

SCIENCE FORUM SOUTH AFRICA

KEYNOTE CONTRIBUTION

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8 December 2016

**THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE AND CRITICAL REFLECTION
IN SHAPING SOUTH AFRICA'S AND AFRICA'S FUTURE**

I wish to start off by expressing our appreciation as the Mapungubwe Institute, for the invitation to join in igniting 'conversations about science'. Coming as it does on this the 20th anniversary of the introduction of the South African White Paper on Science and Technology, Science Forum 2016 assumes special significance.

I wish also to thank the Minister and the Department of Science and Technology for the opportunity MISTRA was granted to launch our latest publication, *The emergence of systems of innovation in Southern Africa: long histories and contemporary debates*. This is besides the partnership that we have in other areas.

What immediately struck one about the theme, *the role of the social sciences and critical reflection in shaping South Africa's and Africa's future*, is the singular reference to 'future'. This underlines the obvious: the mutually beneficial or – woe betide – mutually injurious osmosis between South Africa and the continent at large. The equivalent of Brexit in relation to South Africa and the continent sounds quite vulgar, perhaps because it is inconceivable!

The theme straddles many conceptual issues; and I will not venture into expounding complex notions about gnoseology, epistemology, social science and humanities. Rather, I have chosen to reflect on a few elements of current macrosocial reality across the globe; hoping that, through these reflections, the role of social sciences will come out in even bolder relief.

The question may be asked: why is it necessary, in a forum concerned largely with natural sciences, to integrate the social sciences! Three reasons, among many, do stand out.

Firstly, the poly-crisis currently afflicting humanity, which straddles matters of economics, politics, the environment and security has brought into sharp focus the need for transdisciplinarity: to fashion an integrative process of interpreting and influencing human endeavours. The multi-layered challenges facing humanity do not lend themselves to narrow disciplines or the hyper-specialisation that insidiously afflicted knowledge generation and dissemination during the course of the 20th century. Indeed, it is often in the intersection of disciplines that the most remarkable of discoveries are made. Similarly, it is in the intersection of social and natural sciences that the utility of either to humanity finds full expression.

The second reason pertains to the importance of macrosocial dynamics in facilitating or circumscribing the development of systems of innovation. In the MISTRA publication to which I have referred, the authors note that, to the extent that there have been deficiencies in realising the objectives of the 1996 White Paper, a large part of the reasons lies with the constrictions of

macroeconomic assumptions, policies and praxis, especially in the early years of the democratic dispensation.

Thirdly, social science is profoundly relevant to the so-called 'hard sciences' because, ultimately, in the scramble for meagre resources, the last and most reliable line of defence for the sciences is society at large. And so, the social science of public communication of natural sciences is as important as praxis in these sciences. A society that is alive to the relevance of science to its lived experiences will appreciate and support research and development as an integral part of the endeavours to improve the human condition.

Stripped to its bare essentials, the role of social sciences is to answer the question, whither humanity, and how do we construct the best in human civilisation!

At the core of such civilisation, in my view, is the transformation of natural endowments for the benefit of humanity. Over the past three decades, tremendous progress has been made in this regard, as reflected in advances in information and communications technologies including artificial intelligence, 'the internet of things' and the so-called 4th industrial revolution. One can add to these, nano-technology, genetics and biotechnologies, all of which have contributed to the improvement of the human condition.

It is a reflection of progress in human civilisation – and perhaps a profound sense of self-preservation – that, as distinct from the rapacious licence of yesteryear, humanity today embraces the need to protect the environment as a common inheritance.

The other attribute of human civilisation is about the distributional aspects of social relations. In the words of David Ricardo: *The produce of the earth – all that is derived from its surface by the united application of labour, machinery, and capital, is divided among ... classes of the community ... To determine the laws which regulate this distribution, is the principal problem in Political Economy...* [<http://www.econlib.org/library/Ricardo/ricP1.html#>, On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation, 1817, p.1 & 3]

Beyond this, human civilisation also has to entail the improvement of production processes to enhance the quality of life. In this context, Karl Marx was correct to make the observation that an advanced system of production should eliminate extreme division of labour. He imagines a society in which "...nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity..., [which should make] it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic". [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>]

Before and after Ricardo and Marx, social scientists have sought to identify and pursue humane ways of managing socio-political relations.

More from the vantage point of a latecomer – rather than any sense of exceptionalism – South Africa was able to learn from a variety of sources in setting out its constitutional framework. This relates to the incorporation of the various generations of human rights, ranging from political, economic and social rights to environmental, informational and gender-related issues. Attached to

this are such matters as the principle of separation of powers, and institutions tasked with promoting and protecting the constitution.

All these attributes, aspirational as they may still be, are fundamental to pursuing the best in human civilisation.

What are some of the common challenges currently facing global society?

- Firstly, while the advances in science and technology have opened vistas for massive improvements in the quality of life, access to most of these advances is limited by social station and geographic location. Further, instead of approaching the incipient 4th industrial revolution as a universal liberator, it is seen as a threat to employment on the one hand, and an opportunity for individual wealth accumulation on the other.
- Secondly, with the global economic crisis, the religion of efficient markets with rational information seems to have fallen flat; and yet some aristocrats of finance capital, too big to fail or to jail, seem even today easily to shrug off regulatory interventions. In the real economy in many parts of the world, secular stagnation appears to be the new normal.
- Thirdly, the 'trickle-up' effect is well in evidence. According to the International Labour Organisation: *During much of the past century, ... the division of national income between labour and capital ... remained constant over a long period of time, with only minor fluctuations... [R]ecent decades have seen a downward trend for the labour share in a majority of countries for which data are available.* (ILO Global Wage Report, 2012/13, Part II, pp45/6)
- Lastly, overlaying this is the seeming paucity of visionary leadership in many parts of the world, with the legitimacy of politics mostly in ruins, due its failure to clarify and propose solutions to the question of social inequality and marginalisation, and due to the spectacular attempts, on the part of some, to grasp the future in nostalgia about the past.

In other words, social science has been unable to assert an organising philosophy that embraces humane social relations, to answer the question of political economy so concisely posed by David Ricardo almost exactly 200 years ago.

And so, with the rise of protectionism and narrow nationalism; with selfish geo-politics rearing its ugly head; and with growing social disaffection, one truth stands out in the current conjuncture. With economists hardly providing a coherent approach to extricate humanity from the global economic crisis; with the science of opinion surveys lying in ruins for its patent failure in the wake of Brexit and The Donald; and with rating agencies that got it horribly wrong at the breakout of the crisis in 2008, one truth does indeed stand out.

That truth is: the sea of intellectual endeavour is littered with the flotsam of shattered social sciences discredited by monumental failures. At the centre of this is the inability to fashion cogent analysis of, and solutions to, problems of the 'ordinary citizen'; and a seeming haplessness in forging social cohesion on a national and global scale. The worst in human history threatens to repeat itself.

There may be protestations that this applies only to so-called 'mainstream' or 'establishment' social sciences. But, the fact that alternative approaches have not been able to capture the popular imagination does reflect a major deficit in the value chain of conceptualisation, articulation and popular communication.

Where does Africa fit in all this?

Within the context of the notion of human civilisation expounded earlier, Africa's trajectory, broadly, is trending upwards. The Africa Rising narrative is still relevant. Over the past 20 years, from the evolution of political systems to social indicators, the conditions of life of the African citizen have been improving. Africa may not have escaped the worst effects of the global economic crisis; but high economic growth rates continue to register in many oil-importing countries. The bane of deficient infrastructure is steadily turning into a boon of sustained construction, with infrastructure programmes billed to continue for decades to come.

With many companies offshoring from a changing Chinese economy, significant opportunities in low-end manufacturing are being grasped in East Africa and other parts of the continent. Combined with increased numbers of employed people and a rising 'middle class', all these developments augur well for the expansion of manufacturing operations across Sub-Saharan Africa. This is besides opportunities that have emerged for the continent to leapfrog stages of technological development; and the fact that 60% of the world's uncultivated arable land is located in Africa.

The African Union's Agenda 2063 identifies some of these opportunities; and it is commendable that processes of implementation have been identified. The question though is whether the concepts and processes will be sufficiently institutionalised to survive changes in leadership within and across the African countries. The central lesson of the past two decades is that social progress is a function of social agency – ranging from societal leadership to the so-called 'ordinary citizen'.

Indeed, in a few geographic locations, we continue to experience conflicts that seem intractable. Mismanagement of macroeconomic indicators, cooking of the books and an irrational exuberance attached to the discovery of new natural endowments, have seen stellar performers back at the doorways of Bretton Woods institutions, cap in hand. Familial, partisan and ethnic apportioning of national wealth as well as state capture and other forms of corruption threaten to strip states and polities of popular legitimacy, which is fundamental to the reconstruction and development for which the people of Africa yearn and which they deserve.

If we have overstated the challenges, this is in order to help ignite conversations about science, as obliged by the theme of this Forum. For, the point needs to be made that there is a counter-narrative of hope. This is reflected in prospects of a possible relay race as India and other giants awaken from periods of underperformance. Urbanisation and the rise of a global 'middle class' should propel more countries to act as locomotives of global growth. The whims of some, now rising into political office, may delay, but they cannot reverse the Paris Agreement, the global compact for sustainable development. The long-term trajectory of global production and consumption is towards sustainability.

It is also instructive that, across the hallowed chambers of the 1% who own most of global wealth, and from snow-white Davos, the realisation is growing by the day, that the system of market

capitalism faces the danger of losing its historical capacity for regeneration, if it fails to address the social anomie that it has spawned.

South Africa forms part of that discourse; perhaps more noisily, precisely because our society manifests a concentrated expression of the causes of social anomie.

In the past, social scientists and activists characterised our society as Colonialism of a Special Type. With formal political liberation, and despite all the efforts at reversing the social engineering of apartheid colonialism, the system continues stubbornly to reproduce racialised poverty and inequality. To illustrate: South Africa represents, in social terms, the equivalent of a Nigeria and a Scotland merged into one: with 'two economies' and 'two nations' co-existing within one geography. To change this, in the context of the National Development Plan, requires clarity of vision and social compacting across the 'two economies' and the 'two nations'.

Have the social sciences kept pace with this changing South African reality? Some may argue that there has been an element of post-colonial incapacitation, arising, firstly, from the mass and unplanned migration of liberation-oriented social scientists into state institutions especially during the political transition; secondly, from the rat race that afflicts first-generation middle strata as they seek to batten down the hatches against sliding back into poverty; and thirdly, perhaps out of intellectual indolence. In a sense, the uprising of university students for decolonised progressive content is a timely wake-up call.

To undertake strategic reflections in a systematic way requires institutional, human and financial capacity. It calls for stronger interaction and partnerships among social scientists within and across countries of the continent, and further afield. As in other regions of the globe, it requires the allocation of resources by both the public and private sectors to institutions dealing with humanities and social sciences, so society can adequately reflect beyond the cycles of quarterly returns and democratic elections.

Lest we forget, during the anti-colonial struggle, African and indeed South African social scientists occupied pride of place in global discourse on how to confront and eliminate antagonisms that affect all of humanity: the intersection of race, class and gender. To the extent that efforts by South Africans to deal with these challenges are still in their infancy, to that extent is our country a giant social experiment whose outcomes should stand humanity in good stead.

And so, whither South Africa and Africa at large? Pixley ka Isaka Seme, in his 1906 University of Columbia Lecture does have an answer. To quote him:

Agencies of a social, economic and religious advance tell of a new spirit which, acting as a leavening ferment, shall raise the anxious and aspiring mass to the level of their ancient glory. The ancestral greatness, the unimpaired genius, and the recuperative power of the race, its irrepressibility, which assures its permanence, constitute the African's greatest source of inspiration...

The regeneration of Africa means that a new and unique civilization is soon to be added to the world... The most essential departure of this new civilization is that it shall be thoroughly spiritual and humanistic – indeed a regeneration moral and eternal!

O Africa!

Like some great century plant that shall bloom

In ages hence, we watch thee; in our dream

See in thy swamps the Prospero of our stream;

Thy doors unlocked, where knowledge in her tomb

Hath lain innumerable years in gloom.

Then shalt thou, walking with that morning gleam,

Shine as thy sister lands with equal beam...

It behoves all scientists to ensure that Seme's injunction does not wait another century before finding concrete expression in Africa's lived experience.

END