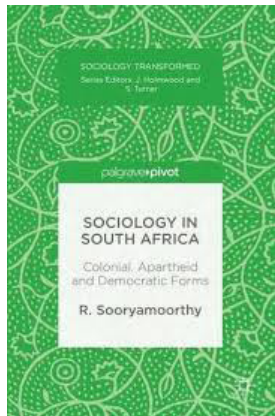


The unique yet universal voice of South African sociology

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Sociology in South Africa:
Colonial, apartheid and
democratic forms

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Globalisation has opened opportunities for cross-national links between sociological communities with nodes of scholars linked to each other in cyberspace. But there is a grave danger in the global age of a kind of pseudo-universalism. It is only through an understanding of our different histories that we can arrive at an understanding of the many voices in our discipline. We need to remind ourselves that path-breaking cultural creativity in world history has often come, not from the centre, but from the periphery of cultural worlds. This is the challenge facing South African social scientists: to find a critical space and a voice that is at once both particular, unique, and at the same time universal.

Sooryamoorthy has made a valuable contribution to global sociology by producing the first full book-length study of the development and nature of South African sociology. He draws extensively on the already published literature as well as interesting and original scientometric data. He has given South African sociology a voice within the global system of social knowledge production.

Sooryamoorthy identifies three phases in the development of sociology in South Africa. The first phase, from 1900 to 1947, is described as 'sociology in colonial times'. Sociologists during this period were primarily concerned with social problems such as poverty amongst white people. The trigger for the study of poverty was the Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Problem in South Africa. The Carnegie Commission (1932) into the so-called 'poor white problem' came to serve as a blueprint for the apartheid policies that were to follow in the next phase.

It is during the second phase, the apartheid phase from 1948 to 1993, that sociology emerges as an independent discipline, separate from departments of social work. Only five doctoral theses were written during the first phase and there was no South African journal of sociology. Initially divided into two competitive strands of sociology along language lines, with separate professional associations and journals, these divisions came sharply to the fore in the 1980s when the multiracial Association of Southern African Sociologists (ASSA), the alternative to the conservative Suid Afrikaanse Sociologie Vereniging (SASOV), became an exciting forum for a group of engaged social scientists concerned with the transformation of South Africa. Although these divisions mirrored the language cleavage, they came to reflect a much deeper division between the more established positivist and functionalist tradition held in the Afrikaans-speaking universities, and the critical and neo-Marxist sociology associated with the emerging democratic movement inside South Africa in the 1980s. While Sooryamoorthy's useful analysis of journal publications captures this development, particularly the growth of labour studies, his analysis of the data set of the Web of Science reveals very little about this innovative moment (from which Burawoy¹ derived his notion of public sociology) in the history of South African sociology.

The third phase, sociology in a democratic South Africa, from 1994 to 2015, opened with much promise. In 1993, the two rival associations had merged to create the South African Sociological Association (SASA) and the advent of democracy after years of struggle had created a deep interest in South African society. But with only 178 members by 2015, South African sociology remained a small community. The advent of democracy had shifted the centre of stage away from the social movements that led the democratisation process, towards the state whose demands were for more technically policy-oriented research. Government was committed to repositioning South African higher education institutions to global technological and economic competitiveness. To achieve this goal it was necessary to restructure universities as sites of new knowledge production and technological innovation. In the face of these pressures some universities totally abandoned their departments of sociology and redeployed academics to fit into 'programmes'. As Sooryamoorthy politely observes, 'sociology had to adjust and adapt to this environment when it entered its third phase in the democratic era'.

What is the state of sociology today? South African sociology has internationalised: indeed it successfully hosted in 2006 the World Congress of Sociology. The output in international publications has dramatically increased. But some of the features of the past continue; the indifference to quantitative methodology goes back, Sooryamoorthy suggests, to historic antipathies between Afrikaans- and English-language universities. The fragmentation and lack of specialisation, Sooryamoorthy suggests, is an 'outcome of reactions to the changing social realities – labour studies, health studies or studies on crime'. In spite of growing international contact, Sooryamoorthy found international collaboration in only 3% of the publications of the *South African Review of Sociology* journal between 1995 and 2012 (p. 125). Furthermore, Sooryamoorthy observes that 'an acceptable composition and proportion of black staff has not been realized to represent the population'. He estimates that only 35% of sociology staff in the universities are black. Above all, the articulation of an African-centred sociology has not engaged sociologists, either as a sub-discipline of African studies or as a sub-discipline of traditional sociology.

What of the future? Sooryamoorthy cites favourably the case of labour studies in South Africa 'that developed a body of knowledge based in the local patterns of social relations and the local struggles from these patterns'. He argues that offering specialist programmes and engaging in relevant sociological research will 'encourage the government and policymakers to make use of the findings for policy-based programmes'. It is an interesting observation but to sustain a special area of sociology that is both unique and universal will require greater resources, both in terms of people and finance, than is currently available in South African universities.

Sociology in South Africa: Colonial, Apartheid and Democratic Forms is a balanced and informative account of South African sociology. Hopefully it will inspire a new generation of sociologists to develop the African-centred sociology that is so desperately needed in this southern tip of Africa.

Reference

1. Burawoy M. Public sociology: South African dilemmas in a global context. *Soc Trans.* 2004;35(1):11–26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2004.10419104>