

Review

Radhamany Sooryamoorthy (2016) *Sociology in South Africa: colonial, apartheid and democratic forms*. New York: Springer International Publishing.

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Having long since retired from the hurly-burly of the South African sociological scene, I initially looked forward to reading this book largely from a sense of nostalgia. I hoped it would transport me into a Proustian ‘remembrance of things past’ and I was not entirely disappointed.

As I read it, I found myself being reminded of such influential South African sociologists of the past as Hansi Pollak, HW (‘Harvey’) van der Merwe, Edward Batson, Nick Rhoodie, Pierre van den Berghe, Marshall Murphree, Frederick van Zyl Slabbert, Fatima Meer, SP Cilliers and Edward Webster.¹ To my surprise, however, Leo Kuper is mentioned only briefly and Lawrence Schlemmer and Dunbar Moodie not at all.² In a sober reminder, the original ideological ‘architects of apartheid’, Hendrik Verwoerd and Geoffrey Cronjé, are identified as having been the country’s first full professors of sociology in the 1930s at Stellenbosch and Pretoria universities respectively.

But as I read and reflected further, I began to realise that this book is no sentimental journey ‘down memory lane’. Rather, it is a thoroughly modern quantitative deconstruction of the history of an academic discipline in one country.

The book’s author, Radhamany Sooryamoorthy, is a statistician-sociologist who was originally trained in India and is now sociology professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban. He has published extensively in the field of scientometrics: the quantitative empirical study of productivity in the sciences through the statistical analysis of computerised datasets listing scientific publications. In this book, he extends this scientometric approach to the study of the origins and development of sociology as an academic discipline in South Africa.

The work deals with the period from the subject's local genesis in the early twentieth century through to the present time. To do so necessitated that the author first undertake the daunting task of compiling as comprehensive a dataset as possible. The final lists contained details of works published on the topics of both the subject's local history and South African society itself over the entire 100 years-plus of the study period. Once this dataset had been compiled it served as the basis for the book's central focus, namely a clinical scientometric dissection of the discipline's history.

In the subsequent analysis, the development of South African sociology is identified as having occurred in three distinct historical phases: the 'colonial' (1900-1947), the 'apartheid' (1948-1993), and the 'democratic' (1994-2015). These correspond to different political dispensations obtaining in the country during the course of the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries.

The published works specifically relating to the history of the discipline in each of these three different eras as listed in the datasets, were then subjected to content analysis. This yields details of the distinctive features of sociology in each particular period. The details of published sociological works on South African society contained in datasets for each of the corresponding eras were then further analysed scientometrically.

On the basis of these analyses, the following is concluded:

During the colonial period (1900-1947), sociology as an academic discipline in South Africa was slow to gather momentum. Initially, supported by the Afrikaans churches, it was linked to departments of social work at the Afrikaans-medium universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria. From the outset, its main concerns were with race relations, poverty, and crime and delinquency amongst the minority white population. The publication of *The Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Problem in South Africa* (1934) was the vital catalyst which led to the establishment of separate sociology departments at more South African white universities, including the English-language institutions. The number of sociological publications increased slowly over the course of the colonial period, with over one-third of the total appearing in its last seven years up until 1947. Throughout, however, the discipline remained overwhelmingly preoccupied with social problems amongst the country's minority white population.

In the apartheid period (1948-1993) which followed, South African sociology underwent substantial growth and a number of dramatic developments occurred over the course of its 45 years. A fundamental division between the exclusively white sociologists at Afrikaans-medium and English-speaking universities became a major feature of this period. With few exceptions, sociologists at the Afrikaans universities supported apartheid policies whereas those at English universities opposed these. As a result, two separate national sociological associations were formed, one exclusively white, the other nominally non-racial. Initially, the latter was dominated by liberal oppositional sociologists but, from the early 1970s onwards, they were increasingly displaced by neo-Marxist inspired radical sociologists. Isolated by the international intellectual community due to apartheid, the white Afrikaans/English divide nevertheless persisted, while sociology was underdeveloped at the new separate black universities. Student numbers increased as did research productivity, but the two separate 'traditions' became entrenched, with Afrikaans sociology enjoying better funding from government agencies. It focused on the study of the institutions of the white family and religion, favouring relatively unsophisticated quantitative methods for doing so. At the English universities, interest in labour studies, class struggle and social change flourished and research into these areas proliferated, with qualitative and critical methodologies being preferred. Oppositional intellectuals in the other social sciences and humanities also made substantial contributions to sociology and, like oppositional sociologists, faced aggressive harassment from the apartheid state. Nevertheless, by the end of the apartheid era South African sociologists remained predominantly white and male.

From the outset of the democratic period (1994-2015), a major restructuring of tertiary education was instituted in South Africa. The universities were desegregated and, in some instances, their sociology departments were merged into interdisciplinary programmes. The two national sociology associations were dissolved and a new unified national body formed. A new managerial style was introduced into the national university system which laid strong emphasis on research productivity. Scientometric methods were used increasingly to regularly monitor and rank the performances of academics, disciplines and institutions. South African sociology was accepted back into international sociology, allowing local sociologists to attend international conferences and seek to have their work published in international journals. At the same time, sociologists from other countries were drawn to South Africa. The fragmentary nature of the discipline nevertheless continued, with diverse specialised areas persisting along with qualitative/quantitative methodological differences. Industrial sociology fluctuated but remained important and gender

studies gained momentum. While ‘pale males’ continued to dominate the discipline, a measure of racial and gender transformation became increasingly evident over the course of the democratic period.

In the book’s final chapter, the author reflects on the current South African sociological scene and its likely future in the light of the preceding scientometric analysis of its history. As to the discipline’s future, he is mildly optimistic, anticipating that research output will continue to increase and have greater international impact. This, it is suggested, will be accompanied by the greater ‘Africanisation’ of both academic sociologists and the sociology curriculum in South Africa. However, he notes that others are less hopeful, believing that the discipline faces decline.

I began reading the book shortly after its publication in late 2016. This coincided with the developing crisis at the nation’s universities, with students demanding free tertiary education. This ramified into further demands, including that university curricula be ‘decolonised’ and ‘Africanised’. The book’s publication at this time thus seemed particularly prescient and appropriate. It certainly provides a basis for further discussions on these issues.

On reflection, I feel that overall the book affords the reader an opportunity to grasp the origins and development of academic sociology in South Africa as a single *gestalt*. In so doing, the author has certainly succeeded in achieving his original aim. However, while I certainly admire both his industry and perspicacity, I nevertheless do have some reservations about the book.

In the first place, it is generally recognised that every research method has its limitations but in this work the author relies exclusively on a single research strategy. That references to important local intellectual figures like Lawrence Schlemmer and Dunbar Moodie are omitted suggests that flaws exist in the datasets on which the scientometric analysis depends. Also, no mention is made of the influential theory that South Africa is a ‘plural society’ of the type to be found in Indonesia and the Caribbean islands, as was advanced by Leo Kuper. Had the author supplemented his research with interviews of a strategic sample of local sociologists both past and present, such omissions could conceivably have been avoided.

Secondly, the scientometric approach is not without controversy because of some of the uses to which it is increasingly being put and the deleterious impact these can have on individual scholars,

disciplines and academic institutions. National governments, university administrations and international bodies are using scientometric analyses to produce quantified hierarchical rankings of individuals, subjects and institutions. These are then used to make critical policy decisions on matters such as subject and research funding and also on individual academic careers. In his article, 'Accountability and surveillance: new mechanisms of control in higher education' (2015), Maistry³ points to the negative effects such management strategies have on academic activities at one modern South African university. If scientometric analyses remain the sole criteria for such policy decisions, especially if the datasets on which they are based are either flawed or their analyses incomplete, their effects could be the very reverse of what is intended.

Third and lastly, by definition sociology is a human science. This implies that the voices of people who are studied should be heard and their wishes respected. The exclusive use by scientometrics of unobtrusive and/or nonreactive research methods involving covert surveillance brings it close to being espionage and raises issues relating to research ethics and the dictum: 'First, do no harm'.

These reservations notwithstanding, this book is one which I strongly feel all sociologists, but particularly those in South Africa, should read and reflect on.

Notes

1. All of these academics were leading figures in South African sociology in the second half of the 20th century. Hansi Pollak was professor at the University of Natal; Harvey van der Merwe was director of the institute for interracial studies at the University of Cape Town; Edward Batson was professor at the University of Cape Town; Nick Rhoodie was professor at Pretoria University; Pierre van den Berghe was a visiting Belgian-American academic at the University of Natal; Marshall Murphree was professor of race relations at the University of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe); Frederick van Zyl Slabbert was a Stellenbosch University graduate and subsequently professor at the University of Cape Town; Fatima Meer was associate professor at the University of Natal; SP Cilliers was professor at Stellenbosch University; Edward Webster was professor at the University of the Witwatersrand.
2. Leo Kuper was professor at the University of Natal; Lawrence Schlemmer was director of the institute for social research at the University of Natal; Dunbar Moodie was professor at the University of the Witwatersrand.
3. Maistry, S (2015) 'Accountability and surveillance: new mechanisms of control in higher education', *Transformation* 88.

