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An Invitation to Debate: Envisioning an Africa-Centered Perspective, Engaging Sociological Endeavor

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Abstract

This article frames the focus of this special Africana studies issue of *Critical Sociology*, discussing its theoretical and epistemological necessity for the discipline, its potential for critical informing inquiry within the discipline with respect to Africana social phenomena as well the human experience, the challenges it poses for the traditional conduct of sociological inquiry and what the particular pieces selected for this issue contribute to each of these.

Keywords

sociology, africana studies, black studies

Introduction

I would like to describe this special issue as an invitation to a dialogue. It's important in that context to thank Critical Sociology for having the interest and frankly, courage to engage this dialogue. I say courage because ultimately this discourse about Africa-centered sociology, what it is, why it is important, and what it offers as a paradigmatic approach is existentially a challenge to the status quo. Even the very terminology "Africa-centered" implicit juxtaposes our discussions here with some sense of some alternative "non-Africa centered" alternative or set of alternatives. The absent referent here is the intellectual system commonly referred to as "Eurocentric."

The Eurocentric System

The Eurocentric system might be best described as a philosophical orientation to, the gathering and treatment of, and the social application of knowledge. In the sense that the historical political machines were designed to turn out party line votes and victories in local elections, the Eurocentric system is a rationalizing machine. Its purpose is to rationalize European and Euro-American political, economic, social, and cultural formations as "standard," "norm" and "natural." Implicitly, the "machine" imputes deviance and abnormality to alternative functional formations from other cultures and civilizations. It masquerades and masks itself as a

kind of global comparative analysis mechanism, but in truth it's less about scientific analysis than a collective cultural and ideological confirmation mechanism for the dominant culture. It is the equivalent of the Greek character Echo to the Narcissus of Eurocentric cultural ethnocentrism. For those not immediately familiar with the story, Echo is the mythological feminine which falls in love with the self-loving, egotistic masculine mythoform of Narcissus who is so busy contemplating his own reflection that he does not notice her pining for Him. Ultimately, in the narrative, only her voice is left and all she can say is the repetition of what he speaks to her. So too all the Eurocentric rationalizing machine can say is what the system of cultural dominance says to it. It becomes literally an "echo" of the monologue of hegemonic oppression.

The roots of Euro-centrism are found in Platonic epistemology and in particular Plato's Republic where among other things, the author develops an, at the time, "new" rationale for elite rule and oligarchical supremacy. This rule is rooted in "right thinking" and the methodology of this "right thinking" is in turn rooted in a wholesale objectification and commodification as well as de-spiritualization of cosmogony, such that the conceptual world is reduced to two sets of material "things," "subjects" and "objects." "Subjects" control "objects" and this supposed condition is essentialized and naturalized as the divine order of things. Scientific social analysis is conceptualized as the process for identification of subjects and objects for the purposes of

“social control,” the task of maintaining them in their proper functionalist order. This has the effect of dichotomizing social phenomena, not only in relation to one another, but internally within themselves. Holism in analysis and perception is rendered difficult if not entirely impossible. Phenomena are hierarchically ranked in terms of a proper superior and inferior and relationships are characterized by a structure built upon oppositions, antithetical rankings, and antagonistic oppositions.

The definitive statement on this point may be found in the work of Robert Armstrong (1975) who says: “Dualities abound, constituting our civilization... We see the world as delicately constituted of ...terms {concepts} in an infinite system of contrasting pairs, and bound together by the tension that exists between them. To be sure one term {concept} in each case is, by definition of greater value than it’s opposite. ..In large measure then, the myth of the consciousness of Western Europe is the myth of bi-polar oppositions. (Armstrong, 1975)

In addition to its roots within Platonic epistemology, Euro-centrism also has roots in the Enlightenment, and in particular in the conceptualization of a new kind of “self.” Prior to this philosophical period, humanity was seen largely in terms of existential collectives, castes, classes and strata and one’s social mobility and identity were inextricably interwoven with the social position of one’s relevant group. Such a conception of human worth can be a powerful element for resisting collective social change. As long as the slave perceives himself or herself as a part

of the social category of “slave”, with its concomitant obligations, then they would expect to be treated as a slave, lowering their trajectory of personal potential and fitting into the dramaturgical role anticipated by those who defined themselves as “slave masters.” In the context of the perpetual “performance” of that role as “slave,” which is a collective and not individually constructed social identity, slavery would be replicated and reproduced and persist. Even after physical, chattel slavery would be overcome, the mental yoke imposed by this oppressive rendering of the self and one’s communities would continue, a point raised forthrightly by Carter G. Woodson (1933) in *Miseducation of the Negro* (Woodson, 2006[1933]). He noted that despite Africans’, at the time, relatively higher level of access to and attainment within Eurocentric educational settings, their mentality of being the oppressed dissuaded them from resisting critical aspects of the status quo. A similar context is found in the arguments of Frantz Fanon (1952) in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon, 2008[1952]) in which he grapples with how revolution and liberation could ultimately be thwarted once collective victimization was psychologically internalized by the oppressed. The oppressed could find themselves becoming that, as Kwame Ture said, “most unlike themselves”, as they come to manifest in word, thought, and deed what had been their oppressors’ worldviews.

The philosophy of the Enlightenment was a discourse which sought to create a new “self” known as the “individual.” This movement had two primary strains: one, the liberation of the

individual and personal conscience from the sway of ecclesiastical authorities, in particular the Roman Catholic Church in Europe and two, the education of the individual in the liberal arts and humanities and the tools of deconstruction which were said to free the mind conceptually in the secular realm. This is penultimately represented in the words of Descartes (1660) “I think therefore I am” (Descartes, 1660). This entire movement was framed in terms of the philosophy of humanism which implicitly suggested that the definition of one’s humanity was inextricably connected to the acceptance of and the actuation in practice of this conception of the self. This was later to be even more refined in the work of Freud and Jung in the conception of the individual in terms of unconscious and conscious realms, largely driven by this entity known as the ego, the repository of “self” integrity. This new “selfhood” unleashed the forces of nationalist change and reform in Europe, but as Adorno and Horkheimer noted in the *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* and as other Frankfurt school theorists ratified in their respective works, this unleashing of the new, unencumbered self and its needy ego was to have disastrous consequences in the long run in the global context. For in the process of legitimization of the individual, the liberators had unwittingly unchained the Promethean forces of modernity.

First, there is subjectivism. The concept of the self was conceived of as the source of Platonic subjectivity and so this “self” was co-determinant with the idea of the subject which controls or at least endeavors to control the external environment. This new self was self-

regarding and self-referent and therefore did not see itself any longer as ultimately morally and ethical obligated to the larger community, except in an abstract way. This reified “I” was in stark contrast, for example, to the self in the African traditional experience as presented in the work of Mbiti (1970), who says “I am because we are” (Mbiti, 1992 [1970]). As a consequence, these “individuals” defined freedom as “freedom to” in terms of their personal wills and “freedom from” in terms of their social rights and responsibilities. The goal of the social construct would be to facilitate this individualism at the expense of the common weal. Economics, politics, education, religion and all other social structures were conceived of as theaters for individual pursuits, even if justified by reference to the social interest, and democracy was the label attached to the facilitation of the idea. Societies and civilizations were perceived as less democratic to the extent that they did not adhere to this policy and sociocultural practice of glorifying the individual and his or her civil and political rights.

Then there is objectivism. Each individual experience is particularistic and the social is basically the sum of the individual occurrences. This has the dual effect of both undermining the concept of what Durkheim called “social facts” and also abstracting human experience. Reasoning is done by anecdote or analogy to the specific culturally bound case. And thus my understanding of the external is related not to the reality of that externality but to a Platonic abstraction of those things related to my antagonistic relationship to them. This is the “world of

opposites” we referenced early. Only now it is not classes versus other classes, or castes versus other castes, but rather a “war” of individuals such that each “me” is confronted with a universe of not me. Combined with the imperative towards cosmological control generated by the subjectivism, you can see this leads to the fear, paranoia, depression, alienation and other maladies of Eurocentric modernity. It makes the unique differences of each individual and each collective, which are at one hand lauded as the hallmark of democratization and identity, also a prima facie threat to my own uniqueness. Difference is now deviance and the desire to control deviance is manifested at the individual as well as at the social level. Difference must be segregated, incarcerated, medicated, or otherwise neutralized as a threat to the body politic and the body personal. The “social” becomes the circle of resources, human and material, that confirm the predilections of the personal ego, and aid in accomplishing the objectives of individuality. Other people are ultimately means to a Platonic end. So much so, that it becomes standard in Eurocentric society to speak of a cornucopia of “Platonic” relationships (as implicitly opposed to real, meaningful ones which would require social interchange).

There is next authoritarianism. The process of the Enlightenment began to “free” the individual from these unjust authorities, but ignored the fact that while legitimate critique of social institutions must be had, the functionality of these institutions would then need to be replaced by new entities. In their absence, there would be nothing to restrain the all-consuming

egotistic individual. Coupled with the acquisition of political, economic, and/or social power, this ego manifests as the stereotypical authoritarian personality where the mechanisms of the social structure are merged with personal prejudices and predilections. This leads in Eurocentric society to oligarchies of concentration of economic and political power (tending towards plutocracy) and to fascist orientations which seek to mold the personhood and lives of others into one's personal model of what they should be. This point was raised in *The Dialectics of the Enlightenment* to explain the rise of fascism and secular society collapse in Germany, but can be applied more broadly to the movements presented under the rubric of neo-conservatism more generally in Eurocentric society.

Finally, there is totalitarianism. In using that term, we refer not to a specific society or political system but the tendency towards totalizing essentialist views of human affairs in which the absolute will of the individual and the ego, unrestrained by spiritualism, believes itself capable of attaining any objective. Any goal not reached hitherto is merely the result of insufficient knowledge or insufficient technology. Such a system places a premium on incremental, objectivist data collection and analysis, decontextualized from social experience and the constant development of technological innovations as implements for separating the vulnerability of mankind to the natural and social environments from the person. Thus we get

phenomena like the “war on drugs” where mass incarceration and military force are presented as technical solutions to what is in fact a physical, psychological, and spiritual problem.

The Implications of the Eurocentric System for Social Science Inquiry

Central to the institutionalization of Euro-centrism within culture and social structures is the process of creating a particular normative regime. This regime establishes a regularized set of expectations for individual and social conduct, consistent with the meta-assumptions of the philosophical system and that increase its cultural reach and power, which Marimba Ani (2007) characterized as its vital force or “asili” (Ani, 2007). This regime normalizes the objectification, hierarchicalization, abstraction, and dichotomization necessary for Platonic reasoning and then imposes it as an obligation upon the autonomous selfhood of the Enlightenment. Worldviews which do not see phenomena in this way as well as the people, who reside in the cultural and sociological realms conceived by them, are defined as dysfunctional, abnormal, deviant, or corrupt. “Education” becomes the process of training adherents to deconstruct those realities. It is in this pursuit that disciplines, particularly social sciences, in Euro-centrism can become assistants to the colonialist and neocolonialist projects.

Na'im Akbar (1984) writes masterfully about the implications of this in an article entitled "Africentric Social Sciences for Human Liberation" (Akbar, 1984). In this article, Akbar (1984) talks about Wade Nobles (1978) idea of Africans using the Eurocentric analytical framework and normative assumptions as "conceptually incarcerated" (Nobles, 1978). This "incarceration" is primarily to the concept of "objectivity" which is actually Eurocentric intersubjectivity where Eurocentric scholars agree to accept a piece of information as knowledge and thereby declare it universal and applicable to all human experiences. This illusion of objectivity vests the Eurocentric scientific narrative form with a sense of its own superiority in comparison with other systems of knowledge. Jacob Carruthers (1972) argues cogently against the idea that science is without values (Carruthers, 1972) and Akbar (1980) himself notes that the Eurocentric concept of "objectivity" is itself a value or a chosen perspective from which to examine data (Akbar, 1980).

The Eurocentric system manifests itself in all scientific analysis, but particularly in the social sciences, setting up a normative regime with the Eurocentric form of social and cultural phenomena as standard. Central to this "normality" are presumptions of English speech, male gender, Christian belief, "white" racial identity, European cultural descent, and heterosexuality. The more that an individual models these phenomena or fits into this criterion, the more "normal" they are. The more collectives exhibit behaviors and ideas characteristic of groups

composed of people meeting this criterion, the more “normal” they are. This sets up a system of social sciences predicated on an inherent comparative analysis and the model of deviance. To what extent does phenomena or theory or method or analysis conform to the standards, or the expectations engendered by them? It is a form of deficit reasoning which colonizes knowledge, the processes for acquisition and validation of knowledge, and particularizing the culture of social science such that a majority of people forfeit their agency as social actors and become systemic objects with their cultural experiences socially controlled by those who fit the norm. As Akbar says, this “has led to a preoccupation with deviance, deficiency, and an excessive involvement with ‘victim analysis.’” This entire system can be understood to constitute what we know as a “paradigm.” It is juxtaposed to what we might characterize as a “worldview.” The worldview may be understood as the set of collective assumptions a people make about the nature of reality. The paradigm would be the inter-subjective, implicit assumptions of a particular community of scientists concerning the shared conceptions of the possible, the boundaries of acceptable inquiry, and the limiting cases (Ornstein, 1981).

Once a particular scientific or in this case, social scientific paradigm is in place, it dictates the nature of the methodologies that will be pursued in related disciplines of inquiry. As Curtis Banks (1980) suggested, ultimately methodologies within the disciplines larger confirm existing paradigmatic models (Banks, 1980). What then, may be said to be the major component

elements of the paradigmatic models within Eurocentric social science? First, there is the predominant status of the ideology of individualism. The identity of the human being is seen as invested in the egoistic self, constituted in the person of the individual. This individual is seen as autonomous, desacralized, and self-determining. This is true even in the most “social” of Eurocentric social sciences such as Eurocentric sociology which often sees social phenomena as collective forces acting upon the individual. Second, there is the purposive presumption concerning the desirability of competition. Progress, even if social, comes about from such competition between autonomous individuals in every sphere of human activity. Third, there is the presumption of “rationality,” associated particularly with the Eurocentric social scientific narrative form. The first problem is that the actual conduct of social science as “rational” as it may be claimed, inherently involves the so-called “non-rational” considerations of social scientists themselves in the conduct of their disciplines. As regards, for example, what is to be studied and the choice of methods, which may be a subjective function as much as any other human activity of biases, subjective judgments, and personal insights. Yet the emphasis on the characterization of Eurocentric science as wholly rational and the need to preserve that ideological image of the narratives leads to the sublimation of feelings or affect as outliers. The implications of this for social phenomena, like that among African people as one case, that incorporate dimensions of spirituality and emotion as central causal elements and for analyzing

them effectively is substantial. Finally, this is reinforced by the pervasive materialism we have alluded to, arising out of Platonic philosophy in which the definitively “real” is that which is directly observable.

Rethinking What We Do and What We Think We “Must” Do

There are innumerable possible responses to the problems that Euro-centrism poses for scientific inquiry, the social sciences, and to sociology in particular. One of them to engage, as the critical theorists in the discipline do, in the thoroughgoing deconstruction of the meta-assumptions we have identified in the system. While this is laudable, it does not complete the task of having us go beyond that exercise and talk about how we construct theory, engage methodology, collect data, and draw conclusions beyond the narrow Eurocentric frame. That task requires some of the insight of the concept of standpoint epistemology.

Standpoint epistemology accepts as the basic condition of human beings, the fact that your perspective is necessarily influenced by your location in terms of the matrix of social and natural environmental relationships and interrelationships. To make the point, we might use an example of multi-perspectival reasoning draw from the experience of being in some position relative to a train. There are a number of perspectives. One might be on the train internally, one might be

observing the train along the tracks, one might be on top of the train (at great risk nonetheless). Were you to conduct a simultaneous interview with all three of these theoretical individuals, they would all give an accounting of the real lived experience of the train. These individual accounts would not all be the same, nonetheless they would all be real and accurate, given the limitations and constraints of each person's particular position relative to the train, its motion, its speed, its direction, and things that could be observed or reckoned with from each of those respective places. Similarly, in human social affairs, interrelationships might be conceived of as a matrix. A matrix in which we are all suspended and our location in which effects our worldview and potential for action and reaction and mobility within the system. There are ascriptive qualities that are assigned. For example, being male, or "white" or Christian or English-speaking or any of the normative categories expected in Euro-centrism, can provide substantial advantages to the individual and to various social groups in the matrix. Think of it as a chess game where certain pieces, simply as a function of the name attributed to them, also acquire the ability to move in more ways than others and thereby have an advantage in obtaining self-defined strategic objectives. There are achieved characteristics that are earned (and we are not necessarily implying "merit" but assigned as function of some action of the individual or those around him or her as opposed to accruing to them by their mere existence). For example, those with more income, more wealth, better social networks, and such things also acquire more mobility. All of

these together are essential to what Pierre Bourdieu described when he discoursed on the various forms of capital and in particular “cultural” and “social” capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Obviously, we cannot mathematically analyze the structure and sum of an arithmetic matrix by examining one cell or its contents. Similarly, we cannot analyze the structure and sociological result of a social matrix by examining one individual or group or using a methodological and theoretical approach or a set of philosophical presumptions normed on such. We know that in research we must “triangulate” to get at difficult questions, using multiple methodologies and multiple sources of data to get a clearer picture of the overall phenomena. As much as Euro-centrism recognizes this necessity WITHIN its analytical work, it fails to recognize that exactly such an approach is needed in engaging Eurocentric science as a whole, particularly social science. To understand the social matrix then, we must move like construction workers around a large building, constructing theoretical “scaffolding” that extends across the whole of the structure allowing us to move in all directions and correlate data. Rather than just being multi-perspectival about a particular cell, or point-moment of social occurrence, we must be multi-perspectival about the assumptions of social science itself. We must practice making non-Eurocentric or “non-Western” assumptions about sociological data and ideas and record what that insight tells us. We must be non-patriarchal and examine how that recalibrates our picture in gender, none heterosexist with respect to sexuality and so on. Note that I am not

arguing that we must discard all Eurocentric research. Quite the contrary, I am arguing rather that we must recognize that Eurocentric research is itself perspectival, given the assumptions of the categories of “normalcy” or matrix positions we have discussed and that it is therefore neither “objective” nor sufficient in and of itself to constitute the whole sociological picture. It is also then, by implication, not adequate alone in declaring what the sociological “reality” is and does not constitute a singular appropriate narrative for codifying what is observed.

Taking an alternative perspective, either Africa-centered or otherwise, means using different theoretical approaches and new language and concepts and making different meta-assumptions. Not necessarily “better,” just different. It is much like an apple pie in which a discussion about one piece being superior is a bit afield of truth. Whereas we have been heretofore been Eurocentrically taught to take but one slice and declare our judgment based on that slice, we are now challenged to taste different pieces from different locations which at alternate times may be better or less tasty and without the sampling of which, one cannot fairly access the “quality” of the baking.

Conceptualizing an “Africa-Centered” Sociology

We begin in full knowledge of the fact that an Africa-centered sociology is merely one slice of that aforementioned pie. Not a better one, but distinctively a different one, with its own cultural and social “flavor.” What is important is that an Africa-centered sociology is not a number of things. It is not merely doing Eurocentric sociology using Africana phenomena as data. Nor, is it African or African diasporic scholars doing sociology, any more than Eurocentric sociology is limited to those of European descent. This is not a surrogate for the Eurocentric concept of “race,” and is not a call for any kind of “race” based sociology. It IS a call for recognizing the culturally bound nature of various competing scientific discourses as well as the variable and relative power various groups have over the construction and validation of those discourses and narratives. So this explains why during this issue we had to turn away a lot of people who were writing otherwise exception sociological pieces that happened to have Africana as a subject or who themselves happened to be of African descent.

African-centered sociology begins from the premise that the sociological endeavor must be re-conceptualized from the beginning in terms of the cultural and social values and norms of African people in the same way that Eurocentric sociology served that purpose for Euro-centrism and those who engaged it during its predominance in global affairs. First, we have to interrogate the “normative” standards. In the revision, the Africana experience, local and global, is considered as equally valid for the consideration of human social affairs. Thus the African social

is deemed “normal” and “standard.” Again, not that there could not be or are not alternatives, their certainly are, but the Africana perspective is one not frequently considered in the sociological project and we believe that by taking such a view and providing a forum for the same, we can learn something that would have been obscured or underestimated otherwise. It is the metaphorical invocation of a second, new kind of microscope, not to undercut previous observation, but to illuminate additional parts of the conceptual sky. Once Africana is normed as the center and the standard, the ontological conception of mankind is changed. Human beings are not conceived quintessentially as egos or subjects or individuals, but as micro-representations of humanity writ large. Thus all human experiences are existentially attributed value and legitimacy as a part of the whole human story and any particular case of these, including the Africana ones, are legitimate in turn, for shedding light on the human story. This also de-emphasizes comparative analysis, at least beyond acknowledging similarities and differences. While it’s appropriate to demarcate variations in human manifestations, it is no longer necessary to identify these differences as abnormalities or deviances, just regularities within an alternative cultural frame. Now I am aware that there are those who will charge “Relativism!” here and attempt to storm my theoretical Bastille. But to that I respond that inherent within each cultural context is an ethical and moral narrative that must be met within that cultural system and so not all actions or social occurrences are viewed as equally desirable, even if particular manifestations are not

held to equal value ACROSS different cultural civilizations. If humanity is the standard de facto without any conditions and each is equal in value in that regard, then the nature of man, and nature itself is the norm. An example of a derived law from this idea is one where what nature does is seen as inherent normal. Thus cycles of life and death, and the need to survive, are seen not as particularities of culture but as part of a revised natural physics of sorts. This survival creed extends beyond the Western idea of the “individual” to the collective individuality in the African sense and concomitantly to the collective itself. The normative regime then is founded upon the maxim that what preserves the essential qualities of the community and the collective which defines and sustains one’s existence is “normal” and conversely, that which undermines the communal and the collective is deemed “abnormal” or at least problematic on a temporal basis (Nobles, 1980).

This affects the nature of sociological analysis. This author wrote a number of pieces based on the problems feminist scholars had already noted with the notion of the SNAF, or Standard North American Family, model which permeated US sociological analysis concerning the family structure and led to a general discourse of many families as “dysfunctional” and in fact a disproportionate number of these were African-American and other “minority” families, a consequence I dealt with extensively in my most recent book and in my dissertation work (Imani, 2011) (Smith, 1993). As I argued in my work, an Africa-centered to sociological analysis of the

family would assess the functionality of the family, not with respect to some Platonic and Eurocentric expectations of structure or gender roles, but rather with respect to its elasticity as it relates to the need for preserving the community writ large. This means a lot more and different familial forms would qualify in this revised standard of “normalcy.”

The autonomous self disappears in this Africa-centered paradigm. The self, in the Africana case, is a collectively constructed phenomenon. This idea should not be completely foreign, even to Eurocentric sociologists as it resonates with Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical idea of the self as socially and interpretively constructed in view of the responses of others to our validity claims of identity (Goffman, 1959). It also resonates with Cooley (1902), except that the “other” is not merely the mirror in which the self is reflected, but an actual emanation of the self. This approach draws psychology, particularly social psychology, much closer to sociology than in the Eurocentric renderings of these. The collective consciousness is considered an, if not **the** arena for human social observation. Africa-centered sociology is sociology of holism, rather than deviance. The comparative analysis component involves looking for areas of syncretism in human experience rather than areas of difference.

The desacralization of human experience, central to Euro-centrism and its Platonic impetus is antithetical to this idea because the collective consciousness is perceived in the Africana experience as grounded in spirituality. Not necessarily particular religious or spiritual

systems, although these also exist, but more in the foundational principle of the human being as a spiritual process and therefore of humanity and the collectives within humanity as likewise. And the synthesis of the material and spiritual is paralleled by a synchronicity between mind, body, and soul and that synthesis is collective as well as individual. In fact, in the Africana context it might be said that it is individual BECAUSE it is collective initially.

The notion of human beings as existentially valuable from a spiritual standpoint and the move away from a sociology of negative comparison and deviance from a posited norm also has the effect of creating a more positive perspective on human nature. Humans are seen as intrinsically “good” in the sense that they participate in the positive aspects of the collective human enterprise, even if the Eurocentric ego and its actions or social circumstances cause them to act in ways that are not ethically positive or to experience circumstances that are not. This positive human nature is seen as tending towards potentiality for human relationships, for diplomacy, for forgiveness, et al. And this evolutionary model of human social progress towards unification on the spiritual and social level is seen as part of the ordinal superstructure of equilibrium in the cosmologies of African societies and groups. The “subjects” and “objects” of Plato’s world are united in what he might see as “unholy” matrimony, inextricably bound in interdependence.

The emotions and affect are re-integrated into the analytical template of Africa-centered sociological analysis. Particularly that type of emotion and affect invoke by symbols as discussed in the context of Eurocentric symbolic interactionism. The difference is that the symbols are not mere artifacts or contextual referents to other forms of social interaction. Rather, the symbols themselves invoke and structure the social interactions such that they become independent and/or dependent variables in themselves.

Ultimately, an Africa-centered sociology is going to change the definition of knowledge or at least posit its own, and juxtapose it to the one commonly held within Eurocentric sociology. Knowledge is in this sense, subjective and collective. The sociological narrative merely recognizes the de facto reality, but does not define it or “create knowledge: and reality is not somehow constituted by the authority of the sociological narrative. In fact, the litmus test of the validity and reliability of sociological knowledge is no longer the subjective inter-subjectivity of practicing Eurocentric sociologists, but rather the masses of the people and whether they recognize the sociological truths as true to their reality and lived experiences. Knowledge is information about the collective and its consciousness. It is information about environmental obstacles, social and “natural”, that act or have the potential to act as impediments to self (collective) development. It is information about appropriate strategies and tactics for removing and/or mastering those issues. And, it is the capacity to fit these actions and impediments and the

collective worldview into the larger template of universal spirituality and holism. Scholarly intelligence would be the possession of and the effectively capacity to use this information for the collective interest.

This Special Edition

So now we turn our attention to this special issue and how it contributes to the dialogues concerning the issues we raise above from a critical sociological perspective. Akinpelu Olutayo from the University Of Ibadan takes on the question of how we engage African indigenous and traditional knowledges within the context of the sociological analysis of the “everyday”, drawing on the concept of Verstehen. Menah Pratt-Clarke from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign focuses on the application of the thinking of an Africana sociology to broader concepts of social justice and with particular attention to applied social justice activism. Karanja Carroll of SUNY-New Paltz lays the groundwork for the pursuit of the Africana sociological project, exploring in careful depth the sociological tradition and the various strains and threads that culminate in this discussion. James Manigault-Bryant of Williams College refocuses us on the centrality of the image of Africa in the conceptualization of a new paradigm. Sekhmet Maat of the University of Louisville takes us into the application mode, employing some of the

insights of an ancient African, Kemetic model of sociological reasoning in a discussion about LGBTQ relationships and beyond. Tugrul Keskin of Portland State University also writes about the advent of Africana sociological possibility but from the standpoint of the critical critiques of the concept and ideologies associated with “orientalism.” Jasmine Farrish and Ray Von Robertson of Lamar University give us an empirical piece concerning the process of birthing among African-American women and how those can be better understood by taking a culturally referent Africa-centered approach to the analysis.

So we have here a mix of the theoretical, the philosophical, and the empirical that provide us not only with a firm conceptual grounding for the potential of an Africa-centered approach to the sociological endeavor, but also some guideposts and templates for the conduct of empirical research. As I said when I began this discussion, the goal is to do what it is that the exchange of intellectual ideas is designed to accomplish and that is to foment debate, to open up heretofore enclosed and restricted conceptual spaces, to push the discipline and through it, human knowledge, forward. I am satisfied that there are many treasures here that those who seek openly can mine and hopefully, then contribute in their own work towards the further development of the process of inquiry.

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