Knowledge and knowing in South Africa: Making a case for the social sciences and the humanities

[B O O K   R E V I E W]

Jacklin, Heather & Vale, Peter (eds) (2009)
Re-imagining the social in South Africa: Critique, theory and post-apartheid society.
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Congratulations on your Bachelor of Arts Degree. Now go on out there and be the best damn something-or-other you can be!" Quips like this, which imply that there is little value in the knowledge produced within the humanities and social sciences, are not unfamiliar to those who work in these disciplinary areas. In recent years the practical value of these disciplines has been increasingly questioned, as "hard" science and policy-oriented research has been prioritised over critically-oriented, qualitative, conceptual, or "merely" curiosity-driven research. Academics are increasingly required to respond to social and economic development initiatives, including the production of a capable workforce. Jacklin and Vale's edited volume **Re-imagining the social in South Africa** responds to the global "threat" (p 78) and makes a case for "the indispensability of the humanities" (p 269) and social sciences.

Focussing on the particularities of the South African situation in which, it is argued, "deep thinking about the social world, even within society is not encouraged" (p 1), the overarching concern of the book is with "how knowledge and knowing has shaped South Africa and how it has fed—and continues to feed—the country's understanding of worlds, both social and other" (p 23). Collectively, the works gathered in this volume speak to a socio-political context where, as the development and transformation agenda has predominated, the role of South African scholars has shifted "from critique to subservience" (p 2). This shift has also been noted by critical psychologists who have argued that the earlier oppositional discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, which sought to challenge the Apartheid state, has become one of social responsiveness. Rather than being adjudged on the basis

of its transformative potential, the "relevance" of psychological knowledge is now evaluated in respect to the degree to which it contributes to government programmes for social and economic development (Macleod & Howe, 2013).

The book comprises a collection of papers written by eminent humanities scholars and social scientists (though none from psychology). The papers were originally prepared for a symposium focussed on understanding the reasons for the "end of [critical] public debate" (p 2) in South Africa and the ways that social theory can contribute to restoring critique in the interests of social justice. While a range of fields and perspectives are represented, what unites the authors is the emphasis placed on the liberatory role that the humanities and social sciences are seen as appropriately playing. This argument is probably best summed up by Olivier's conclusion (chapter 4) that: "Human 'knowledge', when divorced from emancipatory action, is irredeemably vitiated" (p 102). In grappling with the "prospects for an emancipatory intellectual praxis" (p 141) in South Africa, a range of issues are identified as impinging on this, chief among these are: state politics; the tyranny of economic imperatives in knowledge production; and the commodification and managerialism of higher education.

The first substantive contribution to the volume is Schatzki's well-placed chapter on social theory (chapter 2). This chapter provides a good conceptual basis for subsequent chapters. He argues that it is social theory that connects the humanities and social sciences. In his detailed exposition, he not only explains what social theory *is* but also offers a view on what its ultimate purpose ought to be, namely, "changing global constellations of power, finance, culture, productions and governance" (p 30). This theme—of the relationship between humanities and social sciences— is revisited later in a chapter by Higgins, who also attempts to find common ground between the disciplines. Approaching from a somewhat different angle, Higgins maintains that these disciplinary areas have more in common than their mutual marginalisation through the privileging of science and technology and construction of useful knowledge as instrumental. Their common ground, Higgins argues, is that of representation or the "presentation of reality" (p 179). By this he refers to semiotics or the realm of ideology, which he then goes on to show is central to understandings of citizenship and ultimately to political critique.

A number of other authors also pick up on the ways that our relationship to the state impact both on knowledge production and social change. In chapter three, for instance, Chipkin discusses nationalism and the disablement of critical thought, particularly in relation to the ANC government and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). He asserts that, as a highly-regulated parastatal entity, the council runs the risk of functioning as a service provider to the state. Similarly, in chapter five, Neocosmos criticises state-liberal politics for stultifying emancipatory action— looking particularly at the limitations of human rights discourse. A similar point is made in chapter six by Pithouse, who asserts that, within the confines of the current configuration of state, mass participation and truly revolutionary pro-poor politics is not possible. Rather than acting in the good of the poor majority, the interests of the middle classes and the new elite are being upheld through the liberalism of academe and the bourgeois politics of civil society.

Several contributors consider the factors that act as impediments to critical thinking and broader societal transformation. The subordination of critical thought to economic imperatives is identified and discussed as a central factor in the depoliticisation of thought and knowledge production. Several authors discuss the relationship between the commercialisation of knowledge and the strong instrumentalist view toward ameliorating social problems, usually through policy-driven

research. This is most explicit in Chipkin's critique of the HSRC as an entity tasked with conducting "social science that makes a difference" and in which a strong instrumentalist view of research is promoted. Chipkin considers how a great deal of the knowledge produced by HSRC researchers is shaped by the council's funding model that requires researchers to locate donor funding for their projects, usually within targeted areas dictated by national policy objectives. This significantly narrows the scope of the research that is carried out, he contends, with very little latitude for critical inquiry or critique. In a similar vein, Olivier argues that within the academy itself the critical and emancipatory role of the humanities has been minimised and de-politicised by the current incarnation of neo-liberal capitalism.

Accordingly, Olivier argues—along with his fellow contributors—for the crucial role of the humanities in providing social critique and producing unique kinds of knowledge that allow us to reflect on oppressive practices, even within supposedly 'free' democracies. Likewise, Rowe (chapter 8) contends that precisely what is needed in higher education is "humanities informed by a rigorous engagement with the common good" (p 271). Using a case study to illustrate, he maintains that the "utilitarian aspect" of higher education cannot simply be dismissed, but instead suggests how this aspect might be reconciled with the more traditional roles of the university, including that of social critique.

Central to most chapters in the collection is the issue of race, with some interesting discussion of its intersections with class, especially by Pillay in chapter nine. In this chapter, he outlines the historical trajectory of scholarly discussion of the race-class nexus in South Africa. He goes on to claim that scholars' focus on race and class in their attempts to understand post-apartheid power relations has been at the expense of issues of language (and translation). His argument is certainly confirmed by the book itself which, save for the attention to class and the brief mention of gender, tends to focus solely on the ongoing significance of race in our country. There is no disputing that race continues to be a crucial signifier in our society and while this focus allows for a deep discussion of the topic, it also narrows it. Feminist scholars have argued that in order to create a nuanced picture of how privilege and oppression continue to operate, and to produce socially-relevant knowledge (in the radical sense), then we also need to engage with the diverse socio-political concerns and "multiple sources of social inequalities and diffractions characteristic of South African society" (Macleod & Howe, 2013: 222).

In sum, as the preceding discussion reflects, the volume is informative and rich, spanning a range of social science and humanities disciplines and including a number of different perspectives. The book's overall style, however, is challenging, even turgid, at times. Its audience is therefore likely to be specialist academic readers, regrettably excluding those who ought to hear its important message. Nevertheless, those who do engage with it will be presented with a number of crucial, provoking questions regarding the contemporary conditions of knowledge production in South Africa and its connection to emancipatory politics. The book, in a sense, revives and continues a vital discussion for all academics, including psychologists, in which we reflect upon our knowledge production as "a socio-political project that is intricately interwoven with the socio-historical and socio-economic power relations of modern society" (Macleod & Howe, 2013: 222).

Reference

Macleod, C & Howell, S (2013) Reflecting on South African Psychology: Published research, "relevance" and social issues. **South African Journal of Psychology, 43(2)**, 222-237.