed in deracialising, demasculanising and decolonising the

processes, dynamics and outcomes of scholarship and knowledge production and inherited curricula. This is not the advocacy of any simple Africanisation – an issue that Amartya Sen addresses eloquently in *The Argumentative Indian* with respect to Indianisation - but is to pose that to the extent that respect for intellectual autonomy and academic freedom exists what continues to preclude the recognition of Ibn Khaldun and other great African, Asian and South American scholars in our social sciences.

In as mush as sociology and the social sciences must look outwards and ensure the visibility of our scholars and of sociology in the intellectual and cultural debates and lives of our societies, there is clearly also urgent need for looking inwards to our own inherited intellectual traditions and practices.

Third, as you conference and debate it would be good if your powers of sociological observation take in the conditions of the town, iRhini/Grahamstown, in which you meet. The economic and social structure of this town, like hundreds across Africa, has been profoundly shaped by colonialism and apartheid. Thirteen years into the democratic breakthrough, the legacies of colonialism and apartheid remain stark, and there is a considerable distance to be travelled, as in many parts of Africa, for human and economic and social rights to proceed beyond

rhetorical pronouncements and to become substantive for the historically disadvantaged and socially marginalized inhabitants of this town.

During the past thirteen years of democracy in South Africa there have been some important economic and social gains. Yet the reality is that South Africa continues to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions. The Presidency's *Development Indicators Mid-Term Review* released last month reveals that the Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality, increased from 0.665 in 1994 to 0.685 in 2006 (2007:22). This indicates that the social grants that are provided to 12 million people and new jobs that have been created have been insufficient 'to overcome widening income inequality' (ibid.).

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994 from 2.0% to 1.7%; conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994 from 72.0% to 72.5%. At the same time, the per capita income of the richest 20% has risen much faster than that of the poorest 20% (Presidency, 2007:21). 43% of South Africans continue to live on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year (down from 50.5% in 1994) (Presidency, 2007:23).

The cleavages of ‘race’, class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight South Africa’s democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, unbridled individualism and crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of “greed is cool” runs rampant in our society. Patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to development. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives and wreaks havoc in South Africa. HIV/AIDS exacerbates the fault-lines of our society, intensifies our social challenges and has over the past decade reduced life-expectancy from almost 60 years to about 47 years.

The obdurate reality is that the inhabitants of this town ‘…see a world where disparities in wealth, resources and opportunities have grown, (and) where human rights norms and values seem invariably to yield to the dictates of the rich and powerful; which expresses shock and outrage at arbitrary killing but at the same time is complicit in the killing of many more thorough hunger and disease – which could have been avoided (Kollapen, 2004).

If we are serious about advancing social justice, we must refuse, as the Palestinian scholar Hammami puts it, 'to accept the logic of inequality and the repression that it involves', and continue to 'search for human agency, for the means through which inequality can be undone' (2006:32).

The great African thinker and revolutionary Amilcar Cabral, to whom a lecture at this conference is fittingly dedicated, has made the point that we must not confuse ideals and intentions and goals with what actually exists and that we must proceed with out feet firmly on the ground, from what is, what exists.

Social theory and a courageous and engaged sociology I believe has an immense contribution to make to the critique and laying bare of the 'logic of inequality and the repression that it involves' and to the 'search for human agency'. It also has a significant contribution to make the critical analysis of the stated ideals, goals, priorities and policies of governments and political and social movements, and to the description and analysis of what actually exists.

A critical sociology and critical sociologists are much needed, not least in this conjuncture where the ideology of neo-liberalism holds sway and long discredited

modernisation and human capital theories have returned with a vengeance to replace thick conceptions of development which encompass human and social and economic rights with a conception that reduces development to economic growth and good governance.

Finally, we live in an age in which the value of intellectual work is increasingly judged in relation to its significance for economic growth, with the result that the humanities and social sciences are in danger of being crucified at the altar of an extremely narrow conception of 'relevance'. This obsession with knowledge serving largely instrumental ends is something we must, of course, refute and reject.

Intellectual work of the kind that will be discussed at this conference over the next few days has great value and significance for enhancing human understanding and as part of developing the cultural inheritance of future generations and we must fight to ensure that it is also supported and promoted.

It is a testimony to the creativity and hard work of the African Sociology Association and the conference organisers that under these conditions we are able to convene this conference with its exciting and impressive array of addresses and papers.

I am sure that you will join with me in expressing our collective since thanks to the Association, the conference organisers, to the countless unsung colleagues in the seminar rooms, residences and kitchens, and especially Prof. Jimi Adesina, for their dedication and tremendous efforts in assembling this gathering.

I wish you an enjoyable stay at Rhodes University and in Rhini/Grahamstown, a stimulating and productive conference, and a memorable occasion that lays the intellectual and organisational platform for the further development of sociology in Africa and future scholarly exchanges of this kind.