

## REVIEW OF :

M Orkin (1986) - *Disinvestment, the struggle and the future: what black South Africans really think* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, R6,95, 73 pages), and

C de Kok, NJ Rhodie and M Couper (1986) - *Perceptions of adult blacks in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vaal Triangle area of economic boycotts against South Africa: a comparison of the data of three surveys* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council Report S-138, 50 pages)

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The appropriation and subsequent publication of surveys which evidence 'popular' or 'working class' support or opposition to particular socio-economic or political positions has become a way of life in South Africa. At times it almost appears as if economic and political change results directly from the latest findings from social scientists labouring in 'independent' institutions.

Recent examples of this tendency include the variety of surveys conducted to elicit black attitudes towards international economic pressure against South Africa. Usually prominently displayed by fractions of the media, these (usually white) social scientists have almost replaced (usually black) leaders as official spokespersons for black attitudes towards disinvestment, divestment, sanctions, boycotts and the like.

Lawrie Schlemmer's (1985) 'disinvestment' surveys are possibly the best known examples of this condition. More recently, however, the production of these social surveys has been stepped up with the involvement of the HSRC, CASE/IBR, and various newspapers (*London Sunday Times*, *The Star*, *Ilanga*, etc). Each of the surveys has provided ammunition for, and has therefore been appropriated by, one of the sides involved in the 'debate'. However, the inadequate reporting of the survey results has created, on the one hand, more confusion given the contradictory nature of the results. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that the surveys have all focused on different forms of economic pressure, there has been a tendency to conflate the various proposed measures. The two little books under review provide a glimpse into the labour process of social survey methodology used in the production of results. Mark Orkin's book details the results of his (CASE/IBR) survey of 800 respondents in the major metropolitan areas of South Africa, indicating that about 75% of those interviewed favoured some form of conditional investment. The HSRC survey, however, while confined

to the PWV area, suggested that 75% of black respondents were against economic boycotts.

Although it is important to compare the results obtained from different surveys, it is quite clear that apparently similar questions have produced very different responses. Of course, the most obvious difference between the surveys is the phrasing of the specific questions on economic pressure. There is often a tendency to presume that disinvestment, divestment, economic boycotts, sanctions and the like are the same, when in the minds of the respondents they may mean very different things. For example, workers might support divestment and certain forms of sanctions, while disassociating themselves from disinvestment.

While the media have focused on the contradictory results obtained in each of the surveys, I would like to briefly focus instead on some aspects of the surveys which are common to both, and which inform us about the nature of social scientific practice in South Africa. First, what strikes one in picking up the books is how sure these social scientists are about their results. Subtitled 'What black South Africans really think', Mark Orkin suggests that his survey results are correct because they did not assume the question of economic pressures to be an either/ or affair, but instead allowed for intermediate positions as well. This meant that Orkin could recognise three 'groups' of respondents -- those in favour of unconditional investment (25%), those in favour of conditional investment (50%) and those in favour of disinvestment (25%). The HSRC's surveys indicated that while between 20% and 35% of blacks were in favour of an economic boycott of South Africa, the remainder were not. They conclude that: 'The vast majority ... of the subjects in the three HSRC surveys rejected even the milder forms of economic sanctions against South Africa, while a quarter ... supported sanctions'.

What is lost sight of in this process is that social surveys are subject to a host of biases and methodological deficiencies and they are not the reliable and efficient monitors that most people believe them to be. As Schlemmer argues in a (pre-disinvestment survey) publication, attitudes surveys should be 'recognised for what they are -- very weak and imprecise instruments ...'. While they may be 'useful guides to the interpretation of large social scenarios,' he continues, they 'should never be read as social facts'.

Second, and quite interestingly, each report establishes its legitimacy in terms of 'the other side's' epistemological foundations. Orkin, for example, while espousing the virtues of an emancipatory social enquiry, spends most of the book justifying his methodology in conventional social scientific terms. The HSRC, on the other hand, spends a lot of time

arguing that economic pressures are antithetical to the teachings of Karl Marx (and Duke, Galtung and Dahrendorf). It appears, therefore, that in spite of the definite conclusions provided by each group of researchers, they feel rather tentative about the acceptability (legitimacy?) of their findings.

Finally, it is important to note that these books do not really deal at all with the substantive aspects of the debates. That is, the pros and cons of the arguments used by those advocating pressure or not are not even provided, let alone critically evaluated. As a result, unfortunately, the books will not widely inform people about the central questions in the debate, thereby allowing them to then do the struggling from a more informed perspective.

Ultimately, these books are useful in explaining important aspects of social science methodology. However, they fail to provide any real insight into the nature and complexities of the disinvestment and sanctions campaigns. The reader is left more with a sense of the inadequacies of social science as practiced, than with an understanding of the issues under investigation.