

Lessons and legacies: HOW THE EARLY YEARS OF THE HSRC AND THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA SHAPED THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN SOUTH AFRICA

South African social scientists Dr Ernst Malherbe and Prof Geoff Cronjé were both, ostensibly, committed to the scientific method and the pursuit of truth. Yet the thread of their work was coloured by Afrikaner nationalism, and Cronjé ultimately arrived at a belief in the defensibility of total apartheid. Speaking at the 2019 Annual ASSAf Humanities Lecture, HSRC CEO Prof Crain Soudien charted the beginnings of social science research in South Africa, acknowledging that the University of Pretoria and the predecessor organisations of the HSRC were “messy places” with complex legacies. By *Andrea Teagle*.

Prof Himla Soodyall, executive officer of the Academy of Science of South Africa presenting Prof Crain Soudien with a gift at the 2019 Annual ASSAf Humanities Lecture in Pretoria

Photo: Antonio Erasmus



Prof Geoff Cronjé, a sociology professor at the University of Pretoria, who pleaded for the establishment of a council for human sciences research in the 1960s. But he also believed that people of different races had to be separated in all walks of life.

Photo: Mens en Gemeenskap, 1969



Ninety years ago, Dr Ernst Gideon Malherbe headed the National Bureau of Education, which contributed to the educational research leg of Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa (1928 – 1932).

Photo: HSRC

At a recent event commemorating the 100th anniversary of the University of Pretoria (UP), the 90th anniversary of the HSRC's forerunner, the National Bureau of Education (1929), and the 50th anniversary of the HSRC, the HSRC's CEO Prof Crain Soudien argued that the formative years of the two parallel institutions were critical to understanding the social sciences in South Africa today. Key figures during this 50-year period (1920s -1970s), were Dr Ernst Malherbe, who headed the National Bureau of Education, and Prof Geoff Cronjé, a sociology professor at UP.

One of the enduring contributions of Malherbe and Cronjé to the South African policy landscape is the idea of evidence-based research, Soudien said. Perhaps another contribution is the reminder that, as much as they might believe themselves objective, researchers bring their own worldviews, biases and blindspots to their work.

The lecture took place at the [Future Africa campus](#) of the University of Pretoria, which emphatically embraces a transdisciplinary approach to specifically local problems, casting the net wider for different voices and sources of knowledge. The more people wielding science's tools, the less likely the resultant knowledge will be fashioned by prejudice.

Problems require complex approaches

"The idea here is to create a platform and an infrastructure and a space where people come together to co-create knowledge," UP Vice-Chancellor Prof Tawana Kupe said at the event. "Problems do not come packaged in disciplines...They come as complex as you like, and they require complex approaches."

A century ago, however, approaching social problems through scientific research was itself a new idea in South Africa. In the late 1920s, Soudien said, a young, USA-educated Malherbe made the argument that the policy-making process in South Africa was deeply flawed, suffering from a lack of "genuine science". In response to his plea for the establishment of research institutes, the minister of education, DF Malan set up the National Bureau of Education in 1929.

At the helm of the bureau, Malherbe was responsible for ushering in the scientific methodology of [positivism](#), the view that human behaviour was subject to the same laws of cause and effect as natural science. Critically, Soudien argued, this positivism was able to hide within it and obscure the ideology of race.

"Positivism arrived in South Africa as it was grappling with the

question of building a nation after the establishment of the [Union](#) [of South Africa in 1910]." The Afrikaner leadership was concerned with the creation and preservation of white, and particularly Afrikaner identity. This preoccupation would direct the nascent social sciences field for the coming decades. As is often the case, the question of identity was framed in relation to "the other".

"Framing the question was at one level a struggle about Englishness over a sense of what it meant to be Afrikaans and Afrikaner, and, at another level, about the relationship of white people with black people," Soudien said.

Setting a discursive agenda

One of the bureau's most important research activities was contributing to the educational research which formed part of a country-wide survey among poor whites, financed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (1928 – 1932).

The Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa, set the tone for the social sciences to feed directly into policy making; what might once have been the moral turf of the church was now the practical question of social scientists. The report concluded that white poverty, "in the midst of

the native population," could be explained by psychological, sociological, educational and health factors. "Malherbe helped to set the discursive agenda for sociology, psychology, philosophy, criminology, anthropology and a whole range of disciplines and fields of study."

In 1934, the bureau was renamed the National Bureau for Educational and Social Research and Malherbe was appointed as its first director. It received more funding from the government and the Carnegie Corporation and focused on national educational and social problems. It helped organise conferences, compiled statistics on education and child welfare and established a division for psychological research that worked on the standardisation of individual and group intelligence testing and the application thereof on all population groups.

During the latter part of the 50-year period, Afrikaner nationalist intellectuals became increasingly politically influential. A central figure in these circles was Prof Geoff Cronjé, Chair of Sociology at the University of Pretoria from 1936. According to Soudien, "as an interlocutor, he was absolutely formidable... He took the detached 'facts' of Malherbe and vested them with a soul that his political peers were yearning for."

Having been a [postgraduate student](#) in 1930s Germany, Cronjé was concerned with maintaining the purity of the white race, and was later to oversee the blueprint for state [censorship](#) to guard against moral degeneration and 'undesirable influences' on white culture.

Expounding theories on racial disparities

As Prof Ivan Evans, a sociology lecturer at Eleanor Roosevelt College, [writes](#), Cronjé maintained that the only way to spare South Africa from "miscegenation and racial conflict" was complete separation in all walks of life. This "solution" set Afrikaners up as the guardians of black people. While the Carnegie Commission pointed to environmental factors to explain "poor whiteism," [Cronjé presented](#) racial disparities in intelligence test scores as proof of innate white superiority.

Cronjé's racial arguments, which distilled some essential theories of apartheid, were, [according to historian Saul Dubow](#), "highly derivative, and his style is direct and crude." However, the supposed "neutrality" of science then, as

now, was a particularly powerful tool in the hands of those who wielded it.

"Controversially, seen from the present, [Cronjé] could lay claim to being the HSRC's progenitor," Soudien said, referencing the archival work of the HSRC's Astrid Schwenke. "In 1968, the HSRC was established for the purpose of doing social science research in the national interest."

Growing resistance and academic rigour


Even at a time when the HSRC was most intermeshed with the state, Soudien noted, there were some academics who "resisted being hand-maidens to the apartheid state," and whose commitment to academic rigour stood in opposition to racial ideology. This opposition gradually grew, reaching an historical climax with the 1985 release of the HSRC's report into intergroup relations. The report, which sparked news articles across the country, concluded that racial ordering under the apartheid state had reached an impasse and warned of "catastrophic consequences" in the event of a delay in addressing the issue.

The influence of positivism, stripped of racial ideology, still informs South Africa's research environment. Commenting on the continuity of thought in academic spaces, an audience member at the event said, "As black individuals, we need to think about the fact that we haven't really established a new understanding of ourselves – a new way of thinking." Her point illustrated the importance of understanding even painful history in order to illuminate current ways of doing things that perhaps seem inevitable or natural, but which may not be.

Today, as then, we need as many voices as possible to critically engage and interrogate the viewpoints that today may seem inarguable and tomorrow indefensible, and, as envisioned in Future Africa, imagine new methods of solving enduring problems.

Further reading

The books, Bureaucracy and Race: Native Administration in South Africa by [Ivan Thomas Evans](#); and Intellectual Traditions in South Africa: Ideas, Individuals and Institutions by [Peter CJ Vale](#), [Lawrence Hamilton](#) and [Estelle H Prinsloo](#)



In the early years, the National Bureau for Educational and Social Research was located at the Union Buildings in Pretoria.
Photo: HSRC