

**Address by Professor Charles van Onselen****In accepting****2<sup>nd</sup> Annual HSRC Medal in Social Sciences and Humanities****HSRC, Pretoria****Thursday 31 August 2017**

Professor Soudien, Colleagues, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The HSRC, is South Africa's apex academic institution when it comes to undertaking applied social scientific knowledge in an exceedingly complex setting. It, along with its sister institution the NRF, helps provide practitioners with some of the instrumentation necessary for properly calibrating the standing and status of our individual and collective intellectual well-being in the disciplines that go to make up the humanities and social sciences. It is therefore a singular distinction to have one's work recognised by so august a body, and I am greatly honoured and touched by the award that the HSRC has chosen to bestow upon me and for which I wish to thank you most sincerely.

But, an audience such as this one appreciates that, while an award is bestowed upon an individual, the recipient can only be as good as the intellectual environment in which he or she operates, and that enables them to aspire to excellence. The practitioners of the crafts and disciplines that excite and mesmerise us – part-art, part-science, part-head, part-heart, but focused always on the changing human condition – are in debt to those institutions that host their endeavours. In my case I cannot emphasise sufficiently how encouraging, generous and supportive the managements of the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, the Faculty of Humanities and the University of Pretoria have been of my research and writing over very many years. So, while I cherish the recognition that you have afforded me, I do so fully cognisant of the vital contribution that my colleagues - and others - have played in my effort to write history that is both imaginative and persuasive.

I assume, too, that we can agree that South Africa has, for several decades now been embroiled in a set of inter-connected political, economic and social transformations that are still unfolding within the context of a broadly-defined, but often still strongly contested, constitutional dispensation. The depth, direction and pace at which these changes are taking place, along with the ultimate destination are far from settled. Perhaps it was always going to be like this; we live in an extraordinarily complex society, one where we often see no problem in talking, almost in the same breath, about the existence of an imaginary 'nation' and the on-going need for 'nation-building – the latter a formulation that seems to be largely aspirational, part of an on-going task.

Unlike in the natural sciences there simply are no 'iron laws' in our disciplines that determine the myriad ways in which class and colour, culture and gender, ethnic and racial identity, modernity and tradition, honour and shame, the law and social justice, or poverty and wealth can either help bind or divide us as we yearn to reduce the appalling levels of conflict and violence that wrack society. Each set of these volatilities needs to be analysed and interrogated with dexterity and suppleness of mind before we can arrive at hypotheses that cohere and then be tested empirically against the evidence. And the key to understanding most of these formidable and elusive interactions lies not so much in the natural or biological sciences, in engineering, medicine or technological innovation but in the core disciplines of the humanities and the social sciences. Decoding and understanding the revolutionary transformations we are undergoing is an essential prerequisite for taking up an intelligent position; one capable of guiding both our individual and collective destinies.

Part of the tragedy of modern, deeply disturbed southern Africa is not that we have too *many* graduates in the humanities and social sciences; but that we have too few trained to the requisite levels in big business and the corporate world, in the civil service and the municipalities, in law-enforcement agencies and the judiciary, in parliament and politics, and in our universities. The overwhelming burden of the everyday challenges that leaders in those stressed institutions now face on a daily basis have at least as much – often far *more* - to do with the need for an intelligent reading of individual and collective human behaviour as they play out in society and a contested political

economy, than they have to do with the usual, often mindless, mantras that are routinely recited about the need for more maths, science and technology.

The corporate world might be filled with chartered accountants and MBAs – all undoubtedly desirable and necessary – but much of their time is, and arguably even more should be, taken up with questions and answers about inequality, business ethics, labour relations and social justice. Our civil service and the municipalities are filled with specialists providing essential services such as, housing and welfare but one gets the impression that many, if not most of these men and women are capable of seeing these issues only in isolation, that they often lack a broadly-integrated understanding of the structures and processes that inform the lives of the majority of our citizens. It would do no harm if those in our corrupt and weak law-enforcement agencies, along with a good number of attorneys, court translators, prosecutors and magistrates in the judicial system developed a more subtle understanding of collective behaviour, of individual pathologies, or of class and ethnic conflict not to speak of xenophobia, as they exercised power. In our political life and in parliament, one is often struck by just how confused, how uneducated, how inarticulate or just plain stupid a fair number of our public representatives are when it comes to trying to present a coherent, integrated or rounded analysis of economic or social problems before reverting to mere sloganeering. We sometimes appear to be chronically incapable of joining the dots for a more subtle understanding.

Now, possessing a stunted understanding of the plight of the human condition is, of course, not a peculiarly South African problem. Britain, parts of Europe and the United States, too, have their fair share of oafish men and women in high public office, people who struggle to read the contours of modern societies and economies in ways that are enlightening and socially progressive. But, that said, the sheer scale on which it manifests here at present is, to say the least, daunting. Setting right these deficiencies *does* involve harnessing science and technology in new and imaginative ways, but the core problems often lie more squarely in the fields of education or the humanities and the social sciences than they do in the antiseptic world of prescriptive calibration. Care and commitment, compassion and insight, feeling and empathy, an understanding of the subterranean things that we sense but often do not see - the very stuff of civilised societies everywhere are - I would argue, more easily

cultivated in the deep soils of the arts, language, literature, music, history, political science and sociology than they are in the carefully furrowed fields of allied and complementary, but often exclusively scientific, endeavours.

South Africa desperately needs to improve its economic performance and output. It needs to broaden and deepen its tax base and deploy the resulting surplus in ways that are sustainable if we are to grow a more equal and just social order. The first part, improving on our economic performance can, in considerable measure, be achieved through harnessing the skills of men and women with the necessary professional competence and who can, in turn, use it to maximum effect by utilising scientifically-driven technologies. The second part of the challenge, however – that of deciding *where, when, why and how* to allocate the accrued benefits of shared economic growth are questions best answered by those most versed in issues that are routinely debated by those in the humanities and social sciences. If we are to see the emergence of a more balanced partnership developing between the sciences and the social sciences in this country, one based on mutual respect, then *both* intellectual traditions are going to have to sharpen their cross-disciplinary vision. In short, the more our engineers and scientists get to know about class, culture and politics, and the more our humanities and social science graduates get to learn about science and its applications, the better for both. There is nothing novel in this view; C.P. Snow identified to the very same problems at least half century ago.

But, if we are going to be brutally honest, then I would suggest that, for the moment at least, it is those of us in the humanities and the social sciences that are in greater need of upping our game than those in the applied sciences. It is true that we cannot do without the input of those devoted to advancing science and technology. But it is also true that we do not have sufficient skilled practitioners of our own crafts and skills at the very highest levels of pivotal institutions such as the civil service, the law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, the municipalities or universities – that is, in those institutions tasked with governing and thereby improving the conditions of our citizenry at large.

And, if we are to improve the standing of the humanities and the social sciences in this country we simply can no longer afford to tolerate a largely archaic and often dysfunctional system of primary school education. It is true that all intellectual traditions, cultures and professional skills are founded on

the bedrock of good reading and fine writing but, they are of special importance to those of us devoted to growing the humanities and the social sciences. If we do not improve the education of children in primary school and then follow it through into adolescence - in the high schools - and beyond that, into young adulthood, at the universities, we will continue to lag behind our counterparts in the scientific world. We have a very long way to go if we are to get the humanities and social sciences to be better appreciated in this country.

The HSRC is uniquely well-placed to demonstrate and practise the craft skills that make the humanities and the social sciences at the highest level so fascinating. If that is but a routine necessity during the best of times, then how much more necessary is it during hard times; at a moment when this country is clearly at a pivotal, transformative juncture in a long and very troubled history?

The award that you have bestowed on me shows that there is an appreciation of how, by studying the past, we can develop a better understanding of where we currently find ourselves and develop appropriate ways of addressing an uncertain future. I am delighted to accept this medal in my personal capacity but I also consider it to be an award to the discipline that I am drawn from and one for those colleagues that I have learned so much from. I and historians everywhere thank you for the tribute you have paid us.

Thank you.

CvO

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