



Apartheid & social research :

A reply to Michael Savage

by

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Savage (1983) has presented us with an important survey of the effects of doing social research under apartheid, and racial capitalism. It is necessary for us to detail the material instances that contribute to the constraints and restrictions which social research is subjected to. The social practices which go to make up apartheid society most certainly do have specific politically negative effects.

However, a thoroughgoing critique of apartheid society must include the social relations which sustain the particular effects of that kind of society. Savage's article, and many of the other contributions in the Unesco (1981) volume don't really deal with the problem of apartheid at this level. In the interests of promoting some debate and discussion on the relationship between political ideologies and the practice of social science some aspects of Savage's argument will be responded to.

Savage's, and some of the other 'liberal' analyses (cf Glaser, 1984) in the Unesco (1981) volume edited by sociologist John Rex, omission of a clear theory of society make it difficult to know how to proceed in a social scientific practice which does not reproduce apartheid. Savage is descriptive at the level of society and social science and hence is only able to detail the effects of apartheid on social research, rather than the details of how

apartheid social structures and social relations interact with and determine the inner fabric and sociology of social science. It is felt that because he presents apartheid primarily as ideology, rather than in the materiality of its social relations, he is unable to offer a different (free) practice of social science, other than the implicit removal of apartheid.

For example he starts his article with the following sentence: 'Social research is never conducted in a political vacuum: the structures, tensions and values of a society condition and are reflected in the type of social research that is produced within it'. (p. 21, emphases added). He never develops the interesting issue of the processes involved in how society conditions, reflects, refracts, etc social science, or other theoretical activities for that matter. We need also to penetrate how apartheid "conditions" the content of our theories of people and their behaviour - cf the industrial psychology of black workers in South Africa! - and the outcome of our empirical research. In this regard Hountondji's (1983) work is an attempt to present a critique of the ideological and social practices which have dominated social scientific scholarship in (West) Africa under the political and economic domination of colonialism, imperialism and racism. Hountondji's (ibid) analyses are mostly directed at his own discipline, philosophy, and anthropology, although his work is extremely pertinent to all scholars of social science. (cf Introduction to Hountondji's work in this issue).

Savage characterises South African society as authoritarian, and based on oppressive racial divisions. The constraints that this

society places on social science are both direct, for example '... by the State and by community agencies' (p.35), and indirect, for example the organisational framework of social research, the 'selection' of students, and the training and education of students and social researchers. He unfortunately does not detail the relationship between an authoritarian society and the organisational framework of social research. His critique tends to remain at the general level of ideology - apartheid as a politically oppressive ideology - rather than an analysis of social research/science under apartheid in terms of specific social, political and economic practices. We need to know about the social production of knowledge under apartheid.

The context of apartheid has blinded Savage from some of the debates and discussions concerning the problems of the democratisation of science in less overtly racist capitalist democracies. There is a significant implication in his article that if the constraints of apartheid on social research are removed all will be well in the social sciences. It is this fundamentally idealist notion of the relationship between science and society which is challenged. Some of the (external) constraints of the society on science for Savage are '... [A]t the national level, four aspects of Government restraint on access to information particularly affect sociological research : censorship, restrictions governing access to places, bannings of individuals and a variety of legislation regulating the gathering and reporting of specific information' (p.43). Of course these factors have a negative effect on any attempt at a free social science, but it is

also the (internal) social relations of the scientific production process under racial capitalism that need simultaneous analysis with the (external) constraints and restraints upon social research in apartheid South Africa.

It is also argued that following this idealist conception of science and society Savage "leads to" a radical individualism as a mode of action against apartheid influenced social research. I say "leads to" because this is implicit as Savage does not really offer a way-out for social scientists. What I am referring to is the social/political equation:

Afrikaner social scientists	=	conservative; ruling class ideologies
Black	" "	= radical; socially aware
English	" "	= nothing is said but liberal, neutral, ambivalent!!

It is arguable whether the work of Fatima Meer, Archie Mafeje, Noel Manganyi, Nimrod Mkele which Savage refers to (p.30) is a radical challenge to social scientific practice in South Africa today, or when some of this scholarship was presented. It is this journal's intention, in a forthcoming number, to subject Noel Manganyi's work to a thorough and critical assessment in terms of contributing to a social science of liberation (cf Rex, 1981; Webster; 1982). The response to apartheid is not an inversion of its operations. I don't even think that Savage is articulating an affirmative action response to the absence of black students, scholars and researchers in the social sciences.

There is much of value in Savage's article, and some of the others in the Unesco (1981) collection, and is essential reading for all students of the social sciences in South Africa. The intention of my brief reply to Savage's article, was not to be finicky on a few points - this 'style'/type of scholarship does not impress me - but rather to engage positively in developing a more concrete analysis of social science in South Africa, and more especially in transforming the present social relations which determine a repressive scientific practice. To this end I tried to show a few areas where Savage's analysis is merely descriptive and tends to 'float' in its non-articulation of ideology (apartheid in social research) and social scientific practices. The practice of social science in South Africa needs a much more tenacious critique than what Savage has presented us with.

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