

# Handmaidens and Partners

The humanities and social sciences in S&T Policy  
1994–2009

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# Propositions

- ▶ Between 1994 and 2009, a particular understanding of the sciences and innovation developed in SA(NSI), whose impacts included a narrowing down of the role of the social sciences and humanities and a privileging of mode 2.
- ▶ The process of policy development and implementation took place within two sets of conditions of possibility: the global discourse on S&T and the (political/moral) promises and premises of the social reconstruction.
- ▶ The policy texts and discourses reflect the tensions and contradictions which emerged from these two sets of conditions of possibility.
- ▶ What “has happened” to the HSS is a result of active political choices and translations/interpretations but also of a set of social and individual responses to the policies.

# Global Paradigms in S&T since 1980s

- ▶ Centrality of knowledge society/knowledge economy and innovation discourses.
  - ▶ Isomorphism of science policy and higher education policy discourses and frameworks across the globe
  - ▶ Role of multilateral organisations like OECD, UNESCO, WB in agenda-setting, diffusion of policy ideas and approaches
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# Global Paradigms in S&T policy since 1980s

- ▶ Knowledge (applied) is the driver of economic development.
- ▶ SET as priority knowledge areas for technological innovation and applied multi-disciplinary knowledge (mode 2).
- ▶ ‘Techno-economic’ notion of innovation
- ▶ National System of Innovation.
- ▶ HE as driver of economic growth (high level skills, globally competitive research base).
- ▶ Social sciences enter into the international discourse of innovation under the guise of social innovation (life-process innovation, social cohesion, identity etc).

# SA S&T: organising principles

- ▶ S&T discourse: **innovation and mode 2 knowledge**. Explicit and recurrent in relation to HSS. Specific downstream consequences.
- ▶ The democratic transition implied new policies and new organisational forms.
- ▶ The **NSI** is both the conceptual frame of policy and the organisational form applied to a range of S&T institutions (Green Paper S&T).
- ▶ Who is in the NSI: government, funding agencies, SET institutions, state corporations, **business**, **HEI**, some NGOs.

# White Paper S&T and the HSS

- ▶ Understanding of social processes and problems and as a source of **social innovation**;
- ▶ Facilitating appropriate **technological change** within society and within the economy;
- ▶ Providing the basis of **policy analysis**;
- ▶ Producing **new knowledge** and informed **critique** of the transformation of South African society and its economy (DACST, 1996: 2.8).

# First System Review 1998

- ▶ All SETI (science councils etc.) and the agency function.
- ▶ The system review criticised the SETIs for not favouring cross-disciplinary research or partnerships between the social and natural sciences.
- ▶ **Proposed the idea of the HSS as ‘partners’ of the natural sciences.**
- ▶ Important organisational consequence: the creation of the NRF.

# R&D Strategy 2002 (DST coming of age)

- ▶ Achieving mastery of technological change in economy and society (innovation), *competitiveness and quality of life*
- ▶ Increasing investment in South Africa's science base (human capital and transformation), *focus on universities/R&D survey*
- ▶ Creating an effective government science and technology system (alignment and delivery). *Ability of DST to control and integrate across other government departments.*

# R&D Strategy and the HSS

- ▶ “There is a particular need to mobilise the social sciences to develop far more holistic understandings and interventions to **increase the rate of innovation in our society.** (DST, 2002: 5.1 p.38);
- ▶ “Greater involvement of people from **previously excluded sectors** of the community cannot be left to chance or just market forces. (...) There is a special need in all these areas for enhanced contributions by the social sciences to **delineate the problems that we face, and provide specific proposals for interventions that would strengthen our ability to respond.**” (DST, 2002: 4.4 p.36)

# R&D: the focus

- ▶ Technology missions (5): poverty alleviation.
- ▶ Knowledge generation through basic science: ‘a programme could address social or economic goals, or the programme is potentially world class.’ (*paleoanthropology, indigenous knowledge systems, and the diseases of poverty*, DST, 2002: 6.2).
- ▶ Huge impact on funding.

# HSS in S&T Policy 1996–2002

- *Interpreters* (facilitating an understanding of social process and social innovation),
- *Change agents* (facilitating technological change within society and the economy),
- *Generators of policy*,
- *Critics and producers of knowledge*, and
- *Educators* (responsible for a range of capacity development interventions geared to change the demographic profile of the SET workforce in the country).

# Downstream policy implementation: NRF strategy

- ▶ NRF strategy also framed by national S&T policy produced since 1996.
- ▶ HSS as partners of the SET disciplines (foresight exercise 1996/7 was almost totally concentrated on the natural sciences).
- ▶ Bringing science close to business (THRIP).
- ▶ The shortage of high-level skills and their impact on the economy (SET).
- ▶ Research funding was directed to focus areas (multi-disciplinary thematic areas).
- ▶ Unlocking the future (funding of the disciplines).

# NRF position in the NSI

- ▶ Agency supporting research.
- ▶ Supporting innovation and managing a number of DST and other line departments' initiatives in the area of innovation, applied research and new technology missions.
- ▶ Innovation Fund, THRIP, International Chairs on Entrepreneurship, the Scarce Skills Programme, Centres of Excellence, etc.
- ▶ **Most of the NRF budget is dedicated to special DST/ Labour/ DTI funds.**

# Internal and external critique of policy.

- ▶ **HSS.** 2003 NRF: Shifting the Boundaries (forerunner *Transforming the Disciplines*, 1995). Ability of the HSS to respond to national priorities, development of a research agenda, informed by the WP understanding of the role of HSS. Uncritical view of the policy/ innovation.
- ▶ **NSI.** External critique *OECD system review 2006*: narrow understanding; distorted role of HEIs in R&D, difficult role of the NRF innovation agency and research funding agency; un-strategic selection of technological missions.

# DST into the next decade: Ten Year Plan (2008)

- ▶ Drivers: human capital development, knowledge generation and exploitation, knowledge infrastructure and enablers.
- ▶ Five 'grand challenges', some of which take as their point of departure the technology missions of the 2002 R&D strategy (integration of IKS).

# Arriving late: the fifth grand challenge

- ▶ Social and Human Dynamics: was added to the policy.
- ▶ The study of human behaviour and development in the face of change operates predominantly in a context of application and involves SET and HSS but especially the **behavioural sciences**.
- ▶ It appears to be derivatively modelled on a funding category in the National Science Foundation in the US.

# Arriving late: the fifth grand challenge

- ▶ Four areas for innovation and research: (i) science, technology and society; (ii) the dynamics of human and social behaviour; (iii) social cohesion and identity; (iv) societal change and the evolution of modern society.
- ▶ In common with previous specifications of the role of the HSS, it includes a focus on IKS.
- ▶ New in this formulation is the specific inclusion of public engagement with science as a condition for the success of the envisaged research.

# HSS in the Grand Challenge

- ▶ Is the Human and Social Dynamics Grand Challenge a return to the promise of the WP symbolic policy or is yet another manifestation of the handmaiden role of HSS?
- ▶ It looks at the HSS to introduce change and to explain human choice to influence it.
- ▶ It presents society and individuals as unconstrained by class, race, gender or history.
- ▶ It assumes an uncontested social world in which there are no power differentials, no injustice that requires redress. Neutral improvement in quality of life.
- ▶ In this sense is anti-humanistic and anti-social sciences.

# Conclusion I

- ▶ Four aspects combined to disadvantage the HSS between 1996 and 2009:
  - ▶ a) the conceptualisation of innovation and innovation goals in the S&T discourse.
  - ▶ b) the lack of serious intellectual engagement by academics and researchers with the frame of reference and their disciplines.
  - ▶ c) the lack of 'champions' within the DST to take up the cause of the HSS.
  - ▶ d) the steady decline in funding from the NRF together with the absence of clear signals that its funding policy was underpinned by a coherent and strategic set of balances between different type of science.

# Conclusion II

- ▶ It is worth considering that maybe the very concept of the NSI within a strong state regime might be contradictory with the flourishing of disciplines whose very nature is defined by their independence from externally determined national priorities.
  - ▶ How then to think of HSS within S&T policy?
  - ▶ Becoming more critical of the global discourse?
  - ▶ Developing a new imaginary for the HSS—a new way of thinking about science/knowledge/increased social responsiveness and engagement?
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