

# “The Academy and the Rest”? Intellectual Engagements, Circulation of Knowledge and the Labour Movement in South Africa, 1970s-1980s

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## 1 Introduction

Intellectual engagements with the labour movement have continually been a major area of research in South African sociology and labour studies. A wide range of scholarly works focused on the role of these engagements in the reenvisioning of sociology in the 1970s and 1980s (i.e. Buhlungu, 2006, 2009; Crothers, 1996; Jubber, 2007; Maree, 1984, 2010; Sitas, 1997, 2000; Webster, 1982). Webster’s (1982) view of “a social science for liberation” broke the ground as it brought intellectuals in connection with the emergence of an anti-apartheid, emancipatory discourse, which “was more complex than the binary opposition between the Academy and the Rest. Its intellectual discourses traversed both, though the important difference was that such intellectual formations sustained despite university disciplines and found their meaning and problem-contexts outside the Academy” (Sitas, 2000: 881). For Webster, the task of intellectuals was “to provide people with the systematic opportunity to learn from their own experiences by reflecting on it, and at the same time providing them with new concepts that explain that experience” (1982: 7-8). He argued that “the greater the distance between the intellectual and the real practical struggles of the working class, the more difficult it will be for that intellectual to be held accountable to the wider society for the questions which are asked”. While an intellectual formation started being developed outside the universities, “a social discourse which had a normative and political foundation provided the culture levers to prize open departments and disciplinary fields of inquiry”. A sociology with its “indigenous hybridity” was occurring through “the amalgam of a social movement challenge and the drive for institutionalisation that animated a creative tension that produced new kinds of scholarship” (Sitas, 1997:16).

These intellectual engagements later became an area of interest with a particular reference to “public sociology” (Burawoy, 2004, 2010a, 2010b; Webster, 2004; Buhlungu, 2009). These scholarly works successfully underlined the intellectual engagement of the academics with the public and organic intellectuals outside the university, in particular in the labour movement. Similarly, the relevance of labour studies for South African society, its place in the political and socio-economic transformation and “taking labour seriously” in this context have been widely discussed (Sekgobela, 1994; Sitas, 1997; Webster, 1991; Webster and Lipsig-Mummé, 2002). However, while labour has been taken seriously, it seems that knowledge and its circulation have not been a central point of interest. Keim’s (2008, 2011) work on South African labour studies and its analysis as a counter-hegemonic current in the internationalization of sociology can be seen as an attempt that brings much-needed focus to circulation of knowledge. However, her study covers mainly university-based/academic knowledge and could only connect it with the labour movement to a limited extent.

While reflecting on this gap, this paper aims to explore the circulation of knowledge between

academic and extra-academic fields; in other words, between university/labour studies and labour movement/labour organisations. This attempt requires identifying various sites of circulation of knowledge such as labour research units at the universities as well as other centres, institutions and initiatives such as trade unions, mutual aid societies/workers benefit funds, workers advice bureaus and services, workers’ library, worker education and popular education initiatives, workers movement-oriented journals, cultural projects, and workers theatre. Among these various sites, this paper limits its focus on the cases of the Institute for Industrial Education (IEE) and the South African Labour Bulletin (SALB), which played a prominent role in the development of independent trade unions in the 1970s. It also provides information about various institutions and actors that contributed to the rise of the black trade union movement in this period. In this regard, General Factory Workers Benefit Funds (GFWBF) and Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC) are also mentioned. Moreover, the paper attempts to identify some characteristics and forms of the engagement of intellectuals in the labour movement in the 1970s and 1980s. To achieve this, it tries to explore the IIE and the SALB in an environment where various spheres of intellectual activity existed simultaneously.

In light of this, the paper firstly reviews some theoretical approaches to the role of intellectuals in the labour movement. It discusses the characteristics of ‘traditional’ and ‘organic’ intellectual and expands the debate to the notion of ‘committed intellectual’. Secondly, the social and cultural distance between the intellectuals and workers are discussed on the basis of both a broader debate and in the South African context. The paper finally aims to identify two trends in the understanding of intellectual engagements with the labour movement: one which focuses on the division/differences between the traditional and organic intellectual, and another, complementary one that attempts to bring those into a dialogue. What is particular in this paper is that it attempts to examine the engagements of intellectuals from the point of view that these intellectuals had multiple functions and identities. Correspondingly, it argues that this point of view neither ignores the role of the other groups of intellectuals nor eliminates the prominent role of ‘white’ university intellectuals, which has been increasingly discussed in recent years. The information in this paper is based on secondary resources as well as a preliminary analysis of the qualitative data collected through 16 in-depth interviews with academics and trade unionists in South Africa in 2011.

## 2 ‘Traditional’ and ‘organic’ intellectuals

Gramsci starts his analysis of the formation and function of intellectuals by asking whether intellectuals form an autonomous social group (class). For Gramsci their formation as well as their function cannot be separated from the class structure of the society. He uses the term “‘organic’ intellectuals” to signify the close bond between the intellectuals and the class of which they are part. He argues that “every social group [class] coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates organically, together with itself, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity, and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (2001:1138). In this way, Gramsci identifies his first type of intellectuals - who are ‘organic’, while maintaining that the notion of intellectuals as being a distinct social category independent of class was a myth or illusion.

Gramsci also points out that every essential social group (class) “which emerges into history out of the preceding economic structure [...] has found categories of intellectuals already in existence” and which indeed, seemed to represent an “historical continuity uninterrupted even by the most complicated and radical changes in political and social forms” (Gramsci, 2001:1139). He

defines this type of intellectuals as 'intellectuals of the traditional type', who are "the ecclesiastics, and a full stratum of administrators, scholars, scientists, theorists, non-ecclesiastical philosophers, etc". Like the typical clergy, "these are what we tend to think of when we think of intellectuals" (Burke, 2005).

Gramsci's emphasis on the social function of intellectuals provides a better understanding of his types of intellectuals. Some perform the "immediate social function of the professional category of intellectuals", while others' energy is directed towards "muscular nervous effort" (ibid: 1140). However, he believes that 'manual work' and 'intellectual work' cannot be separated from each other. From this standpoint, he attempts, on the one hand, to define the function of intellectuals in relation to the ruling class and its hegemony, and on the other hand, to introduce a new intellectualism. Regarding the former, he states that intellectuals are the "deputies" of the ruling class "exercising the subaltern functions of hegemony and political government" (ibid: 1143). Regarding the latter, he was trying to convey that people have the capability and the capacity to think. The problem was how to harness those capabilities and capacities (Burke, 2005). "One of the most important characteristics of any group [classes] that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer 'ideologically' the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group [class] in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals" (Gramsci, 1971:10). What is essential for Gramsci is that the "muscular-nervous effort itself" must become the foundation of this new intellectualism.

Gramsci argued that working-class could and should create its own 'organic' intellectuals who are actively participating in actual working lives and who link the role of the theory organically with the ebb and flow of daily proletarian life. This conscious development of a layer of "organic intellectuals" is essential to a rising movement defeating hegemony (Gramsci, 1971: 342-343). Gramsci saw the role of the organic intellectual as a crucial one in the context of creating a counter hegemony. We can understand creating a counter hegemony as a process in which the conscious development of a layer of organic intellectuals had to be combined with a mass consciousness.

As Fischman and McLaren (2005) summarise, working class organic intellectuals were, for Gramsci, a fundamentally important expression of working-class life. They were critical agents that served as vehicles for interrogating emergent patterns of thought and action, radicalizing subaltern groups, translating theory into strategy and multifaceted counter-hegemonic activity as well as into the development of a revolutionary historical bloc where divergent interests converge and coalesce around shared visions and objectives.

A distinctive real intellectual function within societies that Gramsci wished to discover is the educational and political function. Hence, Monasta underlines that the core of Gramsci's message is 'educational'. "Education is a field where theory and practice, culture and politics inevitably merge together, and where intellectual research and achievement combine with social and political action" (1993:597). The organic intellectual holds the intellectual and moral leadership of the society by means of education and organization of culture. Gramsci's particular educational approach was the 'philosophy of praxis', an ideological instrument for widening the awareness of the masses about the mechanism of politics and culture, awareness about the historical and economical determination of ideas, and therefore rendering them more able to master their own lives, to lead their own society and to control those who lead. His initiative of creating two journals *L'Ordine Nuovo* and *Unità* can be viewed as a reflection of this approach. His attempt was to assist in the creation of organic intellectuals from the working class and in the coercing of as many traditional intellectuals to the revolutionary cause as possible. The first journal came out at the same time as the huge spontaneous outbreak of industrial and political militancy that swept Turin in 1919 (Burke, 2005). It was designed to articulate the new culture of Turin's working class, and destined to become the mouthpiece of the factory council movement and the

occupation of factories in 1919 and 1920. Gramsci became a leader of the working class movement a year later, a founding member of the Communist Party in 1921 and its General Secretary in 1924 (Burawoy, 2011). Therefore, we can argue that his educational approach was developed throughout his political and educational apprenticeship by his own active participation in the working class struggle and throughout his own new intellectualism.

### 3 The committed intellectual

Fischman and McLaren (2005) attempt to expand on the role of the organic intellectual by suggesting the concept of the “committed intellectual”. They depart from Foucault’s (1980:133) argument that “the problem [for the intellectual] is not changing people’s consciousness - or what’s in their heads - but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth”. Fischman (1998) suggests that the resisting, hegemonised, and fragmented subaltern needs to function not as a critically superconscious “organic intellectual” but as a committed one. “The committed intellectual is sometimes critically self-conscious and actively engaged but at other times is confused or even unaware of his or her limitations or capacities to be an active proponent of social change (Fischman and McLaren, 2005:440). They build this concept of the “committed intellectual” on the Freireian foundations who sees “conscientization” as more of a product of commitment, as he says “I do not have to be already critically self-conscious in order to struggle. By struggling I become conscious/aware” (1989:46). What must serve, for Freire (1989), as the genesis of such an understanding is an unwavering commitment to the struggle against injustice. As Fischman and McLaren (2005: 443,444) underline, the committed intellectual works in diverse spheres in which new social movements intersect with more organically traditionalist socialist movements. What links the two groups of intellectuals is “a common commitment to anticapitalist struggle and a provisional model of socialist democracy [...] the committed intellectual confronts the capitalist world order with a race, class, and gender consciousness and a politics of respite and renewal”.

In this sense, it would not be wrong to argue that a (shared) commitment is one of the core dimensions that trivialises the divisions between the traditional and organic intellectuals, in other words, the university-based intellectuals and activists, and renders possible linking between these two different groups of intellectuals. Similar to the above mentioned, the engagement of (both types of) intellectuals in South Africa and their role in the labour movement can be characterised by their commitment to equality, economic and social justice, by their commitment to emancipation from both class and race oppression and by their ethical and political choice of identifying themselves with the working class.

Another question to be raised here is: to what extent the intellectuals can be organic to the working class milieu, and be a part, particularly, of its cultural condition? In Gramsci’s view, intellectuals should become elaborate, historical expressions of traditions, culture, values and social relations. “As Boggs (1984) notes, quasi-Jacobin ideological functions were still important intellectual tasks but now were required to be centred within the proletarian milieu (factories, community life, and culture). In this respect, intellectuals would be organic to that milieu only if they were fully immersed in its culture and language” (quoted in Fischman and McLaren, 2005:432,433). Gramsci (1971:418) also underlined that “the popular element “feels” but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element “knows” but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel [...] One cannot make politics-history without this passion, without the sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation”.

Hence, Gramsci (1971) believed that the intellectuals need to develop not only intellectual capital to engage with and on behalf of the masses but also the social capital of trust and collective

will necessary to bring about community-based liberatory praxis (Fischman and McLaren, 2005). However, for Bourdieu (1984) it is not possible for the intellectual to put himself in the place of a worker without having the 'habitus' of a worker. As Burawoy (2012:65) interprets, "the intellectual, whose habitus is formed by *skolé* (a world that is not governed by material necessity), cannot appreciate the condition of the working class, whose habitus is shaped by the endless and precarious pursuit of the material livelihood".

In his study on the contradictory location of white officials in black unions in South Africa, Buhlungu (2006) raises this point in a straight line and asks whether they were "rebels without a cause of their own". He uses Wright's (1978) concept of 'contradictory location', to explain the role of intellectuals in the unions. Wright originally uses this concept to explain the contradictory class location that managers and supervisors occupied between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. He deploys this notion to understand the relationship of intellectuals to the working class and concludes that "intellectuals typically occupy a contradictory class location between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie at the economic level, but between the working class and the bourgeoisie at the ideological level" (1978:10B, quoted in Buhlungu, 2006:434). Buhlungu extends this concept to refer to the white union officials' relationship with black workers at the social and cultural levels. In this way, he refers not only to class relations, but also race relations.

There are three reasons, for Buhlungu, why it is important to account for this contradiction in the context of South Africa. First, there was the social distance that existed between black people and white people in apartheid society. Second, their contradictory location was also a result of the fact that the majority of these officials came from middle-class backgrounds, which refers to living in middle-class suburbs that were racially and spatially separated from black residential areas. In addition, this class division was reinforced by cultural, educational, linguistic and other historical factors. Third, from the early years of the post-1973 unions the role of white officials in the black unions was constructed as an intellectual one [based on knowledge and skills] and in the beginning both sides accepted and operated on the basis of this construction (ibid: 435, 436). Briefly, Buhlungu (ibid: 435) argues that "the class background of white officials resulted in them being accorded the status of a special category that brought resources and skills into the fledging unions. The fact that they did not come from the ranks of the working class and that none of them brought with them any white workers, cast them as rebels without a cause of their own".

They were unable to penetrate the world of black workers beyond the formal interactions defined by the requirements of their jobs within the unions. "This was a critical handicap as it meant they could not reach the level where formal union education and political discourse are digested, interrogated and reinterpreted to fit in with the existing knowledge forms and discourses. It was also at this level that organic intellectuals and discourses emerged and shaped the politics of ordinary members of movements and organizations" (ibid: 441). But, this situation changed when a significant layer of black organic intellectuals emerged independently of white workers in the 1980s (especially with the launch of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)), which gained confidence and political maturity and began to express their resentment of the power of white officials.

In his later writing, rather than merely focusing on academic-activist divide, Buhlungu (2009) puts forward the dialogue between university-based intellectuals and organic ones, which was developed on the basis of a shared commitment to equality and social justice as well as scholarship, and through which a platform of public sociology was illustrated. Linking the two groups of intellectuals, the traditional and organic, is also a major point in Burawoy's (2012:63-66) imaginary meeting of Gramsci and Bourdieu. Where Bourdieu grounds knowledge in the competition governed by the rules of science, taking place in the protected space of the academy, Gramsci grounds knowledge in the practical transformation of the world elaborated by the political party in close connection to the working class. Burawoy remarks that, on the face of it, these two

perspectives are irreconcilable. However, he suggests that both traditional and organic intellectuals are necessary. He elaborates his argument by distinguishing between two types of public sociology: a traditional public sociology, engaging the ruling ideologies that courses through our tattered public space, attacking their disciplinary roots within the academy, and an organic public sociology working in the tranches of civil society, energizing and engaging resistance to markets and states, challenging domination not with demystifying but with alternatives. For him, the traditional and organic public sociologies sustain rather than undermine each other. Hence, traditional and public sociologists must see one another as complementary, not antagonistic. (ibid: 31-33). To summarise, both Buhlungu's later writing and Burawoy's approach provide us with a more complementary understanding of intellectuals and their roles in the society. In the following, this will be further discussed in the South African context in the 1970s and 1980s.

#### 4 The role of intellectuals in revitalising workers' resistance

South Africa experienced a new wave of radicalization in terms of both activism and intellectualism in the 1970s. This period of radicalization demonstrates how the committed intellectuals work in diverse spheres, which intersect in the successful path of growth in the labour movement. It also exemplifies how knowledge circulates in these diverse spheres. For instance, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) continued providing the grounds for black resistance in the 1970s, which initiated student organisations that influenced 1976 Soweto revolts as well as trade unions such as Black Allied Workers' Union. The Churches' efforts combined with the message of the BCM flew into the activities of Young Christian Workers as well as the formation of the Urban Training Project (UTP), an important education and training centre established in 1971. White university students and lecturers restructured and reactivated the students' organisations of the 1960s with the efforts of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). Radical students from NUSAS established Wage Commissions, starting from Durban in 1971 and later spread to other English speaking universities, which researched the conditions of African workers and informed them of Wage Board determinations (Ulrich, 2007:114). The establishment of mutual-aid societies/benefit funds, advice centres, and other labour support organisations had a crucial effect on revitalising the political resistance in the early 1970s. The activists loyal to the South African Communist Party also played a central role in some of these organizations such as the General Factory Workers Benefit Funds (GFWBF).

Radical students engaged with organising workers and building non-racial trade unions also through the registered unions of Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) based at Bolton Hall in Durban. Harriet Bolton, General Secretary of both the registered garment and furniture unions, supported the formation of non-racial trade unions and proved a solid ally. Students, some of whom were hired as organisers in registered unions, adopted a 'parallel strategy' of attempting to organise workers on the one hand, and working through the bargaining structures that were open to registered unions to raise the concerns of African workers on the other (ibid: 114).

The establishment of the General Factor Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF) in 1972 in Natal demonstrated new attempts to organise African workers and showed how the intellectuals and workers turned their potential into radicalizing a mutual-aid society (providing migrant workers with funeral benefits) in a situation where building a union could have victimised any attempt at organising these workers. The GFWBF provided an unexpected source of income and financed complaints services and educational seminars for workers. These societies later on developed into independent new trade unions which marked the labour movement after the 1973 Strike Waves which originated in Durban and spread around the country (ibid:116, 117).

This tendency towards independent structures of workers' control can also be seen in the

perspective of the intellectuals in the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau (WPWAB) (an organisation also comprised of a mix of unionists that had been active in SACTU affiliates and radical students) who were sceptical of the reformist and bureaucratic nature of trade unions and aimed to set up worker councils as opposed to trade unions (ibid: 116).

Although there are numerous other societies of this kind and numerous other intellectuals who were engaged in organizing and educating workers through their structures and activities, I will focus on the case of the *Institute for Industrial Education* (IIE) and the *South African Labour Bulletin* (SALB) to identify the engagement of intellectuals in the labour movement in the early 1970s. The emergence of these two sites is highly related to the Durban Strikes in 1973 which rapidly turned into a wave of countrywide massive strikes. Durban strikes have been described as a spontaneous rising by workers spurred on by low wages and the rising cost of living caused by inflation. However, as the report produced by the IIE will argue, the intellectual activities played important role to heighten the consciousness of numerous workers.

## 5 The Institute for Industrial Education (IIE)

The establishment of the IIE in May 1973 should be identified in an environment where various spheres of intellectual activity existed simultaneously. On the one hand, there was a kind of progressive arm of the old traditional trade unions, which were starting to argue against the strictly racial divisions within the TUCSA. On the other hand, there were wage commissions and an advice bureau/benefit fund which provided support services for workers and used these channels to organise them as well. In the early 1970s, some of the first of the more senior ANC leaders began to come off of Robben Island. They played a quite important role in revitalizing political resistance in Durban. Additionally, there were university lecturers such as Richard (Rick) Turner, Edward Webster and Alec Erwin who were concerned with the scattered strike action of workers in Durban and convinced with the need of turning it into an organisation. They were joined by former students, who had just graduated, who actually worked in the trade unions, i.e. the Hamson brothers, Halton Cheadle, John Copelyn, and Pat Horn – and who became full-time union organizers until they were banned in 1974 and 1976. Briefly, these groupings came together and began to talk about reviving unions and building institutions that could be used as a means of organizing and educating workers. They then decided that “one of the ways that one could promote a greater consciousness of class and workers and working class issues, was to form an educational organisation, which was the IIE” (Author Interview, Alec Erwin, 16.11.2011).

The IIE was mainly initiated by Richard Turner, a political science and philosophy lecturer at the university, who aimed to extend the educational component of the workers movement. When Edward Webster arrived in Durban to take up the job offered in the Department of Sociology at the University of Natal Durban at the end of February 1973, the strikes were petering out. It was also the time just as the NUSAS leaders and Richard Turner were banned. Turner told Webster:

We have got to turn this movement, this spontaneous action of workers into organisation and to do this we have got to set up an institute, the Institute of Industrial Education; we’ll offer a correspondence course for the workers and it will look at the workers in the factory, in the organisation, in the economy, and in the law; and we will also in addition teach these workers the principles of trade unionism; we will set up a research wing to the IIE and we will set up a bulletin, the South African Labour Bulletin. (Author Interview, Edward Webster, 14.11.2011).

In addition to developing a close relationship with the GFWBF, representatives from the TUCSA, UTP and the South African Institute of Race Relations were included on the Working

Committee that ran the new education structure. The IIE registered as a correspondence college under the Bantu Education Act 1953, which ensured that the IIE was officially recognized and allowed to conduct a limited amount of face-to-face teaching (Ulrich, 2007: 128). Chief Buthelezi was also involved as a Chancellor of the IIE to get some protection.

The IIE was not based at the university because the university at that time would not have been interested in worker education and trade unions, which had not been a subject of academic study. IIE moved to the Garment Workers' Union in a small building called Central Court, which was owned by an old communist sympathizer, who was a doctor and allowed them to use rooms there for the IIE. These university intellectuals spent at least two of their five working days in Bolton Hall (Central Court as they called it) where the unions were, either doing educational work, research work or just helping strategic thinking about how to develop the movement.

The university lecturers started working on the IIE booklets, mainly on economic issues. Richard Turner did most of the writing, and others contributed to some of the booklets. The IIE primarily designed correspondence courses – where these booklets were used for exercises and then sent back – so the lecturers actually did have from workers in factories a correspondence element to it. These lecturers were, at this stage, still having an academic role helping with seminars. However, they “made a very conscious choice, and strategically focused on educating worker groups in the factory and on building a shop stewards movement” (Author Interview, Alec Erwin, *ibid*).

The IIE produced a report on the Durban Strikes arguing that these grievances cannot in and of themselves account for the timing or location of the strikes, which were concentrated in Durban. It has been pointed out that the strikes were implicitly political and that the high wages workers demanded could only be met if society was radically transformed. While there was no one organisation or grouping responsible for the strikes, the initial activity of the Wage Commission, South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and the newly formed GFWBF clearly heightened the consciousness of numerous workers (Ulrich, 2007: 118,119). *The Durban Strikes* (1974) which was “produced by the IIE involving surveys, fieldwork, argument and a literature review resonating with the writings of the new intellectual formation”, was seen as ‘the first text of Industrial Sociology’ and ‘the first collaborative book between academics and the social movement, the trade unions that inspired it’ (Sitas, 1997:15). The IIE, its founders and committees should also be analysed in relation to the ‘knowledge-base’ that was brought into and highly influenced the revitalization of the labour movement. These university lecturers and radical students were inspired by the ‘New Left’ in Europe and North America, which tended to overcome the limits and reductionism of Soviet Marxism, and which potentially questioned all structures of authority and identity, and therefore was characterised by a more grassroots oriented, egalitarian and participatory movement. For Nash (1999:66) this was a moment of the “assimilation of Western Marxism in South Africa”. By Western Marxism, Nash means the tradition of Marxist thought which developed mainly in Western Europe – from Lukacs, Gramsci and Korsch in the 1920s through Frankfurt School in the 1930s and 1940s to the work of Marcuse, Sartre and Althusser<sup>1</sup>. For instance, Marcuse’s celebrated book, *One-Dimensional Man*, inspired this movement by articulating “what young radicals felt was wrong with society, and the book’s dialectic of liberation and domination provided a framework for radical politics which struggled against domination and for liberation” (Kellner, 2002:xxxv, quoted in Buhlungu, 2006:431). Buhlungu argues that the engagement of these university based intellectuals with the new movement “often took the form of transferring information and knowledge drawn mainly from local and international networks of the engaged academics”. He mentions the regular writings

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<sup>1</sup>Although this paper is not able to provide more information, it should be mentioned that thoughts from non-western and non-European intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon also provided significant sources for the South African intellectuals of the time.



in the SALB - that was born within the IIE's intellectual circle - which reviewed "new books on unions and the shop stewards movement in England and Europe as well as essays on topics that animated revisionist Marxism of the time" (2009:149). However, Nash (1999: 66, 67) thinks that "the peculiarities of this process of assimilation, rather than the ideas which influenced specific individuals, determined the form of this moment of Western Marxism" in South Africa. Therefore, these (Marxist) intellectuals of the 1970s developed a radical critique of South African capitalism, which was articulated by the new strategies of the resistance movement. At the heart of their critique of "racial capitalism" was the centrality of class divisions within the South African society as well as the recognition of the integrity of apartheid to the development of capitalism in South Africa. This critique, mainly developed by the white English-speaking students and lecturers, had three major strategic innovations regarding the revival of the struggle against apartheid according to Nash (1999:67): first, a flexible approach to leadership emphasized continual recruitment and training of new layers of leadership; second, the ideal of 'non-racialism' that made it possible to address the real conditions of a racially divided society; and third, a conception of grassroots organization that emerged as both accountable to its members in their local context and yet linked to a larger struggle. They also believed that a mass based resistance movement inside the country would provide a more effective opposition to apartheid and that strong worker organisations could lay the foundation for such a movement. Their critique was ultimately turned into the practical field of responding to the demands of the escalating trade union movement.

Nash's (ibid: 69) analysis of the *"Eye of the Needle"*, the Turner's work published in 1972, combines his academic work with a biographical history that demonstrates his multiple intellectual functions. He was an active student in NUSAS in Cape Town, then studied in France. He began lecturing at the University of Natal and at the same time initiated the first Wages and Economics Commission in 1971. He established the IIE and launched the SALB. Turner's Sartreian view of society, as constituted essentially by individual choices, transposed onto South African politics enables us to identify the roles and some characteristics of intellectuals of this period. According to Nash, one of Turner's premises is that "politics is the realization of identity". The 'human model' that fully accommodates ones identity was an individual choice and a political decision. Briefly, as I interpret, it is basically a 'political choice'. Second, "identity is the product of ethical choice" (which with some unclarity is connected to socialism and to the Christian human model). In his next premise, "organization is reduced to the role of catalyst". "Fundamental social change could not result from radical white students organizing themselves, nor could they claim to speak for oppressed majority". In my view, this was expressed to identify a role for the new trade unions as well as for themselves (intellectuals) within these unions. Following this point, finally, their agency is defined as the "free-floating" intellectual that also reflects the variety of strategic options for change in South Africa as well as variety of spheres from which the choices were coming and needed involvement and commitment of intellectuals. 'Organization as catalyst' and intellectuals as 'free-floating' became a major debate in the formation of Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) later in 1979. These issues were crystallized in the FOSATU debates in terms of the workers' own control in their own struggle and unions, as well as in the educational programmes of IIE in the context of the extent to which education should be subordinated to the practical needs of the trade union movement (Maree, 1984; 2006; Nash, 1999; Buhlungu, 2006).

## 6 The South African Labour Bulletin (SALB)

The IIE gave birth to another sphere of intellectual activity, the SALB, which was the realisation of Rick Turner's vision of establishing "a journal to describe, explain and legitimate unions for

black workers" (Webster, 1984:12). As Turner had been banned in 1973, this was proposed by his wife Foszia Fisher, who shared his ideals and worked closely with him. Maree (2010:50) explains that it was designed by academics and other intellectuals as a newsletter that publishes clear and easy-to-understand articles that are aimed at a broader public, specifically at the Black African working class. For Webster (1982:7-8), one of the most active members of its editorial board - together with Turner, it was a vehicle of linking theory with practice by giving people who had been denied a higher education the opportunity to learn from their own practice. "The practice was to be provided by active involvement in emerging trade union organisation, while the learning was facilitated by the SALB that helped them to conceptualise and use their experience in furthering their own struggle for economic and, eventually, political liberation" (Maree, 2010:49). As Webster describes, "the original idea was first, that it would be a record of the activities of the emerging labour movement; second, it would actually analyse it; and third, it would provide new information and ideas (Author Interview, *ibid*). John Copelyn, one of the graduate students and union organisers, was the first editor of the first issue published in 1974.

Webster underlines that "the SALB was not trying to be academic; it was trying to be popular, to communicate with the intellectuals in the movement and the intellectuals outside the movement" (Author interview, *ibid*). In this regard, Buhlungu (2009:148) argues that "the SALB came to play a pivotal role to bridge the academic-activist divide and as a vital platform for public sociology". Johann Maree (2010), who was on the editorial board for 28 years, outlines that the SALB overwhelmingly carried articles in the first ten years on trade unions and strikes. But it also covered a range of other topics of great relevance to the emerging trade union movement: these included labour law, industrial health, industrial relations, migrant labour, unemployment, production and work organisation in the manufacturing and mining sectors, the economy, the state, and numerous other topics.

One of the key strategies of the SALB was to achieve autonomy after being established by the IIE. Maree (1984) argues that the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC) succeeded in subordinating the IIE's educational role completely to its organisational needs. "By way of contrast, the SALB was not subject to the same pressure from TUACC and managed to increase its autonomy within the IIE" (Maree, 2010:52). Its editorial board was given the authority to make the decisions. The appointment of Webster as senior lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand in 1976 ensured the continuity of the SALB and its autonomy, as he aimed at reconstitution of the SALB as a nationally-based journal with editors in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg and, therefore, could appoint people, especially academics, to its editorial board who were not involved in the IIE.

The most important characteristic of this intellectual engagement is the SALB's policy of 'critical engagement'. In a carefully crafted document drawn up collectively by the editorial board it was stated that "the SALB voluntarily ascribes to a position of critical engagement - critical in the sense of not being subordinate to any one group or tendency and engaged in the sense that we are committed to give support to the democratic labour movement" (quoted in Maree, 2010:62). One of the most critical debates that explain this policy of the SALB was the disagreement of different trade union camps on the registration of trade unions that accompanied the Wiehahn Reforms in 1979, by which the state was going to grant African unions the same rights it had granted to White, Coloured and Asian workers. While some trade unions reacted positively to the registration opportunity and joined the industrial councils, the others were opposing to be co-opted by the state that aimed to liquidate the growing black trade union movement. The SALB directly addressed the question of registration over a three-year period and exposed it as an open debate despite the pressures coming from both sides.

Webster recalls this issue and mentions that "the idea was we ought to engage with these movements in order to introduce new concepts and ideas and information, but at the same time we

had a certain distance and we had to be true to our data, true to the evidence, our conscience, our judgment – and that squaring out circles is not an easy thing to do, to engage in. . . We survived by arguing that we would engage but we would reflect the different voices” (Author Interview, *ibid*). Webster also recognizes the relative autonomy of the university-based intellectuals that enabled the SALB to survive. But again, they had to balance the imperatives of political struggle against the need to maintain autonomous spaces for critical intellectual reflection (Webster, 1982; Buhlungu, 2009).

This challenge continued in the 1980s. Once Webster and his colleagues “did a study on AIDS in 1988/89, the National Union of Mine Workers was very offended by it and they tried to censor it” (Author interview, *ibid*). Even in the later period, in which the COSATU consolidated its power, this critical engagement received harsh reactions from the unions. For instance, Sakhela Buhlungu wrote an article pointing to what he called “the big brain drain” of leaders and officials from COSATU and its affiliates (Buhlungu, 1994, cited in Buhlungu, 2009). Buhlungu (2009:158) states: “So incensed were COSATU leaders by the article that when a colleague and I went to interview COSATU’s national office bearers for an article in the next edition of the *South African Labour Bulletin* [. . .], they demanded an apology before they would proceed with the interview”.

To summarise, the SALB experience demonstrates that ‘critical engagement’ was a very crucial aspect of the intellectual engagement with the labour movement in South Africa. Moreover, it recognizes that being based at the university provided white intellectuals with relative autonomy during Apartheid.

## 7 Some main characteristics of intellectual engagements

We have seen ‘critical engagement’ as one of the main aspects of the engagement of intellectuals in the labour movement in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. While exploring further aspects of this engagement, we should mention that the intellectuals had, first of all, knowledge, skills and resources. The white intellectuals who played a prominent role in the labour movement “had resources and education; they had cars, and a phone at home; they had money and could put petrol in a car and drive a whole group of people to a venue, to a meeting; they could donate money to the union; they could buy books and share with people” (Author Interview, Sakhela Buhlungu, 11.03.2012). Apart from these, what is also central to my understanding is that ‘political choice’, ‘ethical choice’ and ‘commitment’ can be identified as some of the key characteristics of the engagement of these intellectuals. For instance, Jan Theron, who took a position as the General Secretary of what was then called Food and Canning Workers Union<sup>2</sup> states that his involvement in the trade union movement was basically a political choice: “You come from a background where you are part of the ruling cast. You know you are going to be a kind of top dogs in the society. Or as you say this thing cannot carry on. It’s getting not sustainable. So that is why it is a political choice basically” (Author interview, 18.10.2011). Webster sees it as a combination of an intellectual, political and moral choice.

Because presumably one did not have to do that; one could have simply benefitted by the system. So I made a choice...When I was arrested my mother had a stroke and my brother-in-law said he would shoot me, and, you know that you were running against your white group. And they put it out as we were communists and, or terrorists. I spent one year on trial – so it was a moral and a political choice that had short-term risks and sacrifices and they were long-term beliefs at stake (Author Interview, *ibid*).

<sup>2</sup>It was an important union as it was an affiliate of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and carried influence of Communist Party of that time in the Western Cape Province.

John Mawbey, one of the few people who has stayed in the unions up to this day, describes his choice supporting to this argument. For him, one thing was to theorize and to teach; the other was to get engaged with reality, practice and to organize the working class. “There was an element of what you might call an anti-materialist, ‘liberal guilt’: I have been privileged relative to others and I should give back of that privilege which I have. When I first went into the union, I saw it very much as helping, as putting something back” (Author Interview, 27.10.2011).

Pat Horn, another activist, mentions that they regarded themselves as middle class people, who were committed to working-class struggles, who were willing to work with the working-class. “We needed to find out about the trade unions, the staff that work in trade unions, because that was the way of doing it. So we saw ourselves as people. We held ourselves accountable to the working-class leadership of the unions and to the democratic committees that were being developed. We were very strongly committed to the worker-control principle (Author Interview, 25.10.2011). Johann Maree also argues that they deliberately created structures that would be democratic with the control of the workers. One thing that the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC) experience did create was its conception of workers’ control as an ethic (Maree, 2006). “Even where it did not happen perfectly, there were still the ethics that workers ought to be controlling or ought to be taking decisions” (Author Interview, 10.11.2011). Moreover, Maree views the involvement of white intellectuals in the labour movement as a commitment to struggle for economic and social justice in South Africa (Maree, 2006:465).

## 8 Multiple functions, multiple identities

These intellectual engagements coming from the universities, IIE and SALB, contributed to the transformation of mutual benefit funds into new independent trade unions and further in their federation-type structures. The TUACC experience should also be mentioned here to complete our configuration, in which we can identify multiple functions and identities of intellectuals in this process. The General Factory Workers Benefit Funds (GFWBF) set up Central Administrative Services in March 1973 to assist the formation of new unions<sup>3</sup>. The new independent unions, the GFWBF and the IIE, established the TUACC in January 1974. As Ulrich (2007:149) summarises, it operated basically as the coordinating body that centralized union resources and the formulation of policy. The formation of TUACC marked an important step in the development of the workers’ control tradition. Although the TUACC accepted ‘interested parties’ (such as the IIE) as members, it was structured to ensure that the elected representatives of workers dominated the organization.

Besides the development of a strategy and an ethic based on workers’ control and non-racial industrial unions, the TUACC experience, in connection with the other spheres of intellectual activity, enables us to identify multiple functions and identities of intellectuals in their engagement in the labour movement. Buhlungu (2006, 2009) and Ulrich (2007) successfully argued that it was not only the white young intellectuals, who contributed to the rise of the independent black trade unions in the 1970s. The intellectuals or activists involved in the new independent unions were drawn from a variety of different backgrounds and communities. In addition to (and also different from) their analysis, I attempt to examine their intellectual role from the point of view that these intellectuals also had multiple functions and identities.

For instance, “in the new unions in Natal, activists (or intellectuals) were drawn from a variety of different backgrounds and communities. Although some had not received any university

<sup>3</sup>The Metal Allied Workers Union (MAWU), the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU) and the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) were launched in 1973, followed by the Furniture and Timber Workers Union and the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) in 1974.

training, they were politically astute and the role of unionists such as Badsha, (organizer for the CWIU) Mthethwa, (secretary of MAWU) and Nxasana (an education officer in the IIE, translator, and a member of the SALB's editorial board) should not be underestimated" (Ulrich, 2007:129). A good example, which supports my argument, would be Alec Erwin, a lecturer in the Department of Economics at University of Natal, was at the same time an education officer in the IIE and a writer of the SALB. He then also became a full-time trade unionist, General Secretary of the TUACC. His career continued in the unions, as organizer in the NUTW and later as general secretary of FOSATU, education secretary of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and then education secretary of the COSATU. John Mawbey's engagement demonstrates another example of intellectuals with multiple functions and identities. He was active in the IIE and he served as managing editor of the SALB. As he describes, he "became a taxi driver, helping union organizers, pick up workers at the factory and go and have a shop steward committee meeting somewhere. And one was also involved in the union council – the TUACC" (Author Interview, *ibid*). He then became the general secretary of the TUACC and organizer in the TGWU. Mawbey's case shows us on the one hand, that the connection between the university intellectuals and the organic intellectuals was there throughout, and on the other hand, that these identities and functions intertwined. "At the end of the day, it's always been the question: when do I stop being an intellectual with university background and when did I in fact become an organic intellectual, just as much as person's coming off the shop-floor getting greater knowledge and becoming organizers" (*ibid*). Another example would be Pat Horn, who started the Western Province Literacy Project in Cape Town with a friend and the workers from the WPWAB, and then worked with the GFWBF in Durban. She was employed by the IIE to do the literacy and education work and became a union organizer at the same time. More examples can be provided, but the amount of pages for this paper would not be enough for that.

## 9 Intellectual activity and cultural distance

There has been a growing debate in South Africa about the social and cultural distance between the white intellectuals and the black working class in the 1970s and 1980s (i.e. Buhlungu, 2006; Maree, 2006). This can also be seen in the frame of the division between traditional and organic intellectuals. For instance, the transition from the FOSATU (which developed through the so-called white intellectual influence) towards the COSATU provides some examples of this cultural distance. Karl von Holdt who lived in Cape Town in the early 1980s and had contact with General Workers' Union, states that this distance and difference struck him in the FOSATU days:

The cultural references of the FOSATU unions, the songs they sang were like British labour songs; people addressed each other as 'brother and sister'. On the contrary, the songs that had been sung by the members of the General Workers' Union were African songs, freedom songs; by the time of COSATU, there were freedom songs, but other songs just disappeared and everyone was 'comrade'. So, that was a very interesting kind of language form that suggested what people's reference points were. (Author Interview, Karl von Holdt, 15.11.2011).

On the racial question and cultural distance, Webster thinks that what complicates the South African situation is the fact that in 1973 there were very few intellectuals who were able to recognise the central importance of the industrial working class. The white intellectuals were absolutely crucial in recognising this social force and willing to build its capability, but they took many things for granted and were ignorant about black working class culture and history:

In 1975, I did a research on the black workers - members of the union. One of the questions was: 'Who was or is the leader of the working class in your world?' The first one was Luthuli; the second Buthelezi; the third Nelson Mandela. The fourth one was a man called Moses Mabida. When I presented this to my fellow white intellectuals, they said "Who is Moses Mabida? You have made it up, there is no such person'. And I said, 'I don't know who he is, but I trust the interviewers'. About 8% of the sample had been in SACTU before, so there was that continuity of history, of liberation movement and I was quite confident that they were accurate. When I moved from Durban to Johannesburg and spent a year on trial, I looked at the old Workers Unity - the journal of SACTU; in every second edition there was a photograph of Moses Mabida; he was a key figure in the South African Communist Party, in the SACTU, in the ANC in Durban in the 1960s (Author Interview, *ibid*).

Cultural differences between Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and the white students in the workers movement caused some tensions in some regions such as Natal. Ulrich (2007) explains that in Natal the BCM was rooted in a movement of young black professionals that centred on various cultural forms that conveyed political messages about the self-emancipation of black people. Here the tensions appear more pronounced. In an interview David Hemson makes a point that reminds us of Bourdieu's argument on the difference between the 'habitus' of the intellectual and the worker:

...there was a lot going on that the workers didn't approve of, like sex (laugh). It caused a lot of comment. Loud music and drinking, and smoking dope and you know all those sort of things. And then suddenly we, we being the trade union organisers, realized we were sort of like the older people of the movement and were being very disciplined and showing workers that we worked in a different way. But [workers] were scandalized by Black Consciousness... (Ulrich, 2007:10).

However, there were cultural projects of the 1980s that were bridging the white and black activists, bridging the white intellectuals and the black working class. Ari Sitas, the leading figure of these projects producing cultural work and workers' plays, says that "white intellectuals had some role, ideas and experience that were gleaned in a theatre company in Johannesburg. The majority of the cultural activists were black. It was basically about bringing the cultural formations of the black working class on the stage with own, new stories." (Author Interview, 15.07.2012). Sitas believes that language barriers, cultural training, understanding how things were said, done, and negotiated; all those created some problems. However, the decision making was participatory, and therefore democratic. No matter what the idea of imposition might have been, and the different educational levels might have been, things went the way of democracy and participation in the long term. But what differentiates cultural work was that "it was not about power within an organization, so, it did not have those dynamics about whose voice was being said. It was about your ability to facilitate the production of cultural work" (*ibid*).

To sum up, one can see that there was a kind of social and cultural distance between the so-called 'white' intellectuals and black working class in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. This scholarly analysis has challenged the dominant discourse on the labour history in recent years and successfully pointed out the contribution of various groups of intellectuals and individuals to the labour movement in this period. But at the same time, it created a tendency towards focusing on the divisions between different intellectual groups rather than on the connections between them.

## 10 Conclusion

This paper attempted to explore circulation of knowledge between academic and extra-academic fields through analysing the intellectual engagements with the labour movement in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. Considering the engagements of intellectuals at the universities, in the GFWBF, the TUACC, IIE and the SALB, the paper argued that 'critical engagement', 'political choice', 'ethical choice' and 'commitment' can be identified as some of the key characteristics of the engagement of these intellectuals. The paper examined these engagements from the point of view that these intellectuals had multiple functions and identities. Correspondingly, it argued that this point of view neither ignores the role of the other groups of intellectuals nor eliminates the prominent role of 'white' university intellectuals, which has been increasingly discussed in recent years. Moreover, the paper identified two trends in the understanding of the intellectual engagements with the labour movement. Rather than focusing on a division within different groups of intellectuals, it presented a more complementary understanding that tried to bridge these groups. While acknowledging the social and cultural distance between white intellectuals and black working class and their organic intellectuals, it also tried to show areas where this distance could disappear jointly with the respective power relations. Hence it can be suggested that, for example, the field of cultural projects should be studied further to elaborate the dialogue and connections between different groups of intellectuals. Moreover, the other sites of intellectual engagements mentioned at the beginning of this paper need to be studied to develop a better understanding of intellectual engagements with the labour movement in South Africa.

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