

THE CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Thoko Mayekiso*

There is a lingering academic disdain for the social sciences which needs countering: namely that they are imprecise, esoteric, and are in the main common sense festooned with jargon, and have the dubious distinction of making what is patently clear, manifestly obscure (Deutsch, Platt & Senghaas 1971). This view of the obsession with the “superiority” of the pure sciences over social sciences, as well as the unquenchable thirst for measurement, found further elaboration by Guthrie (1976) in a book with the interesting title *Even the rat was white: A historical view of psychology*.

Starting with these observations which may arguably be regarded as dated, the reality is that four decades later not much has changed. The mantra: “If you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it” still holds sway to this day. Further evidence for the sleight of hand in favour of the pure sciences is seen in the South African funding formula where more money is received for research in science, engineering and technology, and much less for the social sciences. Pure sciences continue to receive the bulk of the attention, and the bigger slice in the current funding formula in Higher Education. When it comes to budget allocations, the Humanities continue to hold the proverbial short end of the stick.

Davidson and Tolich (2003), in an extensive coverage of social science research in New Zealand, lament the unequal treatment meted out to the social sciences. At the heart of this introduction is the view, and contention that will be made throughout this opinion piece that the social sciences cannot be left to play second fiddle to the pure sciences for one major reason: they are there to develop and address matters germane to being human.

And no pure science, medicine, economics, technology and the whole frontiers of knowledge can advance when the social sciences are neglected and ignored. There must be a balance between “the high tech and the high touch”.

More telling a blow, though, is when the labour market neglects to hire social sciences graduates, and focus on those with degrees in accounting, economics, and the natural and pure sciences, and in doing so, missing out on the skill of lateral thinking, which

* Professor Thoko Mayekiso is Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research, Technology and Planning at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth.

graduates of the social sciences acquire. It is hypocritical to celebrate the seminal role that lateral thinking can play *à la* De Bono, yet deprive social sciences graduates employment opportunities.

The truth is: neglect, disregard, under-resourcing, and “inferiorization” of the social sciences can continue only at the peril of the precarious world, and to the detriment of humanity. Social science research will pale into insignificance if no conscious effort is made to claim a stake and a rightful place alongside all the sciences.

EPISTEMIC JUSTICE VS SCIENTIFIC RIGOUR

Knowledge acquisition is a contested terrain and is a function of a gallimaufry of factors: among them language (anglophone, francophone or lusophone), geography (where in the world are the scholars located), the schooling process and the role models that were noticeable. The relevance of this observation becomes evident when the contribution of female social scientists and AIC (African, Indian and Coloured) social scientists is considered. Diversity observation is therefore key if social science research is to survive and thrive. Neglect of “half the sky”, and disregard of researchers of a darker hue, will continue to add to the role of “less than” when social sciences are juxtaposed with the pure and natural sciences.

No civilization holds propriety over truth, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems – long suffering neglect – should feature on the radar screen. With globalisation and the ability of researchers to track down the contribution of each continent to world science (cf. Mouton 2009), levelling the playing field becomes seminal. The recent hosting of the FIFA Soccer World Cup Tournament for the first time on African soil since FIFA’s inception in 1904, provides ample evidence that Africa now has no place to hide. Africa has to conform to the same rigours of excellence, her historical trajectory notwithstanding. It can no longer be “different strokes for different folks”.

There is a sense in which such an expectation is unfair. Yet with partners who are prepared to assist and support, like FIFA, Africa is capable of rising to the occasion. Countries more resourced in terms of funding, technology and research expertise can help lift the status of social science research in South Africa, and the whole continent. They must just muster the political will to do so.

THE ETHNICITY TRAP

Rasmussen (2007) considers ethnicity as one of the key pillars in the strife to equalise opportunities for all groups. Consistent with the advent of ethnic sensitivity and awareness, is the recent appearance of a book titled *It’s our turn to eat: The story of a Kenyan whistleblower* by Michela Wrong (2009). The relevance of her book strikes to the heart of the matter: if social scientists do not produce research that transcends ethnic allegiances, it is then when the president and his/her cabinet will take care of their kith and kin, and amass huge resources at the expense of the country. Kenya fell into this trap, and is now reaping the whirlwind of this ethnic myopia.

Quoting from T. E. Lawrence's *The seven pillars of wisdom*, Wrong (2009: preface) asserts:

We lived many lives in those whirling campaigns, never sparing ourselves: yet when we achieved and the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our victory to re-make in the likeness of the former world they knew. Youth could win, but had not learned to keep: and was pitiably weak against age.

The parallel is here: a paradigm shift, to take a fresh look at the social sciences and their impact, will invariably be thwarted by those still wedded to the past, those who propound monolithic perspectives.

This trend of celebrating excellence informed by ethnic allegiance has been an albatross around the neck of African universities. The late Professor Bob Leshoai, after producing the first Ph.D. in English at the University of Dar es Salaam, would often be reminded: "When are you going home, make way for the 'son of the soil'". (The thinking then did not accommodate "the daughters of the soil".)

THE CROSS-CUTTING NATURE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

When the American economy hit rock bottom in 2008/2009, at the helm of banking institutions were accountants, statisticians, MBAs and other people who studied outside the social sciences. They were taught the nitty-gritty of their disciplines, but nothing on morality and ethics – a gap social sciences would have filled very ably. The world is the poorer for focusing on disciplines that are methodologically impeccable in their approaches, but humanly vapid. Economics assume a new meaning when it is humanised by the social sciences. Medicine makes more sense when the arteries of human ignorance on matters medical are de-clogged by the social sciences. A telling article titled *The effects of television advertisements for junk food versus nutritious food on children's food attitudes and preferences* (Dixon, Scully, Wakefield, White & Crawford 2007) exemplifies how medical knowledge becomes accessible through social science research output.

The point needs making that education bereft of social science knowledge is deficient. Engineers get to know more about global warming and its negative impact, not from the hard science of engineering, but from reading about the incalculable human cost of carbon emission from contributions of social science research. We make bold to say: social sciences have, as their *raison d'être* the humanisation of knowledge; knowledge in service of the human condition. An illustration may be helpful: An accountant who has mastered the art and science of wealth accumulation, and has an inside track of how the trillions of rands in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) are generated, if sensitised to ethics and morality by the social sciences, would find ways to share and distribute the profits, as she sees grinding and abject poverty all around her.

Contrarily, the one who revels at seeing numbers soar in profit will be oblivious to J. F. Kennedy's advice and admonition: "If we do not take care of the many that are poor, we cannot protect the few who are rich."

MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

Since the advent of the global recession, there is a growing recognition and awareness that education must be more holistic. It no longer suffices to specialise in certain disciplines. Social scientists must reciprocally be aware of economics, pure science trends, and the influence of technology. This simple, yet effective story makes the point: A botanist, geologist and zoologist took a walk up a koppie. They were tasked to observe as much as possible around the koppie they were charged to survey. At the end of an hour of observations, they were asked the question: what did you see? The botanist saw plants, the geologist the various stones and the zoologist, who was entomologist by training, saw insects.

Our training and orientation colour our perceptions. It is indeed true that “all looks yellow to a jaundiced eye”. Multi-disciplinary education and training is the ultra-violet light that removes the jaundice of the mind. Students in the social sciences, indeed even research in this realm should celebrate inter-disciplinary approaches and multi-disciplinary ones.

THE TRAINING OF SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

The training of social scientists, whilst to be informed by the relevance to the context, should also be sensitive to the fact that South Africa, indeed Africa as a whole, is part of the globe. Therefore navel-gazing will be counter-productive.

Mouton (2009: 8) observes that:

the ISI-journals have a distinct anglophone bias which leads to poor coverage of francophone and (to a lesser extent) lusophone countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition the ISI's coverage of small journals in developing countries is not good. The latter is the result of the policy of the ISI to include only the highest impact journals in the world which means that many journals in the developing countries (which have small circulation lists and hence restricted readerships) are thereby automatically excluded. All this means that a significant proportion of African social science is simply not visible in international indices.

With the greater exposure of African social science research in African Journals Online (AJOL), 340 journals could be indexed. The point being made here is that there are still factors which militate against a fair exposure and perusal of the impact of social sciences in South Africa, and Africa.

The agenda

Social science research in South Africa should speak to, and address the issues of the day, inter alia the following:

- the eradication of poverty;
- ways to create jobs;
- techniques to allow for rapid resolution of labour disputes;
- shifting HIV and Aids from awareness to safe sex practices;

- public accountability;
- safe handling of State resources;
- values, ethics and morality;
- the negative sequelae of crass materialism;
- saying no to the abuse of women and children; and
- service delivery at local government level.

The foregoing, whilst suggestive, is not exhaustive.

The strategies

The following strategies can assist social science research to inch forward:

- acquiring generous funding;
- getting female researchers on board;
- recruiting and training more AIC researchers in the social sciences; and
- revisiting the funding formula in Higher Education.

CONCLUSION

Shift of mindset is one of the hardest things to do. Habits formed are refractory to modulation. The disregard for the social sciences has a long history, and moving to be more well-disposed towards them remains tricky. However, the importance of social sciences to our times and for our needs, calls for a new search for paradigms that were largely ignored. There is a call here to inject a new lease of life into the social sciences. An urgent hearkening to this call is warranted especially because the current path trodden *vis-à-vis* the social sciences has proven counter-productive. It would be calamitous to continue to neglect them.

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