How we Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the HSRC

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In the concluding paragraphs of his article on "Servants of Apartheid" (1981) Eddie Webster raises the question about how social scientists would respond to P W Botha's "total strategy" and Harry Oppenheimer's complementary call for "evolutionary change". These reform statements were made during 1979, just when the South African Plan for Social Science Research was being formulated. This plan, says Webster (1981), was a "deliberate act of policy" to politicize social science research (p 3). The main instrument through which the politicization would occur was to be the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). This organisation is of crucial importance for social scientists because it controls most government funding for social science research.

To answer Webster's question, one needs to consider how the response of social scientists to the total strategy in the post 1979 period was mediated by the strategies used by the HSRC. This is the issue we shall analyse in this paper, which develops out of an earlier consideration of the HSRC (Muller, Cloete and Orkin, 1986).

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Legitimizing Inequality

By the late 1970s, the National Party began to realise that it had to take on board the English industrialists and many of their technical concerns about productivity and the needs of the labour market if it was going to survive at the helm of a racial capitalist South Africa. P W Botha tackled this by linking the reform commissions he had inherited, on labour and influx control, to others he initiated, on education, manpower and the new constitution. The connection with English industrialists was forged above ground by the Carlton and Good Hope conferences, and underground by inviting their contribution to the National Security Council (Muller, Cloete and Orkin, 1986). This "total strategy" reform programme for neo-apartheid was an attempt to protect the interests of whites and capital through the gradual inclusion of a black middle class and a labour aristocracy (Webster 1981).

A major requirement for any reform initiative is to obtain legitimacy. According to Habermas (1975), legitimation is a process whereby mass loyalty is obtained, consensus meaning is generated and disparate interests integrated. The crisis that faces most modern capitalist states is the difficulty of "distributing the surplus social product inequitably and yet legitimately" (Weiler, 1983, p 260). In South Africa this problem is compounded because the legitimation crisis consists of inequitable distribution with regards to both class and race.

Some of the strategies States employ to obtain legitimacy are discussed by Weiler (1983) in terms of legalisation (making laws that courts enforce), participation (certain citizen or community groupings) and the use of experts (who provide scientific knowledge or evidence in support of the social programme). In South Africa we have witnessed all three.

The early phase of Nationalist rule relied mainly on a strategy of "legalising" apartheid. The "Nationalist technocratic" government of Botha, in contrast to his more "ideological predecessors" (Adam, 1984: p 60) has tried to employ selective participation by extending token citizenship to 'Coloureds' and 'Indians' in the new constitutional dispensation. And since the late seventies it has also turned to the use of experts (Jubber, 1979).

The role of the expert in the legitimation process must be seen in the light of the symbiotic relationship between power and knowledge. Power legitimizes both knowledge and the process of its production and utilization, while on the other hand knowledge tends to be used in legitimizing arrangements for the exercise of power (Weiler, 1983). In the words of Weiler (1983b), such knowledge provides the "sheltering canopies over the existing institutional order" (p 11).

In a country such as South Africa where the State is structurally incapable of bringing about real reform (Saul and Gelb, 1981), a common strategy is to use rhetoric about reform and change in order to procure "compensatory" legitimacy (Weiler, 1983). In such a situation, the expert becomes even more important by fulfilling two main functions. The first is to provide experimental or scientific evidence that one programme is "better" than the other. An important aspect here is that "wrong" evidence (which is wrong in the view of the policy maker in that it does not suit his purposes) can be suppressed, either by controlling the publication of the results or by silencing the producer. An example is the HSRC's enquiry into university admissions criteria, which exposed appalling differences of standards between different kinds of matric and subsequent pass rates at university. The only publically available version censors the crucial

information i.e. which are the inferior matrics and universities (Stoker, 1983). Another example is those academics or informed commentators who have been silenced (see Websters 1981 article for some examples). On the other hand, evidence that supports the reform is made commonplace by media exposure and authorised by White Papers in Parliament.

The second function of experts, particularly salient if the reform operates mainly on the level of rhetoric, is that experiments in social engineering and associated studies provide political leadership with an opportunity to demonstrate their interest in or intent towards reform. Simultaneously they protect the existing programme from rival alternatives for the duration of the study. By having to wait "until the evidence is in", time is bought for the postponement of political decisions (Weiler, 1983). The de Lange enquiry into education is a pertinent example. In South Africa those "scientific" requirements have not been accepted by the majority of the population; consequently the security forces have to maintain order for the duration of the experiment.

Considering all these useful functions that experts can fulfil, the question for the State is how to get enough of them on the band-wagon. In South Africa the two main sources of social scientific knowledge are two major para-statal research institutes and the universities. First we will look at how these two research institutes (the HSRC and the National Institute of Personnel Research - NIPR) were transformed in the wake of reform and then at how these transformed structures were used to engage the university reseachers.

Transforming the Research Institutes

The foundation of the State survival strategy is unity between, on the one hand, the white Afrikaans ruling elite and on the other hand the majority fraction of capital which is controlled by the English minority . Co-operation between the English and Afrikaners would however not be automatic, because ethnic division and antagonism have a long history and have also been the basis for Nationalist policy. The HSRC and NIPR developed during the deployment of this ethno-centric policy and did not escape the effects of the cleavage. What follows is a brief history of each institute and the path of its transformation.

The first major development of human science as a tool for policy research in South Africa was the Carnegie Poor White Commission of the late 1920s and early 1930s. It was established to consider the dramatic impoverishment of Afrikaner families which were becoming proletarianised at this time. An important feature of the Commission was the psychometric testing programme. Psychometric research in the USA, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, was just taking off as a means of rendering invisible the reproduction of class inequality via educational selection (Bowles and Gintis, 1977) .

Duly imported, psychometric testing in the service of national reconstruction was thereby launched in this country, and the current psychometric preoccupations of the HSRC follow from this pathbreaking study (see Louw 1986 for a more detailed account). Testing and survey research with a strong policy orientation became a feature of work at the National Bureau for Educational and Social Research established in 1953, and of the HSRC which it became in 1968.

Another lineage of testing in South Africa developed just after the

second world war amongst a group of English ex-servicemen like Hudson and Biesheuvel who had links with industrial personnel departments. They consequently pursued work bound up with the concerns of large English industries, principally the mines. This kind of research found a home in the NIPR.

Between the HSRC and the NIPR there developed a competitive rivalry that verged at times on hostility, and it is important to explore the roots of this and to analyse the startling implications of its aufhebung. First and most visibly, the HSRC was predominantly Afrikaner Nationalist while the NIPR was English and SAP (South African Party). Furthermore this meant that the NBESR and later the HSRC usually pursued research of national (and Nationalist) priority, while the NIPR pursued the prerogatives of maximising largely English-owned capital profits. Political differences aside, there was a difference in style of research too which is less easy to characterise. The Afrikaners at the HSRC, coming as they did from an idealist, hermeneutical, continental tradition of human scientific research, were always more concerned with the human (and political) side of social commerce, with research into attitudes, aptitudes and aspirations as empirical signposts to the state of health of the national spirit.

The English at the NIPR, following the British and American positivist tradition, were always more concerned with methodological niceties on the one hand and with technical improvements in human performance with a view to enhancing productivity on the other. In other words, the NIPR was what we might call unabashedly technicist from the outset. This crucial divide between the HSRC and the NIPR, encapsulating aspects of different research traditions, different social interests dressed up in different national systems as well, can be variously construed.

Our explanation above has emphasized the different moments in the historical trajectories of the respective articulations between fractions of capital and the ideological mobilization (of the "volk" for instance) or ideological rationalization. More commonly the divide is "explained" in terms of ethnic difference, in terms of trans-historical "volksgees", the Boer-Brit divide on the terrain of human science.

In any event the two research institutes existed side by side with very little love lost between them and little or no collaboration occurring (pretty much like the rest of the English and Afrikaans speaking population at the time). This separate but peaceful co-existence was to be dramatically altered with the implementation of the National Plan during the early eighties.

One off the main recommendations of this Plan was that the HSRC would "...obtain the co-operation of the universities, research institutes and government departments" (HSRC, 1984, p 1). Positive co-operation was "to be based on the principle of partnership and total autonomy of the participating parties" (p 1). What this turned out to mean in practice was that in July 1985 the NIPR was officially incorporated into the HSRC. The "partnership" developed roughly as follows. In response to the State President's call for "rationalisation and efficiency" the council of the HSRC approached the Council for Industrial and Scientific Research (CSIR), which was then in control of the NIPR. The executive director of the NIPR was invited to Pretoria, asked for his opinion, and then sworn to secrecy with respect to the already finalised plan. After formal ratification by Ministers De Villiers and Viljoen, the NIPR staff were informed of the fait accompli at a function addressed by the presidents of both the HSCR and CSIR - the brothers Garbers.

According to sources inside the NIPR, dissatisfaction with the manner in which the matter was handled was at least as great as with the outcome. An ethnic explanation of events would conclude that the Afrikaners had finally won this local tug-of-Boer war. Such a conclusion would be misleading. If anything, the victory belongs to the technicists. The tenets of this model, efficiency and rationalisation are intimately related to positivism and its technicist corollary, capitalist social engineering. This technicist model has two major features. It provides information for increased productivity whilst at the same time masquerading as scientifically neutral and objective. Both these aspects are fundamental to the technocratic regime's fight for the implementation of the new state capitalism. The HSRC may have swallowed the NIPR, but it ended up looking and indeed acting more like the NIPR (as the 'captive Greeks' were supposed to have caputred their Roman captors...).

A frequent consequence of greater efficiency is increased control. One effect on the old NIPR staff of their inclusion into the HSRC was a dramatic increase in the control exercised over them. The HSRC as a centralised bureaucracy has much greater control over its products than the more decentralised NIPR ever had. For example, before a research report can be published, it has to be cleared by the divisional head, then the group head, then the directorate, before the vice-president finally makes a recommendation to the president. After passing this daunting screening process, the report can only be published with the president's official, signed approval. What is even more worrying about this filtering sequence is that the organisation has no clear mechanism of appeal with respect to work rejected by any of these five filters. The National Plan asserts confidently that "research prospers in a milieu of optimal freedom" (p 1).

It seems that the HSRC's interpretation of freedom is as perverse as is their understanding of partnership.

New Staff : Competent, Unbiased, White Afrikaner Males.

After seeing how the "positive partnership" with the NIPR was forged, let's look at how the HSRC would be prepared for the task of enticing the academics into co-operation. Before 1979, the HSRC had, in the words of one of its most senior officers, little if any credibility as an institute for promoting independent social science of a high quality (Smit, 1985). The immediate issue raised here is that the status and legitimacy of the organisation had to be improved before it could get the co-operation of credible academics - particularly those in the English institutions. The "men" to do this could not be incompetent bureaucrats. Who would they be and where would they come from?

The "main man" drafted in 1979 to head the HSRC was one of the most distinguished Afrikaner social scientists, educationist Johan Garbers from RAU. He was joined on 1 April 1980 by Flip Smit, a reputable and efficient geography professor from Pretoria university. Within the HSRC the important committee into educational reform was led by De Lange, also from RAU. Was it coincidence that all those reform experts came to serve indirectly or directly under the previous RAU Principal of RAU - G Viljoen, then Minister of National Education?

The basis of a credible expertise system is meritocracy. That such a disproportionate number of new deal experts were white males from a very parochial provenance, the social science and education faculties at RAU (and headed, as we have noted, by big science's little brother), certainly

raises questions of legitimacy right from the start.

The new HSRC appointees exude an air of confidence and competence. Few people would dispute that the "watershed year" of 1979 brought about a greater efficiency and a more professional look (Smit, 1986). These men are, whatever the suspicions about their political alignment, professionals. Smit, however, goes further than professionalism when he claims that the watershed represents a break with the largely justified suspicion of ideological bias as well as bureaucratic incompetence of the pre-1979 HSRC. While the HSRC's new efficiency cannot be denied, its ideological bias is another matter. It is difficult to believe that a group of all-white, all-male, all-Afrikaner people acting on a directive from the Nationalist Cabinet and with the Scientific Advisory Council of the Department of Constitutional Development and Planning determining their research priorities can sincerely believe in "eliminating ideological bias". Perhaps they do. But in actual fact, as is so often the case with technicism and professionalism, bias has not been eliminated, but more efficiently obscured. The complex issue that we want to address in the rest of our paper, is the process of concealment and how social scientists at the universities have reacted to the result.

Co-opting the Academics

Academics cannot be co-opted by conscription or incorporation; academic freedom is a bulwark against such tactics. However, offer them both money and a whiff of academic freedom and the flesh becomes weak.

According to Smit (1986) "it has been shown repeatedly over the centuries that free, self-initiated and independent research delivers the

best result" (p 13). This admirable philosophy forms the basis for the pure research ("A" budget) of the HSRC where, in a "democractic funding process" the "books are open" and only the "merits of the applicant and scientific quality of the application counts" (p 13). How would one implement such high ideals? Smit's response was a system of peers reviewing grant applications.

This method is widely used in the scientific world and although it is not without its problems, it is probably the most accountable method currently available. The catch however is that the "peers" must have credibility. This required a vigorous recruitment drive at the English universities. Currently the HSRC has 10 discipline committees evaluating applications and on each of these there is at least one respected academic from an English university. In the economic sciences committee (hardly an Afrikaner dominated discipline) there are possibly three out of seventeen (HSRC, 1985). Roughly the same proportion applies to sociology. While there are four out of twelve English surnames on the African Studies Committee, it has only one African.

Has peer review eliminated bias? Looking at the composition of some of the committees referred to above, the answer can hardly be positive. The proportion of English speakers, blacks and women seems little more than tokenism. An even more serious shortcoming is the almost complete absence of academics who could be classified as representing leftwing, let alone radical, perspectives on their discipline. If these committees are to be neutral, surely their composition should be more representative of the different paradigms in the discipline. Or is it assumed that one is less biased when one holds a moderate to conservative perspective?

The case for less overall bias in the HSRC is based on the dramatic increase in funding for peer-review controlled, self-initiated, "free independent" research.

AGENCY FUNDS ADMINISTERED BY THE HSRC - 1985

Financial year	Amount available	% growth
1980/81	R1 380 800	45.81
1981/82	R1 805 000	30.72
1982/83	R2 520 300	39.63
1983/84	R3 169 600	25.76
1984/85	R5 239 492	65.30
1985/86	R6 587 200	25.72

As can be seen from the above, more money is available for autonomously conceived research than ever before, and it is certainly more neutrally administered than in the past (these figures are not adjusted for inflation).

The case against also relies on figures. The R7,2m set aside for self-initiated research in 1986 is just under 17% of the total budget of about R42m that the HSRC has at its disposal, the rest being spent on internal projects and "national priority" studies under their internal control. Actually, over half of that 17% goes towards bursaries for higher degree students, leaving less than 10% of the total budget, somewhat less than R4m, for self-initiated research by university academics. That is, the "unfree - dependent" scientists at the HSRC have access to seven times more public funds than their "free - independent" counterparts at all the universities put together (1).

The case can be put the other way around. The overwhelming proportion of public funds for human scientific research in this country is directly controlled by in-house committees not accountable to open academic screening procedures. The brief from the Cabinet is clear : it is to be directed mainly towards socio-economic and political problems. The

problems are defined by a Research Priorities Committee and ratified by the Scientific Advisory Council of the Department of Constitutional Development and Planning.

The issue that needs to be addressed, arising from the above, is not whether peer-review eradicates bias, but that a large number of academics have been co-opted into participating in HSRC research governance because of the impression that the agency had become "free of bias". Spending less than R4 million out of R42 million on the legitimation of an institution seems like a public relations bargain.

The co-option strategy has however not been uniformly successful. At the national conference of the Association of Sociologists of Southern Africa in July 1985, an exasperated Garbers and Marais failed to convince the sociologists that all was now rosy in the funding garden. In vain did Garbers try to explain that the peer review system made screening and allocation as neutral and interest-free as possible. In vain, and a lot less coherently, did the sociologists try to convey to Garbers that human scientific research is always interest-bound; that they continued to suspect that critical or radical interests were not represented at the HSRC nor in its peer review committees; worse still, that such interests would all too often be excluded on allegedly "neutral" methodological grounds.

The issue of radical interests is crucial. To begin with, in the symbiotic relationship between power and knowledge, the State often takes care of the more radical elements by driving them into exile, underground or sometimes into jail. The HSRC is thus left to administer neutrally and without bias amongst the rest. What does the ostensibly representative remainder think of the regime? At the same sociology conference Jubber

(1985) reported that in a survey of 73 sociologists, 52% of those from English universities had a negative view of the HSRC and only 20% reacted positively. Of the English-speaking sociologists 30% were against participation in HSRC committees. Respondents from the black universities had a slightly higher proportion of positive responses 37%, and 50% negative responses. Of the Afrikaans academics 59% were positive and 25% negative.

Some of the responses to open-ended questions in the qualitative section are worth quoting. A few were positive : "I am very impressed with Dr Garbers and his new top brass". "They are not ideologically closed minded...they deserve support...in some respect at least it has become more objective in recent years but it has a long way to go" (p 22 - 23).

On the negative side, typical views were :
"The HSRC has been an innately conservative body tied far too closely with the government"; "I have been prepared to reconsider this position since Dr. Garbers became president but have not been encouraged to do so following his political intervention in the recent referendum" (p 17); "It is a statutory body primarily concerned with the provision of instrumental knowledge to the apartheid state" (p 23); "As regards its 'open image', the HSRC confines it's research generally to the boundaries set by the "relations problematic" formulated by the government. 'Objectivity' is often manifested in an atheoretical collection of facts" (p 27); and lastly, much in line with the current analysis, "The provision of HSRC funds to researchers with no strings attached should not be allowed to detract from the patently state/ethnicist bias of the HSRC as seen in its structure and research programmes" (p 23).

The majority of non-participating social scientists work within a

critical paradigm and/or are doing projects in the disenfranchised community. This is the nub of the HSRC's present dilemma. Having perceived the original problem as one of ethnicity and not of class or race, it has gone out of its way to include more "Englishmen" in its deliberations; but not more black people, nor more radical academics, and certainly not more women ("waar is die vrou wat haar man kan staan?"). By their own admission, there has been a drastic curtailment of qualitative research and a boost for more 'technicist' research but not more research directed towards empowering disenfranchised and oppressed communities of our society.

It is clear that the very move designed to ditch the conservatives and their Afrikaner-community priorities by the same token precludes the radicals with their oppressed-community priorities. Not that priorities are eliminated altogether. The 1980 watershed simply changed direction. The HSRC began to close down research for Afrikaner survival only and began to concentrate on issues of technical efficiency representing the interests of a more desparate, largely white-dominated, state-guaranteed capitalism, snailing towards the Rubicon.

It would not be unjustified to conclude that the wrong problem had been addressed admirably. In the process, a fairly large number of credible academics in the social sciences had been deceived into participating in the "shaping of history". Others have simply dropped their knickers for a fiver. Both groups should remember Machiavelli's warning that those who would advise princes end up as their slaves, more especially those princes adept at serving their own interests through the exploitation of others.

Afterword : How to Respond to the HSRC

A comment on our earlier article regarding the HSRC (Muller, Cloete & Orkin, 1986) was that we critisized without being constructive. A first retort might be as Foucault (1981) has remarked, that "critique doesn't have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes : this then is what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is" (p 13). In other words the main aim of our papers has been to analyse, not develop alternatives, although the types of alternatives we would espouse are not hidden too far beneath the surface in our argument. Rather than elaborate on these, we would like to outline briefly some possible tactical approaches to HSRC funds for social scientists who do not want to be servants of racial capital. The HSRC is the only major source of funding for travel to conferences, study bursaries, etc. One option is to use this type of money since once it is obtained there is not much control over how the reseacher spends it, and it should thus not compromise her academic freedom.

Another option is that the space which the new deal at the HSRC has provided can be used to obtain and apply funding to the interests of those constituencies not catered for by the HSRC, provided that the people who are the subjects of the research do not feel compromised by the connection. Two good examples of this use of agency money are Webster (1985) and Keenan (1986).

However, as far as co-operation in the HSRC's actual procedures and research programmes is concerned, the responses of at least one sociologist in the Jubber survey seem to us to hit the nail on the head :

"The HSRC cannot be 're-structured' because it is and remains the government's instrument, in the hands of the government to justify and legitimate the decisions and policies of the government, Research by bodies other than the HSRC must be encouraged" (p 31).

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Note.

1. The total amount of R42 million includes capital expenditure. The HSRC nevertheless controls it .

2. Thanks to Safiya Fredericks for typing and retyping.