

# Towards a postcolonial sociology?

## A conversation with Professor Ari Sitas

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### Introduction

Ari Sitas is a distinguished South African sociologist, poet, activist, and one of the key intellectuals of the post 1980s' generation in South Africa. He is a professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Cape Town. He has been a visiting professor at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, where he offered a course on the histories and theories of nationalism in the Monsoon Semester of 2016. He was part of the teach-in organised by Jawaharlal Nehru University Teachers Association (JNUTA) and delivered the second lecture of a series of open classes on nationalism.<sup>2</sup> The idea of having a conversation with Prof. Sitas emerged after his lecture at the Department of Sociology, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi.<sup>3</sup> The interview took place at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Study (JNIAS), JNU, on 28 March 2016.

RENNY THOMAS : Prof. Sitas, let us start by discussing the new course that you are offering at the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, on nationalism?

ARI SITAS : It's a course on the histories and theories of nationalism. It attempted to combine actual narratives of nationalism, their emergence and theorising about such movements in a systematic way. I wanted to get students out of the Indian tent and start talking about other anti-colonial and postcolonial experiences through which they could ask new questions in terms of what they are confronting at the moment. So I thought I would take Africa as the focus and deal with Afro-pessimism and prejudice—the images of Africa on TV you saw everyday: refugees, narratives that talk about failed states... failed nation states. Is it colonialism at fault? Is it the failed nation states, is it bad nationalism, good nationalism, is it religion, is it ethnicity? ... So beginning to ask these questions that appear to demonstrate that Afro-pessimists are always right. We started from there, and we discussed a lot of ethnographic work that speaks of the arduous passages of refugees into new lands and the crises that they are confronting, and moved towards asking theoretical questions—you are reading Benedict Anderson, you are reading Partha Chatterjee in your courses—but what is anti-colonial nationalism, and what was it in Africa? I focus on that. These lectures made me start writing about it now, because I have realised that it has not been dealt with properly because there is an assumption in the literature on nationalism that nationalism in general is of the same family wherever it appears, and I am trying to impress upon the students that anti-colonial nationalism differs: in Germany—let us say you are from Munich, you are from Berlin, you might even be from Austria—but then comes a moment when you say let's rise against the X, the French, whereas anti-colonial nationalisms start from the peculiar moment when, in the spot where you are born, where you drank your mother's milk, where you learnt how to speak, where you interacted with others, where you fell in and out of love, in that space, you were classified and codified as an Other, in the land of

your birth!

Therefore, the movements on anti-colonial nationalism are precisely about the journey from this otherness to selfhood. It involved saying *no, we are not others, and then it involved imagining what these people now arbitrarily brought together by colonial maps to find what is this 'we'!* So we started the story in Africa, and we moved from there to explore kinds of theoretical and historical issues. That is about the course.

RENNY THOMAS : Isn't the situation far more complex in Africa compared to India? Could you see any similarities or parallels?

ARI SITAS : There are enormous similarities and enormous differences. I think the similarity was historical... there are linkages to the South African story and beyond, because at a certain point a diminutive lawyer arrived in Durban and started an Indian Congress, and started non-violent campaigns there. And African nationalists who were defined as natives and were rebelling against the definition decided to form at first a Native Congress, and then after reflection on the word Native, started the African Congress when they were excluded racially from the emerging union of South Africa. In a sense the story of India and South Africa gets close there, but then it travels: if you take away Gandhi's philosophy of being, and look at his philosophy of praxis, it travels to Nkrumah, it travels to Kenyatta, it travels to Nyerere, who believe now that they belong to a family of nationalists whose strategies combine militant but peaceful processes. So, there is kinship there.

Of course, there are revolutionary traditions in Africa as well, where you start taking up arms against colonial powers, but there is a high correlation between thickly settled societies by white settlers and armed struggles: for instance, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola, etc. South Africa starts on a kind of non-violent mobilisation. At a certain point, after the repression of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Mandela and company chose to pick up arms. So, you have varieties there.

Again, similarities and differences are at another level. My next book is going to be called *Regimes of Racial Derogation*. I am dealing basically with three modalities of Othering. First is the people who are exterminable, they are a kind of surplus other, you can do anything you like with them, but they survive. But alas, they survive as minorities everywhere. So their discovery of the movement from other to self has got its own distinct voice. It fractures any nation state myth because their narratives have not been included, because they make everyone feel like an impostor. For example, Native Americans in the entire continent. They are the Adivasi people of the world.

Then there are others who were not exterminable but proved to be useful. Race of course comes into it: they are homogenised in plantations in the Americas, as Mastery makes them work for cotton, for sugar and so on. Through their experience of Othering, an Afro-American sensibility and consciousness emerges. They constitute a different kind of 'minority' there. There it incubates the dream of Africa and its pasts. They influence the emergence of African nationalism, and their stories of exile and the need to return, the double consciousness that defines their being, that Du Bois and then Paul Gilroy talk about are a significant narrative. Yet it is not the same experience as the one in colonial Africa, where the indigenous populations were being defined as Natives, where they were excluded and broken up as tribes, as subjects of customary law and therefore any assertion has to go through ethnicity to get onto a trans-ethnic national self. So the intonation is different in

both the demands. You too were useful Natives, but because of the differentiations of caste and language, the classification by the British looked a bit different from elsewhere in the colonial world.

Then comes this third category of derogation: “you people who are non-us,” and therefore Others and therefore excludable. They were your indentured labourers, they were your refugees, and so on. So I am dealing with these forms of derogation, and how, then, a non-identical, non-univocal anti-colonial consciousness emerges. It is a kind of multiplicity of voices constructing what is this Self and what its postcolonial Selfhood ought to be.

RENNY THOMAS : From there, I would like you to discuss the very notion of pedagogy. You have been teaching theories and histories of nationalism at JNU, and you were part of the teach-in series on nationalism. How does this experience of witnessing the debates of nationalism and the various events that followed in universities like JNU alter your understanding of nationalism, as a teacher and scholar who is interested in understanding the idea of nationalism?

ARI SITAS : I arrived here from South Africa at a time when an enormous challenge was being staged by students (predominantly black) in some universities. They were asking for decolonisation because, despite the transition to democracy, Eurocentrism and Whiteness were ruling the curriculum. This also translated into a class question in all the universities as a Fees Must Fall movement, where students were demanding an adequately subsidised education. The most evocative act by them was the symbolic removal of Cecil Rhodes’s statue from the University of Cape Town. It was called the Rhodes Must Fall campaign.

Now over here, the student ferment is slightly different, but very very decisive. If it was just a question of rationality or rational argument, a very simple argument against the irrationality of those people who are mobilising against JNU would have won the day. But the ferment is caught in a bigger game of power and violence. In my understanding, JNU has become a paradigmatic devil that produces these abominable anti-nationals that need to be mobilised against. It is about a communalist right using this panic to mobilise and expand its political base. I suspect, though I am not an expert, that a couple of electoral shocks that they have experienced has made them more shrill and shrewd, and I assume losing Delhi and losing Bihar must have been sending alarm signals. So JNU becomes this space that needs to be corrected and it is remarkable to note how the legal and the police systems have worked. For an outsider it is baffling. But what has it done? It has created a new type of student movement; despite the historical and political division between the students’ organisations, you find incredible synergy and a return to ideas of nation and nationalism. I’m also listening very carefully to the kind of discourses that are articulated even though I need translations all the time. But for the first time I understand that the left and Dalit movements are beginning to find common ground. So are the older left of Congress and AAP people coming to the party, and a whole range of voices now are beginning to be heard and beginning to organise and resist the communalist version of nationalism. That’s what I see in front of me.

Now what is the educational aspect of the movement and struggle at JNU? Students sit down, listen to lectures, debate issues late into the night, write essays the next day, demonstrate the next day, trying to bring solidarity across the campuses; and students are beginning to connect across campuses in very interesting ways. Students never in and by themselves transform the world, but they always come to constitute a ‘beginning’ of something radical and new. So as a sociologist I am listening and observing very carefully.

In South Africa there was a much more immediate link with workers against outsourcing, so the new demand of in-sourcing and the whole anti-neoliberal thrust came in as well in the struggles, and now certain universities are indeed moving towards in-sourcing. So things are beginning to happen. Such an alliance between students and workers is not present in India at this stage.

Any participatory pedagogue would say that a lot of learning happens in social movements, when you are in that liminal phase and what you desire is not there, and what you come from is not livable any more, in that liminal stage a lot of learning happens.

RENNY THOMAS : What you just said is extremely interesting. What is happening in India currently, as you have pointed out, is that the very idea of nationalism is being misused by the right-wing forces. In this context, how do you think of a postcolonial nationalism in countries like India? How do you define if there is something called postcolonial nationalism?

ARI SITAS : You see, India is a fantastic laboratory of that. Already the debates were polarised and barely held together in the transition to independence. The constitution has become a kind of a synthesis of many of the tensions. There was commitment in the constitution for doing something about not only freedom, but also equality. Once such a national project is in power, promising equality, they are bound to be in a crisis precisely because of their inability to deliver what has been promised. If we move now to Africa, what happened in the immediate first phase was the promise of Uhuru or freedom and so on, but all of a sudden, criticisms of the first postcolonial governments started and you even see military coups in the name of the nation to protect it against the Kleptocrats. Civil society was seen as a cauldron of corruption, ethnicities and parochialism so the military and/or authoritative rulers have to take over. You also have the Cold War that sponsors dictatorial tendencies. So it was a big adventure of finding new ways of defining this 'We'-this post-THAT-national "we." I use the words postcolonial and post-national as institutional realities. I am not talking about them as a theoretical and discursive construction.

If you look at the creative literature in Africa, it has become a surrogate sociology because of the university system being compromised after independence, with its vocal chords removed by various political regimes—you will find tons of social critique in literature; very fascinating writings about a concern about concrete subjects that the nation promised to deliver into a future. You witness a new idea of concrete individuality, of collectivity, ethnicity, genders, classes and so on coming alive as the new subject of literature. Such important writings started with Chinua Achebe, then Ngugi wa Thiongo, Buchi Emecheta, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ousmane Sembène, then Ben Okri later, much more postmodern in his *The Famished Road*, then you had the Zimbabwean writers Chenjerai Hove, then Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. They were beginning to make real human claims about the gap between what was promised and the reality. Many of them also had to leave the continent. But increasingly that became a counterpoint—a contrapuntal, surrogate sociology.

RENNY THOMAS : Connected with this is the whole idea of a postcolonial social science. In the discourse of colonial social science, what you have is the powerful *researcher* and the powerless *researched*. In postcolonial social sciences, we need to first question the very binary of the *researcher* and the *researched*. Here we need to think about a new vision for social science. In that sense, do we need to have a postcolonial sociology where we have to actually problematise what you had in the colonial understanding of society? Can we then consider this new sociology as a postcolonial critique? Do we need to think of a new sociology where

not only that we question the very methodology and epistemology that colonial sociology used, but also question the relationship between the *fieldworker* and the *field*?

ARI SITAS : Yes, indeed there has to be a new sociology. The postcolonial label is like a strategy—the first step of a strategy. We are in the midst of an epistemic revolution. The South was and is seen always as the parochial, traditional, underdeveloped space... you are that which is not Europe all the time. That is your deficit. And to be modern you have to absent such deficits. Then you may properly take off. You may then create a civil society. All that has become rather bankrupt.

If you take the narrative back to the 16th century and you start looking at modernity after that initial forage of a few ships from Europe that inaugurated new interactions in the world, which, after forage, involved settlement and in the long term colonisation, if you start the story of sociology from there, all the continents become part of the entanglement. When you start looking at that emerging sociality and you arrive at the Industrial Revolution where sociology usually starts, not as a virgin birth but as a process of entanglement, then you can start telling a different story about what sociology is without anything becoming offending.

I show my students the map of 1650. I describe the world in 1650 and there is nothing traditional there. Yes, there are gaps in between. Societies and social groups are running away from this dynamic. In between you will find acephalous societies hiding here and there. Anthropologists did find such societies much later. But when you start mapping the urban formations of the world from the 11th century to the 15th century, you would be hard pressed to find a radiant Europe. There is only one city that appears, Cordoba, and it is rather on the Islamic part of the equation. In the rest of the world, yes, in the 11th century Bagdad was quite the metropolis, by the 15th century there was Beijing, and all of a sudden there is a world that emerges that asks for sociologists of urban life, not of a traditional society. Of course, urban elites exploited the hinterlands, of course many of them were not nice people, but give that history some credence and dignity, please, from the Maya to the Qing.

Allow yourself to puzzle over the 15th and 17th centuries and ask yourself in a new way what allows Europe to ascend and makes the rest experience involution and decline? Then finally you are going to arrive at the late 19th century where Britain rules the waves, and everything is London and London is everything; its money, its transactions, its imperialism, its culture, everything creates a fascinating beacon. That was the first time in history that something like this has been achieved: material and symbolic life coordinated by a small patch on the world map. The USA after the second world war tried to emulate that. Now we are in an era where even US hegemony is declining, there are breaks and cracks emerging and we don't know where we are going. But in all this we could start trying to nurture a proper sociology. And it will be an interdisciplinary project to understand what our sociality is about. Anthropology and sociology had a very peculiar role to play in the domination of most of the world. The British Sociological Society did not start with a study of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, 'the canon'; it started with a launching of Galton's Eugenics project in London. And anthropology was busy helping classify and codify native rule everywhere. The past was regrettable and we need to start doing something else. But when I even look at Habermas, when he discusses the Other in Africa in his theory of Communicative Action, he only uses Evans Pritchard. I am sorry to see this. And when I hear my German colleagues say go back to Weber on the Chinese literati to understand China, when there are

twenty fantastic books by Chinese people and sinologists that disprove anything sociologists have said, I despair. But sociologists do not talk about it, they don't know about it. That scholarship is part of Area Studies. We are in the grips of an epistemic turbulence.

Secondly, those who were derogated, as I described before, are teaching us some profound lessons: that without struggles by indigenous people the eco-sensitive new approach to the world would have been about a couple of mad scientists in Europe who smoked forbidden stuff and imbibed magic mushrooms! The critique of the subject-object dialectic of philosophy and its origin in monotheistic religions that precedes and facilitates industrial civilisation. It is not culture-nature anymore, it is something else.

We have to learn from all Others: from "Blacks," from Dalits, from a whole range of voices that are coming in that cannot be homogenised so easily. But of course, class still remains a horrific reality. The fact that you have lost access to land, that you are potentially or really proletarianised, that you are an immaterial digit if you ever get to a livelihood. All that continues. And it continues today although sociology claims that we are in a post-industrial society. Since the 1980s to the 2010s, production has tripled. The 1970s were supposed to be the highpoint of industrial production, the time of Fordism. What has happened in India, China and in other emerging powers is an unprecedented level of industrialisation. This is something horrific. There are some societies that moved to post-industrial times: good services, technology, better life, better cities and so on. But there is a crude reality of that old industrial civilisation that is with us somehow.

Thirdly, you have to ask what is the university and what is knowledge and what do they have to be in the present? What is this mix between the old monastic idea that you have to remove yourself from the contamination of the world to develop "proper" knowledge. You strut out from the university, and you collect data, whether you are scientist or an anthropologist, you bring it back in, you process it, and get it out as information, knowledge, refereed article and manuscript. It is always a scholarship "of." Then you hear, 'you can't be positivist', 'you need more qualitative studies', but what you do with qualitative is the same—you go out, you collect the stories, better stories often, you bring them back, process them and where do they go?

But what is the university, what kind of marker does it constitute in society? Is it anything more than the institution that facilitates differentiation and decides who will be the new elite? Even if you are a student from the working class, or here in India from perceived lower castes, what are you being groomed for? Is the university anything but a means to stratification?

Then you have movements of resistance that say knowledge is for the people, therefore we cannot let it run away from that! We should transform the university or we should forget it—knowledge-making should be part of movements, part of struggles, and knowledge is produced through struggle with indigenous communities, for the struggle of indigenous communities, with workers for workers. You get such juxtapositions and polarisations happening at the time when social movements are on the rise.

Then, even if you escape the institutional snares, you will still need to create intensive knowledge in certain areas that cannot be about immediate experience and dialogue. It will have to be about science, about reading, about hermeneutic methodologies, which demand

hard work and only some and not all people have the talent for!

What in a sense I have been struggling with philosophically is to find my way through three experiments. Now, if you look at my *Parables*<sup>4</sup> experiment, that was an exploration of a way through which story telling could lead to theorisation. It is not about the flatness created by postmodernism that everything is text. That kind of story telling is a specific kind. It has to have its own modalities. Why this experiment? It was because I was trying to find a dialogic way through which people could deal with knowledge-making, and here I mean people who are less empowered or more empowered than me. In their story telling narratives as part of vibrant oral cultures they were more empowered than me. I am more empowered than them because of the books that I have read and in terms of having a lot of experience in pedagogic encounters, and more theoretical training. I was searching for a more dialogic and oral form of communication. This experiment is undecided. You should be the judge! Is it possible to co-theorise with people?

Secondly, I am struggling with genetics and epigenetics and works of people like Alexander Luria, who was a sensible materialist in the Soviet Union and he was the person to start studying orality and literacy and the transitions between the two. I don't agree with him, but he as a hard neurosurgeon began to show how the brain is not "determinist" as we thought it was. It allows us to be creative, but you can't wire it and unwire it. It is not about the hard neuro versus the soft consciousness but try to find the continuum between materiality and consciousness. I am very fascinated now with the new literature on epigenetics, which is a corrective of genetic determinism. I am working in that area.

And then, searching at the same time for the "emancipatory" in discourse and praxis, the ever-unreachable balance between equality and freedom. What I mean by that is that I am trying to shift sociology and university away from the study of social behaviour in order to control it towards putting it in the service of human flourishing. Once you come to understand what constrains human flourishing, then you know what you have to remove in order to achieve it.

So I am experimenting. There are difficulties—difficulties of language, difficulties of logic even. You really need to work with translations properly to create a philosophical dialogue. So we are limited ontologically by the language we use.

My problem with many postcolonial writers, whom I respect a lot because of their egalitarian impulse, is getting more pronounced. I raise my core objections in one of the essays in *Theoretical Parables* which is called 'Exploiting Phumelele Nene: Postmodernism, Intellectual Work and Ordinary Lives.' Their notion that there are multiple readings possible in any narrative and our role is to decipher how powers play themselves out would, and could, lead to cynical apathy. You do not have to risk failure in your analysis of veracity and reliability in your conclusions. You never have to take the risk and say it is this explication that is correct and make yourself available to failure. There has to be a demonstrative aspect of what I am saying as a scientist. It is not just discourse.

It is not a question of speaking for the subaltern or not being self-reflexive in terms of your situational power—that was an important corrective by Spivak to all the celebration of speaking for people, the middle class speaking for people, and anthropologists with their translators, their native informants, providing for us the "authentic voice." When a peasant

woman asks, why do you think my crop is wilting? – you need to be able to answer and say, it is the chemicals those big farmers are pumping from the air onto the fields and live with the consequences of your explication. It is not about gathering her voice for semiotic analysis in the university lab.

RENNY THOMAS : I would like you to reflect upon the distinction between academic and activist. Do you think it is important for an academic to be part of activism in postcolonial times? Can we teach Social Science without being part of movements in times like ours? You have been part of movements along with your teaching and research. What do you have to say on this?

ARI SITAS : There were times when you had to lead a schizophrenic life where there was no relationship between what you did as an academic and what you did as an activist, because university was a hostile space. There were times when there was too much human kindness flowing out of the university that made you panic because the university was claiming activism and celebrating you for all the things they hated in you. In reality the university was reproducing the racial and class structure in the context of South Africa.

I have encountered during those years three levels of activism. Firstly, it's within the epistemic community you belonged to. An attempt to create an environment where you could push the knowledge project in a new direction. The second level is in terms of one's own social life. As a woman, and depending what kind of woman, there were and are power struggles against multiple patriarchies. They happen at all kinds of levels. Third, it happens in the workplace. One is involved in the actual transformation of the workplace. Changing the way institutions work.

There is a lot of very fashionable literature now that plays the person and not the game. In other words, yes, if Marx was a horrible patriarch, therefore his analysis in *Capital* was andro-centric nonsense. Yes, you can find biases, faults, imperfect biographies in anyone. Is Marx wrong because he was white, was Fanon right because he was black? What allows us to pass judgements? But a lot of our colleagues these days rubbish movements, ideas, texts, literature and so on by not really reading the work properly. On this I am at one with Foucault, kill the author do not worry about his stool-training. But you know, one can make a career out of writing the misdeeds of Gandhi. And we do.

RENNY THOMAS : Lastly, what do you think is the crisis in postcoloniality today? What are we grappling with?

ARI SITAS : I will speak as a sociologist. I think we are living in a time which is equivalent of the transition that happened between the 15th and 17th centuries. We are living with the old hegemony that established itself after the second world war, and tried to define the world according to a certain image... well, it is waning. We have had crises proliferating. The old hegemon, let's name her, the USA, tried to establish and fix the world through a version of a market driven system and through a series of regime changes. And that has not succeeded. So, we are seeing the moral panic around deviance increasing. All of a sudden there is a multiplication of devils and troublesome people who are creating uncertainty. We are seeing it now in terms of the definitions of self and otherness, a capitulation to all kinds of *gemeinschaft* mandarins, of cultural people, essentialists of note, who are going to bring values back and make the uncertain certain. They are the strong men and women who are going to take the broken and make it whole again, as it used to be. You are seeing the capitulation in India, you are seeing it in Europe, you are seeing it in Africa, Latin America, everywhere. You are also seeing new religiosity coming in and threatening the very fabric



of secularism.

Then you have counter movements that are trying to say that this world is unlivable. Whether it is young people in Europe, the US, in Africa, India, you see energy among them towards a new popular democratic and altruistic coexistence and visions of an alternative beginning to happen. So we are caught between a system that's unravelling, where we cannot say whether we are the fixers and whether our fixing will be any good for anyone. This uncertainty creates ambiguities that smash a lot of our seeming universals or forced universals at the moment.

That space that we call a country is needed more and more just for us to claw back some rights, some freedom and some breathing space, and stop them running away from us through what we have called globalisation.

We really do need a new language, emotive and theoretical, in the same old space in new times. Britain thought they had us all sorted out in the late 19th century. What they created was competition between nation states and wars. What I am saying is that the crisis also produces the movements that are for me the most important of actors. I find more solace in indigenous movements telling us about nature, movements of those derogated, telling us about equality and group rights, serious artists reminding us that we need to think of living rights as well, not just about abstract human rights. So on the one hand there is crisis, and on the other hand there is hope. But it's not a binary. It is not a dialectic, it is a *polylectic*.

As long as we are not creating laboratories of transformation in our spaces of work we will be sucked into the more comfortable solution or being pragmatic digital participants of a complex electronic horizontalism. It could be very comfortable for us because we can meet through internet conferencing in Vienna, in Cyprus and Delhi, and talk to each other every day, and imagine ourselves free from the nightmares around us.

RENNY THOMAS : Thank you very much Prof. Sitas.

ARI SITAS : Thanks.

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I would like to thank Taisha Abraham for her intellectual support, and Ari Sitas for agreeing to have a conversation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of Sociology, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, India

<sup>2</sup> His open class on nationalism took place at JNU on 19 February 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Special Lecture by Ari Sitas titled 'Post-Colonial Nationalisms and Their Challenges', organised by the Department of Sociology, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, coordinated by Renny Thomas, on 14 March 2016.

<sup>4</sup>See Ari Sitas (2004): *Voices That Reason: Theoretical Parables*, Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.

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