

REVIEW

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Re-Imagining the Social in South Africa: Critique, Theory and Post-apartheid Society

Edited by Heather Jacklin and Peter Vale

Wither Social Theory?

The humanities are experiencing an ongoing existential crisis. When our democracy was born it made intuitive sense to imagine that we could only dismantle our status as one of the world's two or three most unequal nations by focusing on practical skills development in our education system. This ranged from promoting and developing skills such as carpentry or building to more highbrow but equally instrumentally critical disciplines like science and technology. A liberal arts education seemed rather self-indulgent. This was – and remains – particularly true for many poor students who suddenly became first-time university graduates in their families. Their education yielded financial expectations on their families' part (and their own legitimate desire for material success), rather than the intrinsic and romantic satisfaction of intellectual pursuit as an end in itself. This forced many humanities departments to do some soul-searching about their place under the African sky.

Some responded by becoming commercialised or market-oriented and introducing courses that sell themselves as indispensable to the development of a student seeking to leave university ready to conquer the business world. And so, by way of example, philosophy departments offer critical thinking courses to business executives or cross-pollinate with business science and commerce degrees by persuading these faculties to employ their staff to teach students logic and argumentation. Other departments, in their turn, simply got canned based on a brute – and brutal – assessment that they are yesterday's bake. (The fate of the Rhodes University Department of Theology, for example, comes to mind).

Re-imagining the Social in South Africa is a collection of thought-provoking reflections on the state of the humanities. The editors, Heather Jacklin and Peter Vale, carefully engage the substantive contributions in the anthology to provide a very nuanced, frank and timely set of critical insights into the place of the humanities in the social universe we inhabit. Although the book's subplot, as it were, is an in-depth focus on the specific concept of 'social theory' and 'critical' theory at that, it is a strength of the book that it in fact oscillates between a big picture engagement with the overall state of the humanities and a more granular focus on the conceptual complexities regarding critical terms such as 'social theory'. Theodore R. Schatzki lays a good conceptual foundation for the book by helping to make sense of the terms that the inquiry of the book are dependent on. He defines social theory as "...abstract, systematic thought that, through rational argumentation, fashions general accounts of the character, development and organisation of social life (and of the comprehension that can be had of these.)"



Re-imagining
the Social
in South Africa

Critique, Theory
and Post-apartheid
Society

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In essence, the anthology is a meta-philosophical inquiry about the state of the very disciplines within which the contributors themselves are important actors. It is worth reflecting on, and engaging with, a couple of the theses that dominate.

Sources of pressure: economic, scientific, political

The main thread that runs throughout the anthology is a cataloguing of the different kinds of pressure that is still being placed on the humanities.

Ivor Chipkin, for example, examines the impact that commercialisation has on the production of knowledge by research institutions. He looks at the Human Sciences Research Council as a case in point. His key insight is that once the arrangement of research units within an institution are organised with a competitive business imperative as its main driver, perverse consequences often follow. For example, analytic approaches to make sense of why government departments fail in the execution of some of their duties is hampered by reliance on state funding. Equally, in terms of external funding, there is a disproportionate use of resources to chase donor money, such that a topic like HIV/AIDS, for example, may become a dominant research area at the expense of other equally important issues.

John Higgins, in turn, argues that an overemphasis on science and scientific method has resulted in policy debates often being couched in terms that exclude reference to social theory. This impoverishes the quality of those debates and, in the process, prevents social policy inquiry from using all available intellectual resources to make sense of, and find solutions to, the problems of society. This analysis is particularly important because it shows that even by the yardstick of practical impact as a success criterion the role and importance of the humanities, and social theory in particular, are poorly understood. It is, in fact, instrumentally critical in the same way that, say, studying science and technology or commerce is.

Nicholas Rowe echoes this truth when he points out on a similarly practical front that in today's complex business environment it is those persons with a deep understanding of human beings and social relationships that will have the best shot at success. This underscores the need to focus on the complementary strengths of different faculties rather than perversely and falsely ranking some as more or less useful in building and developing society.

Richard Pithouse, more optimistically than other contributors, focuses on how a progressive or emancipatory role can be fulfilled by intellectuals within South African universities (with maybe the University of KwaZulu Natal as a present exception). But he lays down some conditions. These include avoiding the impact of political influences. The "top-down control" of the ANC, for example, can have a pernicious extra-political impact on the work of academics. Other factors include the role of civil society – including the need, in the first instance, to properly conceptualise civil society and its role within the broader question of the place of social theory and the humanities in society's progressive advancement.

A passionate plea, "Help!"

It is fascinating how the tone of the book itself reflects the sense of crisis within the humanities. At times, formalised argument gives way to honest, un-formalised venting.

Bert Olivier's contribution, for example, is less a structured analytic argument – as one might expect of a philosopher – than it is an impassioned if cogent polemic

about the dying influence of the humanities as a result of the developmental (in a policy sense) and economic influences that have brought about immense pressure on the humanities. He bemoans this fact when he asserts that “natural habitats across the planet today are yielding to the invasive effect of economic ‘development’, which, spreading like a cancer seems to be oblivious of the vital interconnectedness of natural and social ecosystems across the globe.”

The book gives a sense then of the lived reality of the practitioners – researchers, teachers, etc. – who have to justify their intellectual existence. It is perhaps unsurprising that the self-interest of doing so would manifest in places as a passionate plea to not be executed.

Why should we care about social theory at all?

Schatzki puts it best when he argues that social theory is both important for intrinsic reasons (human beings seek general answers about the world) and instrumental reasons. The instrumental reasons are both cognitive (enabling descriptions, explanations, interpretations and evaluations or criticisms of the social world) and practical (helping with the “mutual understanding among humans, the achievement of the good society along with the amelioration of social ills ...”). It is hard to see why ‘managers’ at universities, often previously full-time academics themselves, cannot see the persuasiveness of this justification.

Coda: A thought on style

While the mere fact of this book’s existence speaks to the ongoing existential crisis of the humanities, it kick-starts a necessary dialogue within the discipline. This makes it an indispensable read to anyone intrinsically interested in the world around them (for pure intellectual interest’s sake) as well of interest to those who seek more pragmatic justifications when they select which books to read (it will enhance your ability to approach ‘real world’ problems such as policy formulation with greater skill).

One of the few shortcomings of the book is that the style of some of the contributions may put off non-specialist readers. Academics really need to accept that they are useful and smart creatures. Many, unfortunately, do not believe this and manifest their insecurity by writing in academic jargon that obfuscates rather than clarifies. It gives academics a false sense of profundity even when they convey fairly pedestrian ideas. This helps no one. As the philosopher John Searle said with only slight exaggeration, “If you can’t say it clearly you don’t understand it yourself.” Nevertheless, an ‘on-balance’ assessment of this anthology is that it is an excellent contribution in a much needed would-be area of meta-philosophical inquiry.