

BOOK REVIEW

Crain Soudien, Sharlene Swartz and Gregory Houston, eds. *Society, Research and Power: A History of the Human Sciences Research Council from 1929 to 2019*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2021. 540 pp. \$54.91. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-7969-2605-0.

While it is imperative for historians to rewrite the history of South Africa by focusing on the oppressed, it is equally important to examine the inner workings of the racist apartheid state and its institutions such as the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and its forerunner, the National Bureau for Social and Educational Research, simply known as the Bureau. This book, *Society, Research and Power: A History of the Human Sciences Research Council from 1929 to 2019*, edited by Crain Soudien, Sharlene Swartz, and Gregory Houston, is an attempt to write a comprehensive history of the HSRC. This is a commendable effort, considering that nothing substantial has been written about the institution previously.

The chapters in the book give readers a broader sense of the HSRC and are very informative with regard to the research projects carried out there. The individual chapters shed light on the different phases that the organization has gone through. However, they are uneven, some well written while others are less well thought out.

Brahm Fleisch's chapter is thoroughly researched and well written. It covers the Bureau from its formation in 1929 to 1943, when its first director Ernst Malherbe was at the helm. Sean Morrow and Linda Chisholm's chapter focuses mainly on the relationships that the institution forged with the government and some universities. This article is well written but largely relies on secondary sources. Katie Mooney's contribution pays particular attention to juvenile delinquency in the white community and is also commendable for its research and style.


A few of the chapters have been published elsewhere, including articles by Fleisch and another by Nico Cloete, John Muller, and Mark Orkin. Though it is common practice for an edited book to contain works published before, one would have expected more groundbreaking work for a publication of this nature, particularly since important archival material on the HSRC was discovered at its offices in Pretoria some time back. Disappointingly, sources from this important archival collection were minimally used by Astrid Schwenke and Mathias Fubah Alubaji. Rolf Stumpf's chapter is informative; however, it is basically a personal memoir and not an academic paper. He discusses his role in managing the HSRC in the early 1990s.

Greg Houston and Marie Wentzel would have produced a compelling read had they used the HSRC archival material. In this material, there is correspondence between the HSRC and the South African Democracy Education Trust, which

rewrote the history of the country's struggle. The assertion by Houston and Wentzel that the HSRC funded liberation history during apartheid is convenient. Funding struggle-related projects, including postgraduate or research topics by academics, became mere tokenism. Such tokenism manifested itself in other spheres of life as well during apartheid. The authors also fail to point out that African students were not among the students funded by the HSRC during apartheid. This program only benefited Whites, Indians, and Coloureds for obvious reasons: divide and rule them so they could never work as a cohesive force to challenge the apartheid state.

The chapter by Schwenke and Alubaji covering some of the organizations that preceded the HSRC in 1969 is shallow. It is a combination of paragraphs, and its conclusion is poorly written. The paper would have seriously benefited from primary sources from the South African State Archives or Wits University (Central Records as well as Wits Historical Papers). Most of the chapters in this book would have benefited significantly not only from research at the three aforementioned depositories but also from the National Library of South Africa, Killie Campbell Library at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and Special Collections at the University of Cape Town. The chapter by Cheryl Hendricks, Vuyo Mjimba, Thokozani Simelane, and Elsie Maritz covering the history of Africa Institute of South Africa is quite disappointing. It is not critical and relies heavily on secondary sources.

Also, the book's referencing system is not standardized. The book would have also greatly benefited from oral history interviews. Only four chapters use some interviews. The book also avoids some of the HSRC's controversies and internal disputes. For example, it turns a blind eye to the allegations of racism made by an HSRC researcher, Mandla Seleokane, against Mark Orkin, the institution's Chief Executive Officer from 2000 to 2005. This matter was covered thoroughly in the media. Another case in point is the public disagreement between an executive director at the institution, Xolela Mangcu, and Orkin's successor, Oliver Shisana, which also played itself out in the media in 2005. Any book that hopes to produce a definitive history of the HSRC should give a nuanced view of the institution and not shy away from its controversies and weaknesses alike. I recommend the book for scholarly use, but readers should be careful how they use it, given these deficiencies and weaknesses.

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