

THE ORIGINS OF SOCIOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Introduction

I was invited by the President of our Association to present to you an assessment of the origins of sociology in South Africa up to the foundation of ASSA1). This has proved to be a daunting task, since not only does it imply covering the historic period of fifty years between roughly 1920 and 1970, but, as Ken Jubber suggested in his presidential address to ASSA in 1983, "we must acknowledge that the true history of South African sociology dates back to the earliest human groupings to settle in this part of Africa. And just as Gramsci was able to say that all men are intellectuals, so we can say that all people are sociologists and all societies produce people who ask sociological questions and provide sociological ideas."

However, let me hasten to put you at ease. Since, as Jubber remarked, the "archeology of sociology just referred to has still to be written", I will restrict my remarks to that period in the history of the discipline during which it was formally recognised and identified as such. This still leaves me some forty odd years of history to cover in one rather short address. Fortunately, quite a number of authors have dealt with at least some aspects of this history (Du Toit, 1965; Hare & Savage, 1979; Higgins, 1974; Jubber, 1983; Kellerman & Grove, 1971; Lever,

1981; Pauw, 1959; Petersen, 1966; Steyn, 1982; Van den Berghe, 1962 and Van Jaarsveld, 1966 & 1982).

Furthermore, my colleague at Stellenbosch, Corné Groenewald, is at present completing what promises to be a definitive study²⁾ on the institutionalisation of sociology in South Africa. All of this material is or soon will be available to you. I have therefore not deemed it necessary to present to you a detailed account of the origin and development of sociology in this country.

Since my own association with the subject now spans more than 40 of the 50 or so years since its emergence as a recognised academic discipline, I will rather use the occasion to draw to your attention some of the trends overlooked by other commentators and to set the record straight with regard to some developments.

Origins

It is common knowledge that sociology was instituted as an independent academic discipline, generally in conjunction with social work, at South African Universities in the decade of the thirties. As an examining institute, the University of South Africa accommodated sociology from 1918, but the teaching universities only took steps to institute sociology as an independent academic discipline during the thirties. At the end of this decade, Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Cape Town, Witwatersrand, Potchefstroom, Natal and the Orange Free State had all taken this step. Undergraduate courses in sociology had, however, been offered at several of these universities since the twenties, often under the auspices of philosophy or anthropology.

It has often been suggested that the major stimulus for the institution of sociology had been a specific recommendation by the Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Problem (1932:xxxiii) that South African universities provide a basis for the scientific study of this problem and for the training of social workers. This assumption is incorrect, since, as stated above, courses in sociology were already being offered during the twenties, and several universities had in fact started to provide training for social workers even before the Carnegie Inquiry had been launched.

2) C J Groenewald's unpublished D.Phil. thesis, *Die Institutionaliserings van die sosiologie in Suid-Afrika*, was completed in 1985 at the University of Stellenbosch.

1) The Association for Sociology in Southern Africa.

Associated with this assumption is the view that sociology initially tended to focus only on social problems associated with the poor white, and that issues related to poverty among other population groups and to intergroup relations were initially neglected. Such views are explicitly expressed by Hare and Savage (1979:344), Peterson (1966:37) and others. A detailed examination of early social research and 'sociological' writings reveal, however, that this view needs to be qualified significantly to the effect that both conditions in black communities and the issue of race relations were given attention at an early stage in the development of sociology.

The linking of sociology with the training of social workers during the early phase of its institutionalisation as an academic discipline did, however, involve the leading sociologists at the time in the applied fields of social work and social administration. Much of their time was therefore devoted to the organisation and directing of welfare services. This involvement in social welfare services by sociologists lasted until social work came to be established as an independent academic discipline. The important work of these early sociologists like Hendrik Verwoerd, Oloff Wagner, Edward Batson and Geoff Cronjé in contributing towards the establishment of a national infrastructure for social services must be recognised and appreciated. It is therefore not surprising that at least some of their research and writings in the early years were aimed at facilitating and developing such services.

Examples of such research are Wagner's *Poverty and dependency in Cape Town* (1936), *Social work in Cape Town* (1938); *Maatskaplike werk by 'n plattelandse vereniging* (1940) (with Erika Theron) and Cronjé's work as chief editor of *Volkswelsand*. Verwoerd should be mentioned for his work in arranging the National Conference on the Poor White Problem in 1934 and as a prime mover of the thrust for the establishment of a state Department of Social Welfare (see Theron, 1970). It would probably not be an overstatement to characterise the main thrust of the first decade of academic sociology (namely, the decade of the thirties) as overwhelmingly concerned with the professionalisation of social work and with the institution of an infrastructure for social services in the country. The groundwork for this called for investigations and research to determine the nature and extent of the social needs for which the services were required.

It is therefore not surprising that a strong empirical thrust was given to sociological research being undertaken at this stage, and that the traditions of the social survey approach as practiced at the London School of Economics and in the USA were readily adopted in South Africa. Both Verwoerd and his successor at Stellenbosch,

Oloff Wagner, increasingly turned to American approaches, while Batson was strongly influenced by the London School of Economics from where he had come to Cape Town. Thus Cronjé, who was to head the Department of Sociology at Pretoria, upon his return to South Africa as the first academically trained sociologist with a doctorate from the Netherlands in the early thirties, was flatly turned away by Verwoerd who expressed a preference for persons trained in the American empirical tradition rather than for persons trained in the continental philosophic tradition.

At Stellenbosch the link with American sociology was strengthened when Wagner undertook an extensive study tour to the USA just before World War II. It is noteworthy that through his initiative at the time, arrangements were made for George A Lundberg to visit Stellenbosch during his sabbatical in 1940 to assist Wagner in planning an extensive study of rural life in South Africa. The events of World War II prevented this from materialising.

The preceding should, however, not be taken as confirmation of the often-expressed view that early sociology in South Africa was characterised by rampant empiricism. On the contrary, the American influence at Stellenbosch, for instance, also included Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish peasant in Europe and America*, Park and Burgess's pioneering work in developing a systematic framework for the presentation of sociology as an academic discipline and the theoretical contributions of writers such as Sorokin, Barnes and Becker.

Trends after World War II

The Second World War and its aftermath also affected the development of sociology in South Africa significantly. On the one hand the flow of literature and communication from Europe and later America was severely disrupted, so that an inevitable time-lag built up between new developments in the discipline overseas and its dissemination in South Africa. This link was only properly re-established towards the end of the forties. On the other hand, the realisation that the aftermath of the war would call for new approaches to developmental issues and social reconstruction was appreciated even in South Africa at a very early stage. It found concrete expression *inter alia* in the creation of the Social and Economic Planning Council which was instituted in June 1942 under the chairmanship of the dynamic Dr H J van Eck. The Council's terms of reference included a brief to 'examine and make recommendations for the improvement of the social and economic standards of the various sections of the people' (SA, 1950:1). A long list of reports were

produced by the Council before it was restructured at the beginning of the decade of the fifties. Present-day sociologists interested in socio-historic work would be well-advised to study some of these reports, such as that published as *The Economic and social conditions of the racial groups in South Africa* (SA, 1948).

A new direction and thrust to sociology resulted from a series of regional studies undertaken by the Universities of Natal, Stellenbosch and Cape Town at the request of this Social and Economic Planning Council in 1943. The departments of sociology particularly at Stellenbosch and Natal were heavily involved, and embarked on major research projects involving also other disciplines, which were to absorb all research energies in the departments for the rest of the decade of the forties. At Stellenbosch no less than eight reports were produced, and a summary of the whole project was eventually published in the *Annals of the University of Stellenbosch* (Cilliers et al, 1953). An important by-product was the opportunity afforded to senior under-graduate and post-graduate students to participate in comprehensive and large-scale research activities. This drew significant numbers of students into the discipline. Those familiar with the history of the discipline at Natal University will probably agree with the statement that this initiative contributed much towards the establishment of a tradition of involvement in regional developmental research by the social sciences at that University.

It is of course also true that the Second World War did in fact trigger a rapid expansion of the South African economy with all its concomitant demographic, social, cultural and political developments. The central issues of (white) poverty and dependency of the thirties were rapidly replaced by a whole range of new issues which opened new areas for research and involvement for sociologists. Internationally new emphasis was put on ideas such as freedom, democracy, nationalism and decolonization and the first tentative steps were taken towards the institutionalisation of a new kind of global social system. While in the immediate post-war years some, especially the younger generation of sociologists of the time, were involved in issues relating to the process of demobilisation such as a rocketing divorce rate, hoboism and prostitution, such mundane issues were soon swept aside by these other issues arising from the changing structure of our society. Problems relating to industrialisation and the rapid urbanisation of all sectors of the population led to a growing focus on issues such as housing needs and urban and rural development while the inadequacies of the socio-political system of our society also increasingly demanded attention.

The departments of sociology at Stellenbosch, Witwatersrand, Natal, and to a lesser degree Cape Town during the late forties and throughout the fifties therefore were

involved in a variety of research projects concerning social, educational and economic problems relating to rapid economic expansion and urban growth. The research called for to meet these needs, could mostly best be met through survey-type investigations. While latter-day commentators - often from within our own ranks - have sometimes spoken of this emphasis on empirical research at the time in disparaging terms as 'mere description', 'purely empirical', 'mundane fact-finding' etc., important developments did flow from such research undertakings. Apart from the methodological sophistication and expertise that was developed, students involved in such projects were exposed to the realities of social conditions and were often recruited for the social sciences, and, most important, social action which addressed the problems researched, often followed from these studies.

Apartheid

With regard to the broader issue of the inadequacies of the socio-political system, South African sociologists inevitably came to be involved in the central issue of race or intergroup relations. In my view, Lever's (1981:250-254) overview of the work and role of sociologists in this field may be accepted as fairly accurate. It is, however, necessary to note that the work of sociologists with regard to socio-political issues was not restricted to their academic statements and publications on these issues. There are those amongst us who are or have been involved in social action programs and agencies of greater or lesser importance in our socio-political environment. Such work is seldom publicly acknowledged or recognised and therefore often not even known to colleagues. This does not make it necessarily less real or effective.

Sociology as a Discipline

It has been said that during these first forty years of sociology in South Africa not much was contributed to the development of the discipline itself. Such observations are, I believe, at best uninformed if not obtuse. They ignore the effect of the basic grounding in the discipline provided to those at present active in the field both here in South Africa and elsewhere, who, without the benefit of the teachings of an earlier generation would not have developed the skills, analytical abilities or inclination to work in sociology. It also ignores the work of Geoff Cronjé, S P Cilliers, Dian Joubert, Coenie Brand, Van Zyl Slabbert, Laurie Schlemmer, Henry Lever and Leo Kuper (to mention but a few) who all, through a wide range of publications, particularly during the late fifties and the sixties, made significant and

often internationally recognised contributions of a conceptual, theoretical and methodological nature to the discipline.

One must also keep in mind that during the first thirty of the forty years under review the discipline of sociology was being served by a mere handful of men and women. At the time of the formal institution of sociology as an independent academic discipline in the early thirties, there were only two South African-born, trained sociologists in the country, namely Geoff Cronjé and N J Brummer. Most of the early professors of sociology came to the field from other disciplines - Verwoerd from applied psychology, Wagner and Keyter from education, Batson from economics, etc. The Second World War and its immediate aftermath virtually excluded the possibility of advanced training in sociology overseas for the first generation of students produced by the early teachers in the field. Thus it was only towards the end of the forties and the early fifties that a new generation of practitioners of the discipline were able to be exposed to the influence of international masters in the field. If these facts are taken into consideration, the level of sophistication of the present generation of sociologists should be regarded as a tribute to the dedication, innovativeness and self-study of the first and second generations of sociologists in South Africa.

Professional Associations

Reference needs also to be made to professional association between sociologists over the years under consideration. Opportunities for representatives from the departments of sociology at all South African universities to meet on a regular annual basis was provided as far back as 1938, with the establishment of the *South African Inter-University Committee for Social Studies* on the occasion of an inter-university conference held at the University of Cape Town. This organisation (subsequently known as *Inter-University Committee for Social Science* and still later as the *Joint University Committee for Sociology and Social Work*) (see Muller, 1968:5), met fairly regularly and did provide at least one senior sociologist from each university with a regular opportunity to meet with representatives from other universities. Since the purpose of the Committee was "the promotion of the interchange of ideas and information ... with reference to the teaching of social studies and in particular (*inter alia*) curriculum and courses" (Muller, loc. cit.) such exchanges must have produced some degree of comparability and coherence in the nature and content of undergraduate teaching in particular in sociology during the forties, fifties and into the sixties. Particularly after social work had been differentiated as a separate academic discipline increasingly manned by its own staff

members, separate sessions of sociologists became a regular feature of such meetings.

At the Sixteenth Annual General Meeting of the Joint University Committee for Sociology and Social Work at the University of Pretoria on 18th of June 1964, attention was drawn to the need for the founding of a sociological association. This led to a series of events which culminated in a decision at a meeting at the University of the Witwatersrand on 17 June, 1967 to form the South African Sociological Association (SASOV) as a whites-only organisation. Since I was personally involved in these events, I choose not to elaborate on the detailed history - a full official record is available for those interested. I must, however, point out that the outline of the history of the events surrounding the foundation of SASA presented by Hare and Savage (1979:341-343) - like much of the rest of their overview of sociology in South Africa in the relevant publication - is both one-sided and factually incorrect when compared to the official records of these events. What needs to be said is that a sectional association, not representative of South African sociologists, came into existence and, since sociologists no longer participated in the *Joint Universities Committee*, opportunities for all sociologists to meet ceased to exist. As you know, neither did the founding of the Association for Sociology in Southern Africa provide an effective alternative. It is a sad fact that for almost twenty years no really representative meeting of South African sociologists has occurred.

Since the history of the founding and development of ASSA is excluded from my topic, I will not comment on it, except to record that I have very pleasant, proud and gratifying memories of the initial events and of my terms of office as the first President of ASSA. While the dramatic socio-political developments in Southern Africa since the seventies have cast doubts upon ASSA's claim to being a truly regional association, greater political stability in the region may yet open a very exciting future for our Association.

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