INTRODUCTION

Something happened after 1990 in South Africa’s corridors of learning: students started dragging into the seminar rooms a variety of ‘post’ discourses: post-structuralism, postmodernism and post-colonial studies. In sociology graduate seminars in particular the rumour that the bars of Max Weber’s iron cage had been loosened was doing its rounds. The voicing and scripting of all this excitement constituted an unprecedented challenge.

Yet there was another. Many of my grassroots friends from the creative work of the liberation movement of the 1980s started frequenting workshops and seminars, leaving for a while their mythical ghettos with names like Moscow, Lusaka, Angola and Jamaica to wonder about theory and what these (to quote from one of their poems) ‘satans with degrees’ were all about. This book is a response to both voices.

For my new generation of students, the grand narratives of the anti-apartheid period seemed an anachronism. For my grassroots friends, who performed, composed and wove the symbolic narratives of ‘the’ struggle, their embedded knowledges seemed of no use to the Academy and, in turn, the Academy seemed of no use to them either.

My instinctive response was that in some ways both were partly wrong. To the former, my response was to turn their analytical dialogues into stories. To the latter, my response was to turn their vibrant storytelling into analytical pieces. In between, during those shifting and transforming instances, which felt like an exhilarating experiment, something else happened: the theoretical parables you are about to read.

My first presentations of these parables elicited shock. It was ‘one thing’, I was told, to argue the importance of narrativity: that was fine in socio-philosophical terms; ‘it was quite another’ to compose such narrations. Despite the shocks, the seminars were filled with exciting disputation. Thanks to a small grant from the University of Natal’s Community and Development Research Fund, I was able to take the experiments further to communities, trade union education classes and among youth structures in and around Durban.
Similarly, their reception off-campus brought with it its own shocks. It was ‘one thing’
to create didactic narratives in popular and worker theatre and oral storytelling; it was
‘quite another’ to turn them into hypotheses about the social. There was also resistance
to the breaking-down of the roles of teacher and the taught, of the umfundisi, professor
sir, and the class.

At first I avoided giving my own exegesis of the parables. The kind version of what
I was doing would have me facilitating a creative process of dialogue and cognition.
A less kind version, though, would have me enjoying the power my silence involved.
Consequently the ‘what-do-you-mean’ pressure increased.

I tried my best to avoid speaking to the parables directly, embroidering instead the
yawing gaps around them. First of all there was the ‘daydreams’ work, which emerged
as a piece after discussions with Michael Burawoy after his exposure to black worker
theatre improvisations in Durban. The piece, which appears some pages later in this
book, was an exploration of the sources of creativity in the workplace. It most certainly
answered the question of ‘agency’ the parables allude to, but it was, I was told, not enough.
Thanks to Michael Burawoy’s and Gillian Hart’s generosity at Berkeley, I was given
the time to start on my broad response to the students’ concern about the relationship
between postmodernism, post-coloniality and the ‘anachronistic’ social science of the
pre-1990s. The result was the chapter on ‘Exploiting Phumelele Nene’. Then, followed
my sudden ‘globalisation’. Through a wonderful coincidence, the ‘breaking-out’ from
years of self-enforced isolation involved encounters with intellectuals from all over the
world who were visiting Durban: Mahmood Mamdani, T. K. Oommen, Raquel Sosa
Elizaga, Maria Luz Moran, and Immanuel and Beatrice Wallerstein. Not only were
they facilitating the voicing of South African concerns, but they were connecting us
with other regional voices. A quick follow-up encounter in Mumbai hosted by Partha
Mukherjee and further discussions with Sujata Patel allowed me to consolidate a further
piece: ‘Beyond Afropessimism’.

As mentioned before, these pieces were skirting around the concerns of the ‘parable
project’. When included in the theory seminars I held, they left many of the participants
unsatisfied. They still insisted that it was my turn to address the parables directly. I tried
and my exegesis followed their order of presentation.

The first, ‘Ingol’ Emasondosoando’, benefited immensely from discussions with Ahmed
Bawa and Astrid von Kotze. The concern they both shared about the role of ‘science’ and
social practices (although Ahmed Bawa is a theoretical physicist and Astrid von Kotze a
participatory adult educator) helped me formulate my thoughts. The second, the ‘Mad­
man’ sequence, had to await a visit to the Mbelu clan in the Midlands. I needed to test
my claims as the inspiration came from their stories of dispossession.

The rest followed in quick succession so, seven years after the beginning of this
theoretical experiment, the manuscript was more or less completed.

Its first public and academic airing occurred thanks to the philosophy programme’s
Skeptic Tank seminar series, where a lot of encouragement and sharp criticism followed.
I would like to thank in particular Lenard Suransky, Jo Beall, Gillian Hart, Pitika Ntuli,
Abebe Zegeye and Vanessa Fenner-Barbour; their encouragement was beyond the call of duty. Finally, of late, the generous comments from Pal Ahluwalia and Mysore Panini gave me the last gasps of energy to complete it. Mysore Panini made me feel particularly special when he convened a special seminar on the parables at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

Furthermore, fortified by the support of the above, I used the parables in the context of very delicate public encounters that have been filmed by Sankofa. At the plenary of the launch of the African Renaissance initiative in Durban, a bemused then deputy president of the country, Thabo Mbeki, had to respond in the context of my musings. A mass gathering of informal sellers and hawkers in Verulam and a series of workshops with young izimbongi and storytellers, criticising and improvising on its themes.

This introduction owes something to their pressure – a pressure that asked me to break the rules of the experiment and make my claims explicit up front. So readers whose patience is stretched by theoretical and discursive concerns may want to skip what follows to re-visit its claims later.

To make matters explicit, the modern, waged and bureaucratic forms of domination have been thought to ‘interpellate’ and ‘socialise’ people as subjects. What has not been said is that such designs, rules of conduct and operational processes have always been attempts to do so. No doubt social institutions and modern organisations try to coordinate human action, but they do so in situations of dissonance, alterity or resistance. I therefore insist that there is always an asymmetry between structure and action, system and practice, interpellation and subjectivity.

The parables concern themselves with the sources of dissonance by exploring active agencies and the meaning of agency. A better formulation would be a concern with recoiling and refracting agencies that are singular, social and sometimes powerfully collective. The operative concept that animates the pages that follow is that of ‘cultural formation’. Better still, ‘cultural formations’ that constitute attempts to recoil from and to refract the pressures of modernity: pressures that tend to disvalue, to degender, to disoralise and to alienate. If, therefore, modernity’s institutions tend towards ‘anomie’, cultural formations are so many contranomic instances of sociality.

The dissonant energies embedded in cultural formations must be seen as ‘centring’ instances that not only recoil from and refract the pressures of institutional life, but also create navigating nodes that shape the substance, the sway and the parameters of social action. They are therefore a major element of subject formation.

The litmus test of their existence and efficacy is in their ‘absence’. Here, South Africa has been a vicious laboratory of extreme situations. Such cultural formations have been destabilised and have been snapped. At the social level they flow into extreme forms of crisis and, most importantly, at the singular level they lead to infraction: the subject’s loss of any ‘centring’ or ‘navigating’ co-ordinates.
To return to their dissonance: we find them resisting the ‘classifying powers’ of modern institutional life and even resist the most individualised forms of pressure – solitary confinement and torture. We find them resisting through invisible labour processes: in reveries, daydreams, the private theatres we create in our minds; we find them active in orality and its poetic forms (the *isibongo*); we find them in ‘narrative streams’ that shape expression and justify social behaviour; in the ‘status scripts’ of everyday life and the ‘mnemonic constellations’ that re-memory the past. The parables and the exegesis are permeated by such recoilings and refractions.

If that is so, then the ‘positionality’ of the sociologist needs serious amendments: we have been operating within a binary opposition. South Africa’s intellectual community has been practising a sociology ‘of’ society and a sociology ‘for’ movements, causes and freedoms. The book asks us to consider the possibility of a sociology ‘with’ people. A sociology that is empathetic to people’s cultural formations, one that risks failure in its counsel for social action and one that is *pace* postmodernism apodictic in its claims. In working with the parable form, one is not only co-hypothesising about the social but one is beginning to break through towards a more undistorted pedagogy.

The sociological parables that follow are rooted in the popular narratives of the KwaZulu-Natal region: in the stories, performances and the poetics of everyday life. They are therefore deeply influenced by Nguni-derived narratives, found in urban, rural and migrant cultural formations. Although they are rooted inside such symbolic thickets, they are a result of further experimental and theoretical work, which translates them into didactic parables.

The first section presents the parables and adds an analytical endnote or afterthought. The reader can tear this section out of the book and use it. Its interpretations could be manifold and varied. It would be absurd to think of these parables as parts of a closure.

The second section describes what I understand sociology to be, or, better, can be, in the sociological context, and how this context can use the communicative, oral and aural strengths of our communities to produce knowledges in common.

The third section uses the parables in a subjective way. I theorise in my own idiosyncratic way through them.

As an experimental text it must be used with the playfulness it invites and the disagreements it warrants – ‘unanimity of opinion,’ argued Feyerabend in his provocative text *Against method*, ‘may be fitting for a church, for the frightened or greedy victims of some (ancient, or modern) myth, or for the weak and willing followers of some tyrant’.1